



BY TOM CARPENTER

A PATCHWORK FOR POLLINATORS

Big spreads of wildflowers are great for bees, butterflies and gamebirds. But small patches of habitat are critical too ... for wildlife and farmers alike.



Jumping off I-35 and driving across northern Iowa on a sultry early-June day, with thunderclouds brewing back to the west but a warm late-afternoon sun yet lighting up the ever-greening landscape, it takes some study to discern wildlife habitat from cropland on the countryside.

But with the eye of a pheasant hunter and the heart of a butterfly and songbird lover, it's soon clear: I spy buffer strips, some CRP fields, waterways and wooded creekbottoms dotting the landscape.

After an hour I'm turning into Wayne and Ruth Fredericks' farm near Osage in Mitchell County. The farmstead is as neat as a pin, with hardly a blade of grass out of place; likewise the house, where I sit down at the kitchen table with Wayne, two devoted Pheasants Forever field employees — Dan Borchardt (Farm Bill biologist) and Josh Divan (monarch coordinating biologist), a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a pitcher of lemonade.

PLACES FOR POLLINATORS

Fredericks, who works about 750 acres of owned and leased land, is a renaissance farmer of sorts, sitting on the boards of two organizations that, at first glance, would seem to have vastly different goals: The Iowa Soybean Association and the Keystone National Monarch Collaborative.

But Fredericks' view on managing the landscape meshes perfectly with both production agriculture and wildlife conservation. The Collaborative's mission: "Support productive agriculture and livestock operations in concert with monarch conservation. An increase in milkweed and nectar plants



Wayne Fredericks (center) inspects a fieldside pollinator patch with PF's Dan Borchardt (left) and Josh Divan (right).

appropriately placed in rural areas can benefit monarchs without inhibiting production."

Fredericks lives those goals on the land he farms. "I've farmed long enough to know," he said, "that prior to Roundup, we used to have some milkweed out in the fields. You'd hit a patch and the milkweed seeds would just fly. Monarchs had a place."

But clean fields, coupled with largescale clean-farming techniques that cleared odd corners and fallow plots, hurt pollinators. "So did the CRP bust in 2007," added Fredericks.

"Now we're trying to put some of that pollinator habitat back," Fredericks said. "Doing it on marginal acres just makes sense."

"It all started for me back in 2013," said Fredericks. "I heard about some software then called AgSolver." Today's it's better known as Profit Zone Manager from EFC Systems. "But the concept is still simple," explained Fredericks: "Not every acre of farmland is a profitable one. It took four years of field data overlaid with profitability maps, but we found some areas that were

better off out of production."

A spot might not be profitable due to the soil quality, wetness or both. Other spots are even simpler to evaluate — places where modern machinery can't get at them efficiently. "One was a triangular corner of a field. It was not good or efficient for the equipment, just an extra half-swath or so," said Fredericks. "Another was near a waterway, and we widened the buffer strip. Yet another field had a sinkhole near the edge, a place that crops never grew well anyway; we squared it off and put it into pollinator habitat."

In all these cases, marginal or inefficient land was taken out of crop production. Wildlife gained patches of habitat on the landscape. And Fredericks' bottom line benefitted.

But how did he get started?

"I turned to my local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office," said Fredericks, "and they hooked me up with Dan. It's easy. Any producer can do that."

"We used CP42 pollinator mix on most of the sites, but seeded CP25 along the buffer strips," said Borchardt. "Oh, and it came in so nice," added Fredericks,

who manages with mowing and burning to keep the habitat fresh and invigorated according to his and Borchardt's prescriptions.

"That first year it was lit up with black-eyed Susans and other wildflowers," said Fredericks. "Keeping it disturbed — we burned a couple patches this spring — keeps it vibrant."

"Another benefit," he laughed, pointing to last year's stems still standing, "is those stiff stems make a great snowfence. And it's still standing as residual cover for nesting pheasants in spring."

AN EVENING WALK

Snow was the last thing on our minds as we exited the kitchen to walk to some of Fredericks' pollinator patches, of which he has added a total of seven acres in addition to other conservation acres on his lands.

Seven acres may not sound like much. But they are critical acres where habitat otherwise wouldn't be: little oases for monarchs and other butterflies, bees, songbirds, and other wildlife too.

Our first stop was the aforementioned Triangle Patch, a little less than an acre tucked behind the treerow that guards Fredericks' farmstead from a prairie winter's northwest winds. "Oh look, the deer have been in here," announced Divan, surveying evidence of browsing work and what came out the other end. "They love these places," added Fredericks.

Although the habitat was young yet for the year, it was abuzz with insects already. "I've seen red admirals and painted lady butterflies," said Fredericks.

Behind his machine sheds, Fredericks showed off a small half-

acre patch. "It might as well be for the butterflies, he said." As if on cue, an early monarch wafted through.

We walked a waterway that had been widened to take the marginal border zone out of production and improve profitability. "We saw a pheasant run across the road and into this cover this morning," said Fredericks.

We got into Fredericks' truck and drove around a section to a place he calls The Sinkhole. But it's no sinkhole anymore: It's a 3.2-acre parcel containing a small pond and a blanket of prairie pollinator habitat. Two mallards flushed as we approached.

"Many landowners with plots like these are seeing meadowlarks, bobolinks and more gamebirds too," said Borchardt, "things they haven't seen for awhile."

"Because of all the forbs in the seed mixes, many of these plots may be more productive for wildlife than CRP itself," said Divan. "This place will be alive with pollinators come August." I suspected it would be alive with a crowing rooster or two tomorrow morning.

"There's a lot of interest among landowners in pollinator patches, big and small," said Divan. "Dan held 12 workshops this past spring on monarch biology, pollinator

habitat, and cost-share programs. There were over 320 total attendees. There is momentum."

"Local PF Farm Bill biologists are anybody's best resource," said Borchardt. "We can work up a seed mix and make a 'recipe' that's just right for each pollinator patch, customized to soil type."

In Iowa alone there are 14 PF or PF-funded positions supporting pollinator efforts: 12 Farm Bill biologists, one precision agriculture and conservation specialist, and the coordinating biologist, to help landowners and land managers with their projects.

BACK AT THE FARMSTEAD, we said our goodbyes and Fredericks was climbing into his tractor — there was still daylight left and work to be done — as I pulled out. He is passionate about pollinators, passionate about productive agriculture, and found a way to mesh the two. Wayne Fredericks is proof that butterflies, bees and wildlife (including gamebirds) can have a place on a landscape that also produces substantial amounts of corn and soybeans. ✎

Tom Carpenter is editor of Pheasants Forever Journal.



Wayne Fredericks shows off early summer growth in The Triangle Patch.