

We Are Not Bluffing in Our Restoration Efforts in Wisconsin



Photo on the left is the view of the prairie bluff from Gary Christopherson's house and the photo on the right is the view over Nelson, Wisconsin from a top of the prairie bluff. Photos by Alejandro Morales/USFWS.

Prairie bluffs, or as locals like to call them *goat prairies* are an increasingly rare sight due to forest overgrowth. The idea behind the name is probably due to the bluff's steepness, prairie vegetation, unique ecological value and the fact that maybe only a mountain goat could climb a prairie bluff. If you were ever to look and hike a prairie trail you can understand why goat prairie is a fitting name, that is if you can find a bluff not overgrown. In the last few years private landowners in Buffalo County, Wisconsin have banded together to relieve these goat prairies of overgrowth and return their natural prairie grasslands.

Gary Christopherson is one of those landowners in Nelson, Wisconsin and he wants to work with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Service Program (Partners Program) and other federal and state agencies to restore prairie bluffs.

"I want to help restore the prairie bluffs from the Chippewa River south to the Illinois border," says Christopherson. "The first step is to show people the beauty of the bluffs to intrigue their interest in restoration."

Restoration projects like the one Gary would like to accomplish are great for the ecosystem and can be beneficial for many species including monarch butterflies, northern flicker and other grassland birds and rare butterflies and moths. Bill Kiser, a private lands biologist for the Partners Program, understands the historical ecology of the prairies bluffs and works with private landowners to restore the bluffs for the benefit of prairie wildlife.

"Prairie restoration projects that remove overgrown invasive and undesirable trees and shrubs to restore the native prairie grassland and oak savannas benefit many species for multiple generations," commented Bill Kiser. "For example the northern flicker can use the prairies to forage and the oak savanna for nesting and rearing their young then the cycles repeats itself."

In this restoration project the bluff is found in Gary's backyard in Nelson, Wisconsin. The bluff was covered with overgrowth from cedar trees and undesirable brush. Through strategic planning, Bill and Gary were able to partner with

several agencies and contractors to tag-team the removal of the invasive vegetation. With the steep incline to the bluff, a special contractor had to come in to rappel and hang bluff-side to safely remove trees that were growing on the bluff slopes. The bluff is now cleared and is now under continued management from Bill and Gary to ensure shrubs and cedar tree seedlings don't grow before the prairie has a chance to thrive.

Gary's dream is simple, he wants to restore his land to historic prairie bluff conditions and then convert it to a public park for people to enjoy. His ideal park would include trails, playgrounds and a breathtaking view over the Chippewa and Mississippi Rivers. Gary may only be one person, but many share his dream, goals and aspirations to restore the prairie bluffs to their historic conditions. To this day, multiple landowners have initiated and completed restoration projects on bluffs south of Nelson, Wisconsin.

Through Bill's efforts, he was able to combine \$5,400 in Partners Program dollars with \$8,969 dollars of in-kind efforts and contributions to complete this project. Currently, Bill and the Wisconsin Partners Program are working on a cooperative agreement with Buffalo County to match 1-to-1 of \$15,000 for a total of \$30,000 to help with prairie bluff restoration.

Restoration projects like these cannot be done without partnership efforts from agencies such as the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service, Buffalo County Land conservation District, The Prairie Enthusiasts, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource's Bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation.

To learn more about the [Partners Program](#) please visit our website.

To learn more about the [monarch butterfly](#) please visit our website.

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The Northern flicker and the monarch butterfly are two species of ecological importance and are species we use in strategizing restoration efforts. Northern Flicker (left). Photo courtesy of Anita Ritenour/Creative Commons. Monarch butterfly (right). Photo by USFWS.



Gary Christopherson and Bill Kiser agreeing to continue restoration work on bluff prairies. Photo by Alejandro Morales/USFWS.