



Viewing the baby snapping turtle that came to the wetland first!



*Establishing a wetland community...*

## A Weekend of Restoration, A Getaway that *Made* a Difference.

By Lora Petrak, Community Relations Specialist

On your next outing to Glacial Park as you walk the Deerpath Trail you will come across an opening just south of the bog affectionately known to those who helped restore it as "Turtle Marsh." It doesn't look like much now – mostly a cleared area with straw strewn about and a white post sticking up out of the middle. But it holds promise.

Turtle Marsh was completed during the Weekend of Restoration program held this past September. After a year of planning between McHenry County Conservation District and graduate students from the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment, a three-day event transpired that provided participants with a better understanding of wetland ecology and hydrology, the plants and animals that inhabit Illinois wetlands, and how open space agencies are working to restore our wetland heritage. In addition, participants received a unique hands-on experience and a deeper connection with their natural world.

"This was not the first three-day event we have ever done. We did restoration retreats in 2004 and 2005. We then started the Ecological Restoration Certificate Program, a series of Saturday workshops, which kept me busy for the last three years. But, I always had in the back of my mind the desire to go back to the three day format," said Research Field Station Ecologist Tom Simpson.



Excavation of sediment from the basin.



During the Weekend of Restoration event.

A time lapse camera documented the preparation of the site as well as the seeding and planting. The camera will continue to document the changes in the site through the weeks, months and seasons to come. Visit [mcdistrict.org/web/pr-ercp.htm](http://mcdistrict.org/web/pr-ercp.htm) for updates.



Twenty-two people participated from around the region, ranging from high school students through retirees. Their reasons for attending varied from just wanting to be outside and giving back to the land, to a desire to learn more about the science of the natural world and how this knowledge might be applicable to their own properties.

The site location for the wetland restoration was first discovered over 10 years ago by Tom Simpson while on a field trip when he was an instructor with Morton Arboretum. "I remember seeing a stand of reed canary grass surrounded by prairie grasses on all sides. I looked at the soil to see if it might be different, and in fact it was quite different. That was when I first recognized that a buried wetland lay beneath the surface. More detailed studies over the next 10 years gave me a better picture of the shape and character of the lost wetland," said Simpson.

Prior to the weekend program staff removed roughly 10 inches of sediment that had accumulated by erosion, monitored water levels, and selected plant and seed species. When the Weekend of Restoration arrived and after a morning of introductions and instruction, eager students ready to get to work divided the area – and each team took on a piece of the pie. Six hours of nitty gritty hands-on work of bed preparation; raking, seeding, and raking again, planting wetland plugs, and overlaying straw to keep seeds in place, reduce erosion and predation.

Certainly this project could have been completed in-house by staff but an important and significant educational opportunity would have been missed. "There is a bond you form with participants, and they with one another, that is very different from any other strictly educational event I have ever done. The deliberate and intentional educational component gives the program more intellectual and spiritual depth than a simple volunteer restoration activity. This is evident

by the morning of the second day when a group of people become a community with a common goal and a shared understanding of who they are and what they are doing. One doesn't create that goal and understanding so much as one creates the moment in which it can happen. Being there when it happens and watching it happen is pretty special," said Simpson.

"It was a baby snapping turtle that found its way to the center of the project area on Sunday morning, the last day of the restoration weekend. He was no bigger than a half dollar, but we took that as a sign that we were doing something important... renewal of a former wetland... and nature responded... this turtle was just a beginning," said participant and Communications Specialist Lora Petrak.

On the Monday morning following the weekend, Simpson transcribed an e-mail to the participants that read, "At 9:30 this morning I walked out to the wetland. The rain fell heavily last night, as if it were releasing a torrent of emotion pent up for days, and was still drizzling on my walk to the site. I imagined a pool of water at the center of the basin, but assured myself that the water table was too low, and that it would require many rains to bring it back to the surface. I was wrong.

The rain came so hard, the clay simply couldn't absorb it, and there in the center of the basin were several small pools. Maybe the snapping turtle knew something the rest of us didn't. The sun sneaked beneath the clouds as I arrived, and the last raindrops were glistening in the bright light. There was a steady wind from the south and the white cottony clouds raced overhead. That is when the whole experience of the weekend hit me."

A community formed over the weekend through shared experience, effort and knowledge. Another community is developing as the plants grow and the animals find a haven. This place has become special to those who came to make a difference, it can be special to you too — we encourage you to visit the site to witness the progress over the coming months. If you are interested in participating in future programs like this and would like to be placed on a notification list, please send your contact information to [tsimpson@mccdDistrict.org](mailto:tsimpson@mccdDistrict.org).



Discovery



Raking



Teamwork



Planting



Seeding



Learning

**What I learned on my weekend of restoration. Journal notes from Lora Petrak...**

*I finally had that "aha" moment in understanding the nature of soils – I never realized before how much soil affects our climate, how much better wetlands in our region are at holding carbon compared to trees. Soils have all levels of dimension as one might describe wine - an amazing range of colors so subtle you'd think you were at a paint shop.*

*I now have a whole new set of vocabulary words: organic, mineral, alluvial, muck, churt; and a new set of terminology: soil formation, percussion flaking, pressure flaking, times arrow and times cycle. I have to remember soil is an ecological body unconsolidated at the earth surface as well as root base for plants and that ice under pressure "flows" unlike the solid chunks in a freezer.*

*On Dec. 31 when I reflect (as people do when another year is coming to a close) on what occurred over the past 12 months, I can say I helped rebuild a wetland. I can go back to this place and say, I helped make that happen. It wasn't on my list of resolutions or on my bucket list. My motivation was to pick up techniques that might be useful for my own property and to understand the challenges that a bigger restoration involves.*

*We were challenged to think about how we approach ecological restoration, how humans impact the environment and what our responsibility is in the stewardship of the land, to think about it in various contexts – linear, cyclical ... We say we are giving back to the land but I believe we are also taking something from it a tangible sense of being connected to it. A form of legacy. I believe Ed Collins, Natural Resource Manager said it best, "We all leave a footprint – the question is – "What is it going to look like?"*

*Why am I so involved in nature? Frankly it interests me — it's like a puzzle with the reward of discovery.*

*This is my form of gardening. This weekend I walked away with a greater understanding of the ecological history of Glacial Park — a place shaped by glaciers, farming, development, and restoration. If you think about the ways you can connect with nature – you'll find multiple facets of yourself – the scientific, the aesthetic, spiritual, compassionate, and health conscious.*

*When dubbed as "a vacation that makes a difference" – it delivered. LP*

