

We've all seen the swath of destruction underneath powerlines. Areas that have been cleared of trees to protect the lines.

In an effort to increase the reliability of their lines, power companies are now being ordered to clear trees to the full width of their easement, which is often a departure from past practice.

They want to cut more trees. The scar will get worse.

I am a landowner with a Great River Energy easement. Part of my woods is directly affected. My reaction was typical: "See you in court."

Upon further reflection, I changed my mind. My woods is typical of former farmland: lots of boxelder, green ash, prickly ash and gooseberry but with some spring ephemerals. Most of my yard-admiring time is spent walking through my front yard which has been mostly converted to prairie garden. The fall color of my little bluestem was better than ever, this year.

I therefore decided to convert the easement land, which consists of prairie garden, pasture grasses and woods, to prairie garden and woodland margin shrubs such as nannyberry, arrowwood, etc.

As I looked down the hideous scar of the easement, it became apparent that easement land could serve a greater good with the right plantings. It could be mile-after-mile of prairie and flowering shrubs / small trees. It could be a haven for a wide variety of habitat-strapped wildlife. It could be spectacular.

Project and Goals

1) Encourage landowners, whether public or private, to convert at least some of their easement property to native or other plantings that could benefit wildlife. Long stretches of appropriately vegetated land might also serve as a wildlife corridor.

Even if only a very small percentage of landowners have an interest, the project could result in a significant increase in habitat for non-game species. Common milkweed, for instance, is widely regarded as a weed and has often been destroyed as such. This would be an opportunity to return it to general availability.

Long stretches of east/west or north/south habitat could provide a good transect for biology projects.

2) Set the stage for the collection of volumes of biological data.

3) Introduce landowners to the community of phenologists and others with biological interests. This would ideally be done at the time of GRE / landowner contact.

4) Support the movement away from resource-intensive turf lawns.

5) Encourage the commercial development of additional types of habitat.

Carrol Henderson, in *Landscaping for Wildlife*, describes an involved method of creating reptile hibernacula. Perhaps Prairie Resto or Landscape Alternatives could come up with a simpler structure that could be incorporated into their repertoire.

They could also collaborate with Dr. Oberhauser to develop seed / plant mixes specifically designed around the needs of the monarch.

Habitat selection could make it easier for landowners to visualize favorable alternatives to turf or to the painful emptiness of a lost woods.

6) Encourage a greater appreciation of and access to nature by the younger generation, which is now seeing more and more restricted access.

7) Encourage power companies and their regulatory agency to be more flexible when high-value woodlands are encountered.

Landowner Involvement

Most of the landowners will lose only a small number of trees. The rest of their land will contain turf grass or pasture grass (for developments in farmland). Landowners will probably be most amenable to converting pasture grasses. However, people with large 1-acre+ yards may be interested in converting significant portions of their turf grass to prairie. Even small yards would benefit from a 3x3 foot patch of butterfly garden.

The inducements to landowners would include at least:

1) Minimal maintenance: perhaps a spring or fall mowing. Burning is a possibility but is more difficult.

2) A constantly changing patch of ground or even a vista dotted by native flowers and grasses and visited by a wide variety of wildlife including butterflies, mammals, birds and singing insects.

3) A place for children to personally experience a bit of nature right outside their door.

4) A sense of participation or ownership in the effort to support species of interest, such as the monarch butterfly.

5) Opportunities for citizen science. GRE is interested in generating a website. They have not yet been specific about exactly what the website should include but they have supported phenology and climate change initiatives through Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. I believe they would be open to most of what we'd like to accomplish. Many of us have an interest in phenology. The website could collect some information as well as direct new observers to other well-developed sites, such as Ebird.

6) Some people might be more open to the use of dried plants in craft projects.

Preliminary Model

- 1) GRE contacts landowner of need to destroy trees and presents the brochure or software describing what the land could look like. The landowner may even have heard about the project from phenology shows, such as presented by John and Peter.
- 2) Landowner fills out a short questionnaire on projects that are of interest, e.g. monarchs, general butterfly gardens, wildflowers, herps. Detailed information is then provided by landscaping / plant providers based on recommendations of project owners.
- 3) Land is landscaped, planted and maintained accordingly. The average landowner knows little of the process of converting turf grass or woods to prairie or edge plantings. We'll need to supply at least a vision of what the land could look like, where to get plants and how to go about accomplishing the work. This involves a brochure or software package with images of appropriate plants, GRE's height requirements, providers of landscaping services and appropriate plants, suggestions for specific habitat modifications (hibernacula, etc).
- 4) Landowner / citizen-scientist starts making observations and reporting them on the web or thru other arrangements. Participation is optional.
- 5) Some projects might require training sessions of the landowners / citizen-scientists. In some cases, it could be accomplished via written instructions on the web. In other cases, hands-on instruction might be required.
- 6) Scientists analyze data and report the results via the usual scientific outlets but in venues accessible to the public. This is necessary to encourage the continued participation of the landowner.

Funding has not yet been discussed. This might be better examined after interested parties have been identified and preliminary goals have been established. GRE has a good record on this issue and has funded projects through Wolf Ridge concerning phenology and climate change. I have no doubt that they have funded other projects, as well.

Time commitments for most people would be minimal and might even be simply putting their materials on the web. GRE still has the responsibility for contacting the landowners and informing them of their options.

If this project is successful, there is no reason it couldn't be used as a model for other areas around the state or nation.

Participants

Mr. Poetter, my contact at GRE, is an active Audubon member and has a good understanding of the issues.

Only a few people have been contacted so far.

John Latimer has a popular phenology show in Grand Rapids. He is part of the Minnesota Phenology Network and is in a position to help advertise and promote the project from his very popular phenology radio show in Grand Rapids and surrounding communities.

Peter Harris is a naturalist / science coordinator at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. He is also a member of MPN, also has a phenology radio show, and has put together many conferences / training sessions covering a wide variety of topics from climate change to phenology.

Peter, John and I developed the phenology software that they use. It would be possible for all of GRE's easement landowners to contribute observations via the web.

This email is going out to a small number biologists, naturalists, phenology show hosts, native plant providers, the DNR, and a municipality. The list is not meant to be comprehensive. If you know other people / companies who might be interested, please feel free to forward this note.

Questions

- 1) Do you have special insights on the feasibility of the project? Perhaps you know of another location where it has been tried.
- 2) Are you interested in participating? If so, are there specific limits to your participation, e.g. the need for remuneration?

GRE is being forced to proceed with their cutting at a very rapid rate. Each landowner contacted at this point is a lost opportunity.

It would be helpful if feasibility and a tentative list of participants could be determined within a month (Feb 15). It may be possible to get basic action plans into place by the time the blackbirds (Mar 15) return since the activities are mostly just extensions of what we already do. The sooner GRE can start discussing the project with their easement owners, the better.

I'm hopeful that the project will provide significant new resources to the biologists with only a minor investment of time, more business to the native plant providers / landscapers, much more habitat for targeted species, and a vastly more interesting easement.

Thanks very much for reading such a long introductory letter and for your response.