

Bald Eagle Finds a Home on Dan and Brenda Pace's Wetland Easement

Kingman County, Kansas

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Dan Pace

“Think we have two chicks this year,” Dan said, pointing to a gnarly lump of branches that make up a Bald Eagles' nest, packed in a cradle of tree limbs near the very top of a cottonwood tree.

Nesting Bald Eagles are just one part of the wildlife legacy Dan and Brenda Pace are leaving for their community. They came to Pretty Prairie in 1983 to work at the Pretty Prairie bank, in Reno County, Kansas. Stretching their finances, Dan and Brenda bought 240 acres of wetland in the late 1980's. “I don't remember how I got the owner to separate the 240 acres from the ranch, said Dan. “The piece of land had a pond, a river—I used to do a lot of fishing; it was just perfect for that.” So began their first steps as Kansas conservationists.

Brenda's parents, Gordon and Martha Barnhardt, had several hundred acres of native prairie they preserved throughout their lifetime. Talking about his father-in-law's prairie, “Just unbelievable wild flowers—never seen anything like it,” Dan said. “He taught me a lot about plants and birds. I attribute a big part of my conservation ethic to him.”

Dan wanted to do something with his land, to find a way for it to be preserved for people to enjoy in the future and yet still be productive. His brother-in-law in Colorado had worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on a conservation project, so thinking there might be a way for him to find something to meet his goals, Dan contacted the NRCS in Kingman County.

Mike Clover, District Conservationist, Kingman County, came out and talked with Dan to understand his goals as they walked the property to see how to preserve its natural resources. After more analysis, Mike developed a conservation plan tailored to Dan's goals while preserving and improving the property's natural resources. Dan and Brenda enrolled in NRCS's Wetlands Reserve Program in 2008.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) has replaced the Wetlands Reserve Program from the previous farm bill. The new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program has an Agricultural Land Easement component and Wetland Reserve Easement component.

The Wetland Reserve Easement component provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and Indian tribes (in Kansas, the other component, Agricultural Land Easements, is done through a non-profit land trust). Wetland Reserve Easements have two enrollment options—perpetuity or 30 years. Wetland easement payments are based on an established area rate cap defined by geographic region. Perpetuity wetland easements pay 100 percent of the cap established for that area and 75 to 100 percent of restoration costs. [To learn more details on the payments and enrollment options, go to <http://www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov/> and click on “Easements” under “Programs” on the top navigation.]

Some easements can obtain compatible use authorization for limited use of the property. Such was the case for the Pace's property in Kingman County. NRCS developed a 5-year plan, allowing hay production at certain intervals as a way to manage grass cover and control woody shrubs.

A haven for migrating waterfowl, beavers, songbirds, and threatened fish

The Bald Eagle is a relatively recent resident, with the first pair observed in 2011. But there is more. “I've been down here in winters and you couldn't begin to count the ducks,” said Dan. “And this place has been loaded with migrating Red-winged Blackbirds and I've also seen migrating pelicans down here. Coyotes, muskrats, about everything waterfowl-wise, I've seen it. Beavers are absolutely not afraid, don't recognize you as a

“ We abuse land because **we see it as a commodity belonging to us**. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to **use it with love and respect**.
Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*



Bald Eagle by Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

threat, they come right up to the boat.” The beavers have about six dams to pool water coming from the natural springs feeding the river.

The Kansas Forest Service conducted a census of the river fish for a streambank erosion project. “I was surprised at the type of fish found, like gar and catfish, which weren’t expected in a stream this size,” Dan said. Another species found was the Arkansas darter. This is a threatened species monitored by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism.

Just routine property management

Johnsongrass had been a problem, along with some spots of *Sericea Lespedeza*. “I didn’t realize Johnsongrass was a big problem here. I’m always monitoring for invasive species,” explained Dan. “Once you get the problems under control, and stay with it, it’s like anything else; the property just requires minor maintenance.”

“I don’t have any regrets; the management has been pretty straightforward. And if I have a question, I just call Mike. He’ll come out a few times during of the year to see how things are going,” he said. Dan’s plan included approval to allow haying at certain intervals. “I wanted to manage for wildlife and still have a measure of grass for the tenant’s cattle,” said Dan, “I’m really pleased with the plan.”

Wetland Easements—Building Community

Voluntary conservation easements preserve natural resources

for the community. Benefits include such things as preserving wildlife habitat, recharging groundwater, affording hunting opportunities, education, and opportunities for scientific research. Dan does not allow hunting because of the Bald Eagles, fearing they may be driven away.

The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism has been monitoring the Bald Eagles since 2011. Even though 240 acres may not be a large area, threatened species such as the Arkansas darter and Bald Eagles thrive on wetland easements. Dan and Brenda also have a 67-acre wetland easement with a playa wetland in Meade County, Kansas. Playa wetlands are unique wetlands in western Kansas that support habitat for wildlife and migratory birds.

There are many Kansans like Dan and Brenda supporting their community through conservation easements. “There are a total of 234 wetland easements on 24,851 acres scattered in all parts of Kansas,” according to Lynn Thurlow, NRCS state program manager for easements. “Dan and Brenda are great stewards of Kansas wildlife habitat in their community.”

Their sense of community also inspired them to complete a new project, the restoration of a 103-year-old barn. “I wanted to do something for the community, as a business incubator for our community—to support all kinds of business, bed and breakfasts, wedding planners, photographers, and for teaching events,” said Brenda. The barn, built in 1913, was almost lost due to a ferocious April storm when 110 mph straight-line winds ripped a good part of it away in 2015.

The 16,000 plus square foot Collingwood Barn, with a footprint shaped like a Maltese Cross, opened in July after over a year’s work by Brenda and enthusiastic support and help from the community. Local businesses are using it to create economic growth in the community and bring in visitors from outside the county. Besides their rich wildlife sanctuary, the restored barn is yet another legacy for their community from Dan and Brenda Pace.

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