

**Summary of the Wisconsin Coverts Project Reunion & Advanced Training  
August 22-24, 2021 – Chula Vista Resort, Wisconsin Dells**

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Wisconsin Dells---The late Aldo Leopold observed that the “landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.” Knowing Wisconsin’s reputation for concern over natural resources, it isn’t surprising that hundreds of private landowners have enrolled in the Coverts Project for the past 17 years to learn more about being good stewards of the land that they “temporarily” own.

Hosted by the UW-Madison Division of Extension and UW-Madison Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology, coordinated by Jamie Nack and Scott Craven, the program fills three days with speakers who present ecological principles that landowners can use to enhance biodiversity and wildlife abundance.

Though covert may be thought of as some undercover endeavor, the word is actually an old English word that describes a dense thicket that provides shelter for wildlife. Improving land for wildlife is often one of the most popular goals for any landowner, with birds, deer, and wildflowers some of the biggest interests.

Eighty-five landowners, including Coverts Cooperators and their guests, returned for the fourth reunion and advanced training at the Wisconsin Dells August 22 to 24, and heard and saw examples of how others manage their land, learned about invasive species, amphibians and reptiles, the importance of pollinators, land trusts, forest management for neotropical birds, and more.

Since the first workshop in 1994, more than 700 have attended workshops and are responsible for managing more than 200,000 acres in the state.

Why do they attend?

Bob Retko and Kay Wienke, of Viroqua, put it quite simply: “Kay and I attended the Coverts Reunion in order to learn about new information regarding wildlife, forest and grassland management for our land. At the same time, we wanted to connect with other like-minded landowners in our geographic area.”

### **Leopold land ethic**

Curt Meine, senior fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation, set the stage by telling how logging of the great pine forests of northern Wisconsin in the late 1800s, led to the depletion of pine by the early 1900s. This led to an awakening for conservation efforts, including Increase Lapham Wisconsin’s first scientist who wrote about the destruction of trees and George Wehrwein, UW professor, calling for restraint when using resources. The late Aldo Leopold

joined the UW faculty in 1933 and planted thousands of pines on his property in Sauk County as well as at the UW-Madison Arboretum.

Leopold went on to write **A Sand County Almanac**, where he presents his land ethic, a type of social revolution espousing everyone to be caretakers of the land.

### **Landowner experiences**

A sample of some of the reunion presentations by landowners include:

Dan Bohlin, owner of End-O-Way Farm in Grant County manages 260 acres on a farm that was homesteaded in the 1850s. Bohlin described his effort to turn “a sow’s ear into a silk purse,” while increasing the farm’s annual income by growing quality timber, controlling erosion, improving wildlife habitat and improving the aesthetics of the land. “The key is seeking professional help,” Bohlin said, which he did to install a prairie, with the use of fire, conduct timber harvests to preserve the oak savanna, and improve wildlife habitat with the help of Pheasants Forever and the Conservation Stewardship Program.

Stacey Steers owns property in Columbia County and emphasized the value of talking with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for advice on land management. He focused efforts on cutting box elders, plugged a ditch line, and installed small scrapes to end up with a wetland.

Tim and Linda Eisele, owners of Gobbler Ridge in Crawford County, encouraged landowners to take photos of their land to realize the changes over time. “Although land ownership may be a right in the United States, we consider it a privilege and we’ve only got it for a short period of time,” Eisele said.

Andy Chikowski of Taylor, added a wetland and snake hibernaculum to his property. He encouraged landowners to exchange hunting privileges on the land for work days.

### **Organizational advice**

Sarah Herrick and Rori Paloski, conservation biologists with the DNR, stressed the importance for forest owners to submit observations of frogs, salamanders, and lizards to the DNR Natural Heritage Bureau. Private landowners can help these species by retaining downed trees and logs on their property, ephemeral ponds needed by frogs and salamanders, and trying to reduce the spread of invasive plants.

Jay Watson, conservation biologist with the DNR, encouraged landowners to manage their land to retain native pollinators, including birds, bats, bees, butterflies, moths, and beetles. “Bees are the most efficient pollinator, and pollinate 85% of plants,” he said. Retaining a landscape with a diversity of species, and abundant floral resources is key to assisting pollinators. Early spring woodland flowers, such as trout lily, Dutchman’s breeches and shooting stars, are very important to pollinators that need that pollen after the long winter. Watson suggested

landowners who need to use herbicides to control invasive plants try to spray before they flower to lessen impact on bees. To learn more about the importance of bees as pollinators, consider joining the bumble bee brigade, which provides an identification guide to bees.

Nancy Businga, DNR wildlife disease specialist, urged landowners who feed birds to clean their feeders and change water in bird baths regularly. So far there have not been reports of the avian mortality that was seen in some eastern states this year, and some sources have suggested that the outbreak was associated with the emergence of cicadas.

Randy Johnson, large carnivore specialist with the DNR, gave a synopsis of the status of Wisconsin's largest mammals. Wolves had bounties on them from 1839 to 1847 and again from 1865 to 1957 which led to their being listed as extirpated by 1960. Wolves returned to the state naturally from neighboring states and are part of the extended population in Minnesota, Michigan, and Canada. By 2000 the DNR believed there were over 200 wolves in the state, and by 2020 there were more than 1,000 wolves. Black bears are thriving with about 23,000 in the state, and their range is expanding southward. Their population is managed through hunting seasons, and this fall the bear season adds new zone boundaries. Cougars, or mountain lions, are one of three native cats (including bobcat and Canada lynx) in the state, but there is no evidence of a breeding population currently. Most are transient young males and the DNR receives 200 to 300 sightings each year, though only 15 to 20 are usually verified.

Meg Domroese, programs director with Gathering Waters, described the benefits of conservation easements as promoting sustainable forestry, increasing habitat, and providing recreational opportunities for future generations. Easements are provided through land trusts, which are non-profit land conservation organizations. An easement allows owners to retain ownership while protecting conservation values by selling or donating some of the bundle of rights, such as for development. The land can still be sold, or inherited by a family member, and by preserving conservation benefits the landowner can: make sure conservation values are protected forever; retain ownership; receive a tax benefit; and partner with a land trust.

Eric Canania, DNR southern district deer biologist, acknowledged that many stakeholders are concerned with deer populations and management. When he meets with landowners, he starts by learning the goals of the landowner, and then he looks at the habitat and examines habitat composition, whether trees and shrubs have been browsed, what species are regenerating, and the antlerless harvest history. "Some of the habitat recommendations could include commercial timber harvests, removal of invasive species, encouraging grassland and early successional species, and utilizing wildlife food plots," Canania said.

Michael Demchik, UW-Stevens Point forestry professor, emphasized that different species of habitat will benefit different species of neotropical birds during migration. Some examples include:

- Young and brushy habitat – used by golden-winged and chestnut-sided warblers.
- Mature timber – used by scarlet tanagers and ovenbirds.
- Patchy matrix of forest – used by woodcock and brown thrasher.
- Wet, moist sites – used by American redstart, veery, and Canada warbler.

Michael Hillstrom, forest health specialist with DNR, said though there have not been large-scale defoliations from gypsy moths, the emerald ash borer is now in 61 of the state's 72 counties. "Oak wilt is the reason I'm getting 3 to 10 calls per day, and harvesting recommendations for oak vary depending on the location in the state," Hillstrom said. Generally, in southern Wisconsin, landowners should not cut oak from April 1 to July 15. If oak wilt is found, a rapid response is best by sometimes sacrificing healthy nearby oaks to stop the spread of the disease to the rest of the woods.

Ben Zuckerberg, UW-Madison Forest and Wildlife Ecology associate professor, said that ruffed grouse and snowshoe hare are two species that are being influenced by climate warming. Less snowfall makes it more difficult for ruffed grouse to burrow into deep snow during the winter to survive. And, snowshoe hares change hair color based on daylight changes while a lack of snowfall causes the white-phase hares to be more vulnerable to predators.

Eric Schlender, EC3 vice president, said that private contractors have the expertise to conduct habitat management work the most efficient way. Schlender emphasized keeping communications open between the landowner and consultants.

### **Early inhabitants**

During an evening after-dinner presentation, Jonathan Gilbert, biological services director with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, explained that native Ojibwe tribal members reserved their rights to hunt, fish and gather resources during the treaties of 1836, 1837, 1842, and 1854. "They did this to keep their lifestyle, and without these treaty rights their culture would not be complete," Gilbert explained. Gilbert described how the Ojibwe culture revolves around natural resources, such as maple syrup (ziinzibaakwadwaatig) and walleye (ogaa) during the spring (ziigwan) and wild rice (manoomin) during the fall (dagwaagin). Wild rice is a critical resource to the tribes but is vulnerable to climate change. Gilbert described the Ojibwe unique relationship with wolves, which they consider to be their "brother or sister."

Rob Nurre, Wisconsin Archeological Society president, reminded landowners that, "We write our signature on the land." He encouraged landowners to document items that they find on their land, and to be respectful of those who were on the land before us. "Our job is to be stewards for this speck of time that we have the land," Nurre said.