A return to nature

Restoration event at Dixon Waterfowl Refuge is seeking volunteers

By Dave Cook Email
May 12, 2017

HENNEPIN — The majority of the vast Midwestern prairie is gone, replaced by miles and miles of corn and soybean fields or urban development. Many habitat restoration projects, such as the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge, work to help restore this vital habitat to plant and animal species suffering from this massive loss.

The Wetlands Initiative (TWI), founded in 1994, is a non-profit organization dedicated to restoring the wetlands of the Midwest to improve water quality; increase wildlife habitat and biodiversity; and reduce flood damage.

According to its website, more than 90 percent of the wetlands present 200 years ago in Illinois are now drained, tiled, dammed or levied. With so many wetlands already lost, TWI focuses on restoring rather than simply preserving their remnants.

An upcoming opportunity sponsored by TWI at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin and Hopper Lakes on June 3 will provide volunteers an up-close view of a restoration in progress.

The event will run from 9 a.m. to noon, with all equipment and snacks provided by TWI.

According to TWI's development and communications assistant Julie Erdmann, there have been many volunteer events over the past 15 years at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge, but this will only be the second planting event held on the 283-acre Hickory Hollow tract recently added to the refuge.

“Last year’s inaugural event at the Hickory Hollow tract covered about 40 acres. This year’s plug planting will cover about 80 acres and will include the planting of more than 30 native prairie species,” Erdmann said.

The restoration of this area will create a contiguous, high-quality prairie, savanna and woodland system within the southeastern portion of the refuge.

When the land was first acquired it was corn and soybean fields. This year the early signs of a returning natural habitat are becoming more visible after TWI's native planting efforts.
“To see the native seedlings we planted last year in bloom is very exciting. These include the Prairie Violets, Heart-leaf Golden Alexander and Shooting Star,” she said.

Those blooming wildflowers are an early sign of habitat restoration. Once the right plants are available to provide nectar and seeds, the other links in nature’s chain will begin to appear.

“We’re seeing monarchs attracted to the area from the milkweed planting we’ve done, and we expect the developing habitat to also attract many bird species as well, such as the Grasshopper Sparrow, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Meadowlark and Baltimore Oriole,” Erdmann said.

The Hickory Hollow tract is not yet open to the public, so the plug planting volunteer day is a rare opportunity for individuals to see and be part of an ongoing habitat restoration.

Erdmann said while the seedlings are grown at a variety of locations since TWI uses multiple vendors, the majority of them are grown in Illinois, with many coming from Country Road Greenhouses located in Rochelle.

Volunteers will meet at 9 a.m. by the observation tower, and they should wear appropriate clothing for fieldwork, such as long pants and closed-toe shoes. Hats, sunscreen and bug spray are also recommended. Children aged 16 or younger must be accompanied by a parent or chaperone.

Volunteers should email twi@wetlands-initiative.org if planning to attend. For more information, visit www.wetlands-initiative.org/dixon-location-and-visiting.