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Introduction
There are more than 8,000,000 acres of state and federally held public land, accounting for 22% of Michigan’s total area. While this is lower than the national average of 35%, it still ranks 15th in the nation (NRCM 1995). So while state and federal policies have an important influence on the quality of habitat in the state, most of the state is privately owned. This makes private landholders, large and small, essential to successful conservation efforts. Presented here is an overview of some of the resources and programs available to private landholders in order to assist them in conservation efforts.

Non-profit and Species focused Groups

Habitat focused
Wild Ones (www.wildones.org)
Wild Ones is a non-profit, educational and advocacy organization active in 12 states, including Michigan. Its mission states that Wild Ones, “...promotes environmentally sound landscaping practices to preserve biodiversity through the preservation, restoration and establishment of native plant communities.” (Wild Ones 2010). This organization can be a valuable resource to landowners who wish to make a positive impact on their land and provide resources for wildlife. See their website (www.wildones.org) for more information.

Residential properties, even small back-yards, can provide important habitat when landscaped with wildlife in mind. Land animals need connectivity among appropriate habitats, but residential and migratory birds do utilize small and disconnected patches. Native avian communities can show high diversity in areas of intermediate housing densities (Lepczyk et al. 2008). Raising public awareness of the importance of these lands as wildlife habitat is crucial.

Gamebird focused
Due to the popularity of hunting, there are many groups and initiatives which focus on the habitat requirements of specific game species. Those active in Michigan include Pheasants Forever, Timberdoodle.org, Ducks Unlimited, and the Ruffed Grouse Society. The habitat restoration efforts of these groups can be beneficial to all species which prefer similar habitat.

While some of these groups focus their conservation efforts on the acquisition of land, they also may work with private landowners or provide information or other materials which are helpful in the conservation of habitat related to the focus species. These groups can be of great help to landowners with similar goals.

Pheasants Forever (www.pheasantsforever.org)
This organization is geared towards increasing the population of the Ring-necked Pheasant, a game species introduced from Asia in the late 1800s. This species found the prevalence of small farms an ideal environment for expansion and quickly established populations throughout the northern tier of U.S. states. Despite the development of an initial breeding population, the species is not adapting well to the current trends of landscape change. As with many grassland species, new methods and materials associated with modern agriculture, increased habitat fragmentation, and encroaching urbanization have led to population declines.

This organization provides information on improving lands and agricultural methods to accommodate the pheasant. It also offers seed mixes ideal for the creation of habitat areas which provide the resources needed for food, nesting, cover and winter survival. Recognizing the need to create large habitat blocks, they encourage land-owners to work together to create unfragmented areas with many resources for wildlife use. The Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative (MDNR undated) is a partnership of this type.

Timberdoodle.org (www.timberdoodle.org)
This organization works to benefit the American Woodcock, also known affectionately as the timberdoodle. Attention and funds are focused on this species due to its status as a species of concern, as well as its value as a game bird. Conservation of the early successional habitat this species requires is also beneficial to many other species which prefer this habitat such as the Golden-winged Warbler, Ruffed Grouse, and Wild Turkey.

The restoration work of this group is divided into Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) as designated by U.S. North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). Michigan is a part of the Upper Great Lakes region and includes both
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Boreal Hardwood Transition (BCR 12), and Prairie Hardwood Transition (BCR 23). This organization has a set of best management practices tailored for this region to guide the development of quality habitat for this species.

Like Pheasants Forever, they operate at the landscape scale and include many partners to achieve their goals. Partners include many Federal and State agencies, non-governmental organizations, and species groups with similar young forest requirements, such as the Golden-winged Warbler working group.

Ducks Unlimited (www.ducks.org)
Ducks Unlimited works across North America and into Central America to preserve habitat for waterfowl. This wide scope is required due to the migratory nature of these species and dependence upon habitat across long migration routes.

Ducks Unlimited can help private landowners conserve for waterfowl in several ways. They provide information about waterfowl biology and habitat requirements, employs conservation experts, places private land under conservation easements, and helps landowners to become providers of environmental credits.

Ruffed Grouse Society (www.ruffedgrousesociety.org)
The Ruffed Grouse Society is focused on young forest habitats, making it a natural partner for Timberdoodle.org, and other efforts to conserve American Woodcock. Their website provides information about Ruffed Grouse, as well as the young forest ecosystem and the many species which depend upon this habitat type.

The Society provides a conservation plan document, with habitat management techniques for a variety of forest types, and habitat seminars posted online. The Society also works directly with landowners on projects.

USDA Programs
A number of federal programs provide resources to help land owners manage their lands through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Programs apply to various types of land (agricultural, forested, wetlands, and other areas) in order to aid management for conservation. These programs may provide the landowner with professional planning assistance, monetary support, or tax benefits. Avian populations, as well as other wildlife can benefit greatly from these programs. We introduce a few options here which have goals to benefit avian populations, though other environmentally beneficial programs exist.

Brief summaries of some of the programs available are provided, but they change over time and in association with farm legislation. For the most current information contact your local NRCS office.

Note: USDA Program information excerpted from Michigan NRCS website (2013).

Technical Assistance
NRCS has technical assistance available to every county in the United States through local NRCS offices. This network of professional conservationists is available to help landowners address environmental concerns on their lands. The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) and the Conservation of Private Grazing Land (CPGL) programs help to provide landowners sound conservation advice. These programs do not give financial assistance, but do help landowners develop the conservation plans required for many financial assistance programs. The development of a conservation plan may also help landowners determine which of the programs for which they meet eligibility requirements best align with their goals. These programs also connect landowners with technical service providers with expertise in particular fields, such as forestry, irrigation, establishing native grasses, and many others.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary conservation program administered by the NRCS. It supports production agriculture and environmental quality as compatible goals. Through EQIP, farmers, ranchers, private forest land owners and Federally-recognized American Indian tribes may receive financial and technical assistance to implement structural and land management conservation practices on eligible agricultural land. Eligible producers are individuals engaged in livestock, crop or forest production. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, and private non-industrial forestland. State priorities are developed annually from input from local work groups based on county resource assessments and individual plans to address those local needs. A State Technical Committee comprised of representation from these local work groups, Tribal groups, commodity groups, and conservation partners advise NRCS on the implementation of EQIP. EQIP activities are carried out according to a site specific conservation plan developed in conjunction with the producer. All conservation practices are installed according to NRCS technical standards. Producers may elect to use an approved technical service provider for technical assistance. EQIP offers contracts with a minimum term of one year after the implementation of the last scheduled practice and a maximum term of ten years. Total cost share and incentive payments are limited to $300,000 per individual over a six-year period, regardless of the number of farms or contracts. Eligibility for EQIP is subject to the Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2008 Farm Bill and highly erodible land and wetland conversion provisions.

Several initiatives exist under the EQIP program, including organic, cooperative conservation partnership (CCPI), conservation innovation (CIG), and agricultural water enhancement program (AWEP). Through the organic initiative, NRCS provides assistance to eligible producers for installation of conservation practices on organic or agricultural operations transitioning to organic production. Under CCPI, the NRCS enters into partnership agreements with eligible entities that want to enhance conservation outcomes on agricultural and nonindustrial private forest lands. The CIG program is designed to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies. AWEP is a voluntary conservation initiative that provides financial and
technical assistance to agricultural producers to implement agricultural water enhancement activities on agricultural land to conserve surface and ground water and improve water quality.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

CSP provides financial and technical assistance for eligible producers to conserve and enhance soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forest lands, agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe, and other private agricultural land on which resource concerns related to agricultural production could be addressed. Participation in the program is voluntary. CSP encourages land stewards to improve their conservation performance by installing and adopting additional activities, and improving, maintaining, and managing existing activities on agricultural land and non-industrial private forest land. The NRCS will make CSP available nationwide on a continuous application basis. Michigan will focus program impacts on natural resources that are of specific concern for specific geographic areas within the state. Applications will be evaluated relative to other applications addressing similar priority resource concerns to facilitate a competitive ranking process among applicants within a state who face similar resource challenges. The entire agricultural operation must be enrolled and must include all agricultural land that will be under the applicant’s control for the term of the proposed contract. CSP offers participants two possible types of payments:

1. Annual payment for installing and adopting additional activities, and improving, maintaining, and managing existing activities
2. Supplemental payment for adoption of resource-conserving crop rotations

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

WHIP is a voluntary program designed to provide technical and financial assistance to landowners for the establishment and improvement of fish and wildlife habitat. Ranking criteria are used to select the applicants with a conservation plan that will create, enhance or protect wildlife habitat by types of wildlife habitat. WHIP activities are carried out according to a site specific wildlife conservation plan developed in conjunction with the producer. All wildlife practices are installed according to NRCS technical standards. Producers may elect to use an approved technical service provider for technical assistance. WHIP offers contracts with a maximum term of 10 years. Program payments for individual practices will vary based on the average cost for a practice's implementation. Eligibility for WHIP is subject to the adjusted gross income provision of the 2008 Farm Bill. The information on this page lists general WHIP information including ranking criteria, and provides a pre-application tool that will assist landowners to make choices about their conservation plans.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Crop and pasture lands may be eligible to participate in the CRP, a program administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The primary purpose of this voluntary program is to conserve soils and waters, by protecting them from erosion through the planting of resource conserving covers. Many avian species do benefit from these plantings. Land owners are provided with USDA payments for their participation in this program based on the agricultural production value. Participants also receive technical support from the NRCS, the Institute of Food and Agriculture, State forestry agencies, local soil and water conservation districts, and private providers.

An offshoot of the CRP program is the conservation reserve enhancement program (CREP). This land retirement program for environmentally sensitive lands is administered similarly to the CRP program. In 2000, the State of Michigan made a 20 year agreement to implement CRP plans to improve water quality of the Macatawa, River Raisin, and Saginaw Bay Watershed. In addition to improving water quality, one of the issues addressed through this program is the loss of critical habitat for threatened and endangered wildlife species. See website for more information on these programs: http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

The purpose of HFRP is to assist landowners, on a voluntary basis, in restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on private lands through easements, 30-year contracts and 10-year cost-share agreements.

The objectives of HFRP are to:
1. Promote the recovery of endangered and threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)
2. Improve plant and animal biodiversity
3. Enhance carbon sequestration.

The HFRP was signed into law as part of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. It was amended in the 2008 Farm Bill. Areas of the St. Joseph – Maumee Watershed are eligible for this program.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and Tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring eligible land from agriculture. Over 1.9 million acres are currently enrolled in WRP.

Wetlands provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species; improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reduce flooding; recharge groundwater; protect biological diversity; and provide opportunities for educational, scientific, and limited recreational activities.

Plant Materials Program

The natural resources conservation service (NRCS) operates a plant materials program. While the first two mission goals of the NRCS revolve around maintaining healthy productive soils and water resources for food security, the third mission goal is to maintain healthy plant and animal communities (USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program 2010). Information about plant materials for conservation is available on the NRCS website, and through plant materials centers.
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State Programs

Excerpted from Department of Natural Resources (Undated)

Qualified Forestry Property Program (QFP)

In September 2006 the General Property Tax Act (1893 PA 206, as amended) was amended to add QFP tax exemption (Public Acts 378, 379 and 380). The intent of this tax exemption is to encourage private landowners to manage their land for forestry by providing a property tax reduction as an incentive. Landowners approved for this tax exemption are exempt from some school operating taxes. Participating landowners are not required to allow public access on their land. Landowners approved for this exemption must have a minimum of 20 contiguous acres (no buildings or structures are allowed), and are limited to exempting 320 acres per taxing unit. Landowners must manage their land with a DNR-approved forest management plan or a forest management plan certified by a third-party certifying organization. Participating landowners are required to report to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) annually the amount of timber produced on this land and whether any buildings or structures have been constructed on the land.

Forest Stewardship Program (FSP)

FSP provides financial and technical assistance to Michigan's non-industrial private forestland owners. By providing cost share funds for land management planning, sound management practices are promoted that consider elements important to forest health and vigor: soil, water, wildlife, timber, wetland and other resources and resource values. Once a stewardship management plan is prepared, the landowner may then qualify for assistance in management implementation through other assistance programs. Forest Stewardship plans help create informed landowners that become more engaged in planning and managing their forests. This greatly increases the likelihood that their forests will remain intact, productive and healthy, and that the social, economic and environmental benefits of these lands will be sustained for future generations.

The program provides landowners with the professional planning and technical assistance they need to keep their land in a productive and healthy condition. To enter the program, landowners select a private resource consultant from the list of certified stewardship plan writers maintained by the State. In partnership, the landowner and the consultant will identify the management objectives for the property. For some landowners, enhancing wildlife habitat for a particular species may be the most important objective; others may wish to manage their land for some type of recreation or for timber outputs. All are valid objectives under the Forest Stewardship Management Plan. Implementation of the plan is entirely voluntary, although most landowners indicate a desire to move forward with management implementation once a plan is created to their specific objectives.

USFWS Programs

Landowner Incentive Program (LIP)

Excerpted from USFWS Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program (2013)

LIP provides federal grant funds to grant funds to the states, the District of Columbia and insular areas to protect and restore habitats on private lands, to benefit federally listed, proposed or candidate species or other species determined to be at-risk. Grant funds must be used to establish or supplement State landowner incentive programs to benefit species identified in the State's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (State Wildlife Action Plan) or classified as Special Concern by the State, or federally listed, proposed, or candidate species or other species determined to be at-risk. These grant funds may also be used to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners for habitat protection and restoration

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