

Pay It “Forward” WISCONSIN! *Adopt a Wildlife Area...*

By Mike Alaimo

Photo by Tracy Piontkowski

The days are growing shorter and nature is in high gear preparing for winter. It is the time of year that gets my blood racing with thoughts of the next hunt. Hours of preparation, scouting and practice all come together to create the perfect hunt. As waterfowlers, there is no better experience on earth than seeing cupped wings pouring into the decoys. The marsh becomes our second home.

Unfortunately, my home was in disorder. There are many state and federal wildlife areas that I frequent during the season, and frankly, I am disappointed in the way we are maintaining our public lands.

Am I pointing a finger at our state or federal agencies? Not at all. On the contrary, the end user is to blame. It is a hard pill to swallow, but we are to blame.

A backpacker's creed is to leave the surroundings in better condition than when you arrived. One duck hunt creates quite a footprint on our environment. Think hard about what you have seen at your favorite wildlife area..... Litter at the launch, spent shells bobbing in the duck weed, old blinds consumed by the marsh, along with the scenery of turtles sunning themselves on old tires, rotting furniture, boards, filthy five-

gallon buckets..... and the list goes on.

The health of our wetlands is directly influenced by how we control our presence on the environment. Birds simply want food and rest. Take away either one, or both, and your wildlife areas begin to die. Invasive species take over, litter becomes the norm and we watch as flocks of birds pass us by.

Expensive high-end blinds, motorized decoys, and the best calls on the market cannot substitute for the attraction to a stable food source and place of refuge. It is simple math that involves a different kind of investment.

Such was my frame of mind a few years ago. To be honest, I was just looking for something to make a difference. I wanted to clean my house. I wanted a home I was proud of.

This is where the story begins, as I sought out the local DNR team to install wood duck boxes on a newly opened wildlife area west of my village. The process took some time, as a contract was drafted to permit the installation of wood duck boxes on state property. It was not a simple task, as there were many concerns involved in the reporting and maintaining of these boxes. The DNR staff did not want to see a flash in the pan commitment that would result in structures abandoned

to litter the landscape and create hazards.

I am a volunteer member of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, which proved pivotal in the successful approval of the DNR contract on the property by Don Kirby, Executive Director of the WWA and the DNR. The approval was in faith, as a promise was made to complete the task the best I could. I remember being instructed at one point to note each box location by GPS coordinates, just in case someone had to go in and upkeep the boxes if I could not, or remove them if necessary.

It is funny to think about it now, but the request did not even phase me. I decided right then and there to fully document the reporting process by mapping each box location by satellite photo, pictures and the GPS coordinates to create a comprehensive catalog of the boxes. I could have walked away and found some private pond to place some boxes on, but I valued the ability to improve our state lands for all to share.

Even easier, there were no issues receiving the boxes from the WWA. Our volunteer group helped to donate the pipe, fasteners and clamps to complete the boxes for installation.

Involvement with the wood duck boxes had immediate results.

We had approximately 50% success in our wood duck boxes that season. The impact was overwhelming. Our small group of volunteers were hooked. The reward far outweighed the effort, even when it meant pushing canoe carriers through the mud to get to the water's edge.

Over the next couple of years, the interest in this project grew with friends and family. At times, we have had quite the work crew out cleaning boxes and adding some new ones. It was very apparent that we needed to expand our horizons to seek new challenges. Our gaze turned toward the west.

After a hunt in Jefferson County that resulted in pictures of old blinds and wood duck boxes dotting the marsh like a spotty rash, we proposed placement of more boxes on the Rome Pond Wildlife Area with a similar wood duck box contract as in Waukesha. Additionally, a presentation was made of a clean-up project for the marsh.

Unknown to me, that summer the DNR launched the “Adopt a Wildlife Area” program. It was a brand new program that was in its infancy. As we made our proposals and were starting to frame together the possibility of a contract, the Jefferson biologist suggested we adopt Rome Pond to perform

any project that is jointly agreed upon.

On a crisp morning, we met with the Area Supervisor to talk through the details of AWA. The excitement was electric, as we sat at a table on a Saturday morning at the Lake Mills office, surrounded by DNR equipment and gear.

I remember feeling like a member of the team. There was passion by the DNR staff towards the improvement of the property. They just needed more help. We were that help.

The program is simple as organizations or volunteers donate time or money to a specific wildlife area. A contract is signed that outlines the labor hours or monetary contribution to be donated (3 working days/100 hours or \$3000 per year, or a combination of both), along with a project plan. The DNR helps



Paradise Valley Wildlife Area: A Bark River wood duck box installed on public land by volunteers.

to provide materials, equipment and mentoring/training if needed. It truly becomes a partnership with the local DNR.

With a very supportive DNR team in Jefferson County, the WWA dove straight in and adopted the Rome Pond Wildlife Area in January of 2016. Since adopting the property, over 100 hours of project work was performed, which included installing wood duck boxes, removal of old poorly maintained nest boxes, a marsh clean-up of abandoned blinds and structures, gate repainting and parking lot clean-ups.

Partnering with the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association at Rome Pond Wildlife Area is going to be a huge benefit, not only for the department and wildlife in this area, but for all members of the public who enjoy spending time at Rome Pond,” said Sam Jonas, Jefferson County wildlife biologist. “I’m excited to see this program flourish so other organizations and individuals adopt wildlife areas throughout the state - it’s a win-win for everyone involved.”

The future will be up to the volunteers and organizations that contribute to this great program. We are able to provide a positive impact on our local lands. By doing so, this will result in more lands being procured, which will equate to even more public land. It will leave a legacy for generations to come, and anyone can be a part of it.



Left: Adopt a Wildlife Area sign at the Rome Pond Wildlife Area and a gate painting WWA work crew.
Above: Marsh Clean-Up Day in April of 2016, which resulted in large amounts of aged and damaged materials being removed from the area.



Adopt a Wildlife Area Program

The Adopt a Fish and Wildlife Area program was started by the DNR in 2015, in response to the need for additional resources to help manage public lands. It provides a formal means for DNR partners to assist with land management activities through labor and financial contributions.

Program Goals

- To help the department accomplish land management work and improve the quality of public lands
- To foster local community investment/engagement in their public lands

To qualify, sponsors must annually contribute a minimum of:

- 3 work days and 100 hours of labor, *OR*
- \$3,000, *OR*
- An equivalent combination of the above two items

The DNR will provide necessary equipment and training to sponsors.

To date, 15 Wildlife Areas have been adopted totaling over \$25,000 in annual donations and 700 hours/year in volunteer labor.

This is where I come full circle. Remember my disparity in thought with the grim view reminiscent of a 1970's TV commercial about pollution? It is all gone. We were proud to do it. Paying it forward with a little sweat equity felt even better.

So, get out there. Enjoy our wild spaces and think about helping to invest in our future. When out on your favorite wildlife area this season, take a look.

Ask yourself, what can I do? What project would help out this property? Would this be something my family, friends, co-workers or hunting buddies would help with? Every bit helps, and it is amazing how much can be done in a short amount of time.

To learn more about adopting a Wisconsin Wildlife Area, visit the department website, www.dnr.wi.gov, and search keyword "volunteer," or reference: <http://dnr.wi.gov/wnrmag/2015/10/WNR%20OCTOBER%20Adopt.PDF>.

Organizations like the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association are also adopting wildlife areas and need volunteers. Check out their new website www.wisducks.org for details. For more project information, please visit our project reports at www.wisducks.org/habitat/adopt-wildlife-area/.



Mike Alaimo is a husband, father, waterfowl enthusiast and recent life member of the WWA. He currently resides in Waukesha County where he works as a project engineer in the plastics industry. He would like thank his family, friends and volunteers for all of their support and help with these projects.