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Bill and Ann Tidball have created more than 40 acres of meadow on their property.



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Dana Squire has converted her back field to native grasses and a large variety of wildflowers.

Week brings attention to pollinators' critical roles

Starting in 2007 following a vote by the U.S. Senate, National Pollinator Week has been celebrated across the country to bring attention to the plight of pollinating insects, including our bees, butterflies, moths and other species. While pollinators tend to be “out of sight, out of mind” for many of us, the fact is they actually play a major role in our lives. You see, pollinators are needed for the reproduction of approximately 70 percent of the world’s plant species, the species that provide us oxygen to breathe. More than two thirds of the world’s crops, including many grown locally here in Madison County, depend on these species as well and thus they have a direct, multi-billion dollar impact on our food supply. It is almost guaranteed that something you eat on your plate today, if not the majority of it, has been directly pollinated or benefited from the work of pollinators.

Unfortunately, many of our pollinators are in decline. We may have heard of the so-called Colony Collapse Disorder affecting our non-native European honey bees. However, while they may not get as much attention, our hundreds of native pollinators are of greater concern due to their roles in our natural ecosystems. In Virginia, species such as the Rusty Patch Bumble Bee and Yellow Banded Bumble Bee are just two of the imperiled bees. We also have vulnerable butterflies and moths such as the Diana Fritillary, Dukes’ Skipper, Early Hairstreak and Regal Fritillary. Class-wide, it is hard to get a clear picture as to why these invertebrate declines are occurring, but they have been blamed on a variety of issues from habitat loss and degradation especially, but also pesticide use, pollution and disease.

Thankfully, Madison County landowners are rising to the challenge. Dana Squire, a Master Naturalist, will tell you about one of the greatest enemies of pollinators, that being tall fescue. Squire says, “While I understand why fescue is grown for cattle production, in this area there is a lot of acreage

in fescue that is no longer used for this purpose. Fescue is of almost no use to any species other than cows. I’d really like to see us convert these areas not used for agricultural production back to a habitat that benefits more native species. That’s why I contacted you and asked for help in converting my fescue field to native warm season grasses and wildflowers.” And Squire has done just that, converting her back field to native grasses and a large variety of wildflowers, such as Partridge Pea and Coreopsis. Her meadow is now coming into year two. Squire says, “I’ve been thrilled by the changes. No longer a fescue monoculture, these fields are now defined by many different structures, textures, and colors of plant life. I already have so many more birds and pollinators than I’ve ever observed in the past, especially and most recently, several types of fritillaries.” Even with just four acres of meadow, she has done an abundance of good for the wildlife just outside the Town of Madison’s center.

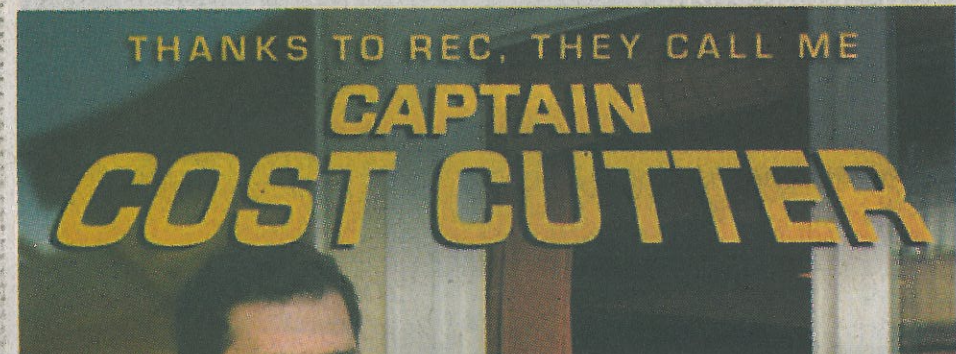
Like Dana Squire, Madison’s Bill and Ann Tidball say they have “declared war on the number one enemy of native grass and wildflowers: fescue grass.” They have planted over 18,000 native shortleaf pine species with the Virginia Department of Forestry and instead of typical commercial rates they have planted the trees “with a little distance between them to allow for a bit of under-growth for both food and protection for birds and animals.” They have also contracted with JW Townsend Landscaping out of Charlottesville to create over 40 acres of meadow on their property, featuring native Little Bluestem grass and a mix of wildflowers. In addition to the great benefits for pollinators, the Tidball project shows the benefits of this habitat type to other species. Bill will proudly tell you, “We had not heard the sound of a ‘bob-white!’ in more than two years. At the end of the first year a small covey of quail had taken up residence on our property. This spring every day we have enjoyed

the sound of many bobwhites, as it is obvious even more have found the new habitat and have moved in for nesting. We also routinely comment about the larger number of songbirds, and larger variety of them, that are evident around the house and we no longer fill the bird feeders! It is all about habitat!” Ultimately, as they enjoy the fruits of their labors, the Tidballs hope that others can become involved as well. “We feel very fortunate to live in an area so rich in beauty and natural resources and really hope to make a difference in preserving it. If successful perhaps it can serve as encouragement to others to recognize the value to society of preserving a bit of the natural beauty and rewards of Madison County’s bounty.”

More recently, Madison’s Roger and Kem Courtenay have become involved. Unlike Dana Squire and the Tidballs, their wildflower meadow project is just in the planning phases, but they have a long term goal that could apply to many landowners in the county. “We need to preserve and replenish regional ecosystems in all their aspects, and pollinators and wildlife habitat in general can help ensure health for many native plants, animals, humans included, increasing the potential for biological diversity on which our environment depends. Native plants dependent

on pollinators, and the pollinators themselves, are in short supply and have high ecological value here in Madison County, which continues to lose native meadow habitat.” The Courtenays are well on their way now, but the question is, are you?

This year for National Pollinator Week, let us all think of ways we can improve the habitat for these species that we depend on economically and ecologically. Whether you own a farm or are in more of a suburban setting, you can create habitat and you can benefit the pollinators, songbirds and maybe even the Northern Bobwhite quail. Thankfully, help is available. All three of the landowners listed in this article have taken advantage of wildlife technical assistance on their multi-acre properties that is available through the Virginia Quail Recovery Initiative, a partnership between the Virginia Tech Conservation Management Institute, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Financial assistance is also available through a variety of state and federal programs assuming land and participant eligibility requirements are met. For information, contact David Bryan, Private Lands Wildlife Biologist, at david.bryan@va.usda.gov or (804) 537-5225 ext. 119. Thanks in advance for your efforts!





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