

# Heaven is Under Their Feet: Greenville Couple Creates Backyard Wildlife Habitat

by Karen Giles-Smith

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**I**n Greenville, Michigan, a beige house sits alone on a rise above a field of tall grasses. It's noon in November and everything appears faded, brittle, and brown. Lifeless.

This is the house that Steve and Dawn Wyckoff built—a three-bedroom bungalow designed with their retirement in mind—their “last stop,” as they refer to matter-of-factly.

But their own home isn't their only consideration: Steve and Dawn are busy making sure the “critters” they love have cozy accommodations, too.

Over three years, the Wyckoffs have created wetlands and grasslands—habitat for wildlife like songbirds, pheasant, and voles—right in their own backyard. What they're doing nurtures wildlife, but is also a boon to you and me, whether we own land or not.

Wendell Berry, poet and conservationist, said, “To cherish what remains of Earth and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope of survival.” Michigan wetlands are one of the most productive landscapes—capable of producing even more living material than tropical forests. Nearly 35 percent of the nation's rare wildlife species are located in wetlands or dependent on wetlands.

According to the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, since Europeans first arrived in Michigan nearly 200 years ago, between 35 and 50 percent of Michigan's wetland acres have been drained, filled, or otherwise altered. The Wyckoff's are turning back the hands of time by turning farmland back over to nature.

What first appeared to be so bleak and lifeless is exactly the opposite. The front door of the Wyckoff home opens wide. Dawn, a retired middle school art teacher, says, “Come on in!” while Train, their 12-year-old black lab, sniffs and wags her own warm welcome. Win, a young black lab, has just returned from a pheasant hunt with Steve.

In the foyer, it's standing room only—two huge dog cushions cover most of the honey-colored hardwood floor. It's evident that Steve and Dawn built this house for the love of “the critters,” both inside and out.

The house is bright, open, and airy. The foyer affords a view of the kitchen, dining room, and living room. A dozen beautifully detailed duck decoys parade in single file across the top of the tall wall that separates the kitchen from the dining room. One of the living room chairs is upholstered in a patchwork pattern of trout and a collection of antique

fishing lures are displayed beneath the glass top of a side table. Large windows in each room provide a semi-panorama of the fallow field and large pond out back.

This afternoon, Steve offers a tour of the territory he and his wife so lovingly tend. He grabs a walking stick and dogs and all traipse down the stairs to the basement and head out the back door, passing dozens of mounted plaques honoring Wyckoff for his work with wetland preservation.

Wyckoff, a very personable, soft-spoken, slightly reserved gentleman, is equally at home in the Carhartt hunting gear he wears today as he is in the suit, trench coat, and fly-fishing fedora he wears on the job as a representative for

Greenville Printing Company. He was born and raised in Greenville and he grew up hunting small game and fishing with his dad and grandfather. In 1969, Wyckoff graduated from Michigan State University with an advertising degree and since then, he's sold newspaper advertising, shoes, school buses, and print jobs.

Wyckoff is an avid steelhead fisherman and duck, pheasant, and goose hunter. After a particularly good duck season in 1976, he came across a magazine ad for Ducks Unlimited and joined the like-minded wetland preservation group for a mere \$10. Since then, he's volunteered up to 30 hours a week for the organization as state chair, regional vice president, and a member of the national board of directors. Wyckoff initiated the Flat River Chapter of Michigan Ducks Unlimited which raises over two million dollars a year for wetland preservation.

Wyckoff says he became interested in wildlife management from romping around water while growing up. “I always enjoyed it—hunting ducks and being around them,”



Steve Wyckoff

he says, “After joining Ducks Unlimited and working to raise money for the wetlands, we purchased the property we’re on now. We’ve had the ability to actually create something that we were raising funds for. It’s been a neat experience.”

What Wyckoff has created, with a grant and assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever, is 60 acres of habitat to nurture a variety of wildlife species. The habitat includes 45 acres of grasslands, which is notable since some species of birds can’t live in any other ecosystem. Wyckoff’s property is both home-tweet-home and a migratory rest stop for many wildlife species such as pheasants, duck, geese, barn swallows, doves, blackbirds, sandhill cranes, and several types of songbirds, including bobolinks en route to Argentina. The habitat also supports rabbits, skunk, possums, and “other furry critters.”

Wyckoff’s land is in the Conservation Reserve Program. The program converts erodible farmland into wildlife habitat. Anyone who owns land that was once farmland and is classified as agricultural can apply for a grant. Land is surveyed to determine if it fits certain criteria, and then the landowner, program personnel, and neighbors work together to draw up plans for the habitat. The land owner is paid a yearly per acre fee for habitat upkeep. “It’s fun,” says Wyckoff, “If I had to do it for a living, it would probably be a pain in the butt, but because it’s my recreation, it’s fun.”

The marsh, original to the property, has been deepened and widened by installing a water control structure. Three additional wetlands were developed by excavating the earth and building dikes. These areas raise waterfowl—birds bulk up on the insects that proliferate in the wetlands during the spring thaw.

The old farm field has been converted to uplands—higher, dry land with groundcover and food sources—by planting native grasses like switch grass for nesting, brooding and roosting cover; native wildflowers; and food plots of millet, milo and buckwheat.

Wyckoff talks softly and carries a big stick as he moves along the mowed paths through the five foot grasses, proudly pointing out his accomplishments. His conversation is liberally sprinkled with easy blue-eyed smiles and short bursts of laughter as he shares how this land has been transformed into a wildlife sanctuary. He explains that the native prairie grasses—switch grass, Indian grass, and big and little blue stem—were planted with grain drills. He plucks off tiny reddish-brown milo seeds for examination. A half acre each of milo, millet, and buckwheat were planted to feed the songbirds and pheasants.

The Chickadees flit among the branches of the bushes bordering the woods and chirp their che-che-che chant. There are signs that deer have been active: rubbings on tree branches and scrapings in the ground. A 20-inch garter snake slips by.

Some people believe that hunters are interested in wildlife conservation so they’ll have more to shoot. There’s much more to it than that, says Wyckoff. “You can’t sit inside and see the same things you see on a marsh at day-break or in a deer stand at daybreak—all the things that come to life. Whether it’s the sunrise coming up over the trees, or ducks flying around, or jack snipe flitting around, or the kingfishers, the great blue herons, sandhill cranes, or the chickadees—they aren’t game species, but they’re part of the experience.”

In the words of Henry David Thoreau, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.”

For more information, including how to nurture wildlife on a small scale in your own backyard, visit:

- Michigan Department of Natural Resources Web site, <http://www.michigan.gov/dnr>
- Ducks Unlimited Web site, [www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org)
- Michigan United Conservation Clubs Web site, [www.mucc.org](http://www.mucc.org)

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### **What is a wetland?**

Wetlands are often transitional zones between dry upland sites, such as old fields, and open-water areas such as lakes and rivers.

### **Why are wetlands important?**

- Provide recreation such as bird watching, hunting, fishing, and photography
- Produce living material – sometimes more than tropical forests
- Protect rare wildlife species
- Stabilize soils and reduce erosion
- Filter pollutants and sediment from surface water

### **Why are grasslands important?**

- Support a variety of wildlife species including some that cannot survive elsewhere
- Provide nesting, brooding, and roosting cover
- Provide food and fawn-birthing cover for deer

### **How farmland can be converted to wetlands and uplands:**

- Natural wetlands are preserved and/or enhanced.
- Wetlands are created by digging holes about three feet deep in low lying areas and building dikes to trap water.
- Food plots, such as plantings of milo, millet, and buckwheat, are installed to provide nourishment.
- Wildflowers, such as black-eyed Susan and partridge pea, are planted as a food source, for cover, and for ecological balance.
- Native prairie grasses (warm season grasses) such as switch grass, big and little blue stem, and Indian grass are planted to provide ground cover. They grow from about three to eight feet tall.