

Project Portfolio

Wisconsin



Timber Rattlesnake Habitat Restoration

Grant Source: Wisconsin Turkey Stamp Program

BACKGROUND

The timber rattlesnake is a species of greatest conservation need in Vernon County in southwestern Wisconsin. Since rattlesnake dens are central to their lives, protecting dens and enhancing surrounding habitat is critical to conserving this species. This project will implement habitat restoration activities on 25 acres of timber rattlesnake habitat in the Western Coulee and Ridges region. The activities will be directed at reducing the amount of canopy cover to 30% or less around the den sites by controlling invasive plant species such as Eastern red cedar, buckthorn, honeysuckle, and prickly ash. A multiple treatment approach will be utilized that includes hand cutting of red cedars and invasive brush species, prescribed burns, and exotic species control.

LOCATION

Vernon County, Wisconsin

ISSUES BEING ADDRESS

This project will specifically address timber rattlesnake habitat degradation caused by red cedar invasion. Invasive native and non-native trees and shrubs will be removed to the greatest extent possible and practical. The short-term goal is to remove all non-native tree and shrub species, and to reduce native trees and shrubs to a minimum density and distribution so as to restore the treeless nature of this system. Low growing native shrubs that are characteristic components of the prairie flora will be retained. In an effort to retain the historic composition of the project sites, and to ensure the vegetative structure required by several listed or at risk species using these sites, some native, potentially invasive species will be retained at low densities (less than 30% total cover). The long-term goal is to protect and maintain the rare habitats on project sites.

OBJECTIVES

While the connection between restoration of timber rattlesnake habitat and improved wild turkey habitat may not be apparent from an

initial observation, the actual connection is very strong. Southwestern Wisconsin's Western Coulee and Ridges Area have an ideal mix of woodlands, agricultural crop fields, and idle land. Ridge tops and valley bottoms have been cleared for crops while steep hillsides remain wooded. However, much of the wooded hillsides, home to the timber rattlesnake, have been invaded by the non-native, red cedar. Eastern red cedar is a translocated species in Wisconsin, which degrades much of the timber rattlesnake habitat. Deterioration of habitat has resulted primarily from changed land uses, exclusion of fire, and encroachment of this exotic species. The primary limiting factor for red cedar establishment has been the suppression of fire. In the absence of fire, red cedar can dominate natural communities. This plant will often form closed stands, excluding most other plant species. As a result, wild turkeys also find this habitat unattractive. Studies show that extensive red cedar invasion can reduce the carrying capacity for wild turkeys on a tract or property by as much as fifty percent. Removal of this undesirable woody vegetation provides improved early successional habitat for wild turkeys and various other birds species. Once the cedars are removed, these grassy openings supply an abundance of insects, seeds, and other foods for adult turkeys and especially for poults.

TIMEFRAME

Project Start Date: June 2007
Project End Date: June 2009

NWTF PROJECT STAFF

Project Manager: Bryan Burhans
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TOTAL GRANT AMOUNT

\$ 16,000