

Public access pays big dividends



Property V280 in the Voluntary Public Access program is a 60-acre parcel in Columbia County owned by the Madison Audubon Society adjacent to Schoenberg Marsh and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Production Area.

OPENING PRIVATE LANDS FOR PUBLIC ACTIVITY CREATES A WIN-WIN FOR OWNERS AND USERS ALIKE.

Anne Reis

In addition to publicly owned lands, Wisconsin's residents have extra opportunities to pursue hunting, fishing, trapping and wildlife observation on 31,000 acres of private lands leased for public access. More than 275 properties in 44 counties, on lands as varied as the state's topography, are included as part of the DNR's Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP).

Take your hand lens and go for a wildflower walk through a prairie filled with pollinators in Juneau County (property V244), or cast your fly along the banks of the Class 1 Camp Creek in Richland County (V1). Bring your binoculars and look for bobolinks in the grasslands in Columbia County (V280). And if it's gun deer season, watch the sky brighten from your blind nestled along the edge of a wetland and corn field in Pierce County (V254).

These are just some of the private lands leased for public access in Wisconsin through VPA-HIP, which has been in

operation in the state since 2011. While many private landowners offer access to their lands to neighbors, friends or small groups for hunting, fishing or trapping, it takes a special generosity of spirit to open privately owned lands to the public 365 days of the year.

Private lands make up the majority of our great state. With VPA-HIP, the waters and wildlife of those lands are made available for the public. This creates a unique opportunity to collectively manage our public wildlife resources.

Funds for VPA-HIP are available through the federal 2014 Farm Bill, in

which Congress reauthorized monies to be used for voluntary access programs across the country. Along with Wisconsin's program, notable access arrangements in the Midwest and Plains states include South Dakota's Walk-In Area program, North Dakota's PLOTS (Private Land Open to Sportsmen), Michigan's Hunting Access Program and Iowa's Habitat and Access Program.

These programs are multi-faceted relationships among state and federal government agencies, landowners, non-profit organizations, recreational user groups and other partners. The underlying motivation for funding these programs at the federal level is to remove the barrier to access that many users experience and to help recruit, retain and re-engage people for wildlife-dependent recreation.

Program allows access

In Wisconsin, the Department of Natural Resources manages the land access program and funds are provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Currently, 200 landowners are enrolled in the program and many have been participating since 2011-12.

Some participating landowners own property adjacent to county, state or federal lands, and the inclusion of those private lands provides better access to these public properties. In fact, a handful of

VPA-HIP properties are embedded in the middle of state or federally owned lands.

One VPA landowner, for instance, has a 10-acre in-holding in the Jackson Marsh Wildlife area, a parcel that was acquired in a tavern in the 1940s by trading a horse. Hunters likely do not even know they are on private lands when on this property.

Other properties are distinct recreation destinations and have their own draw for users. Beverly Krejci and Ronald Zimmerman of Marathon County have been enrolled in VPA-HIP since February 2012. Their property in Harrison Township can best be described as multi-use because it includes a rotational grazing operation, two-thirds of a mile of Class 1 trout stream and 100-plus acres of forest.

Their motivation for enrolling in VPA comes from the lease payment, which helps to maintain farm infrastructure. But Krejci and Zimmerman also have a land ethic with public access in mind. They see themselves as stewards of the land and have a history of educating the public on rotational grazing practices, including presentations at conferences and pasture walks.

Before enrollment in VPA-HIP, they believed people had been sneaking onto their property. After signing up, they noted that land users seemed more comfortable approaching them to ask about access, even though according to the rules of the program, users do not need to ask for permission first.

All of the interactions Krejci and Zimmerman have had with hunters and users have been positive. Recently, a counselor from a nearby youth home brought



MATT AHRENS

Beverly Krejci and Ronald Zimmerman have had their multi-use property in Marathon County (V182) enrolled in the DNR's Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program since 2012.

kids to the land to provide mentoring and instruction on how to hunt and how to talk to landowners.

Positive feedback

While leased private lands in the VPA program account for only 0.6 percent of the total lands open to public hunting, data from a recent survey shows that hunters are indeed utilizing these parcels. Many users report they visit the same property multiple times throughout the year and indicate they would use the property again in the future.

Survey responses from landowners show that most want to keep hunting traditions alive in Wisconsin and to provide hunting opportunities to those who do not own hunting land. Of those responding to the survey, 85 percent indicated they are satisfied or very satisfied with the VPA program.

The VPA program alleviates some of the crowding issues found on pub-

lic lands, decreases drive time to hunting opportunities and stimulates local economies via recreational user spending (gas, food, equipment and supplies), while also providing financial incentives directly to private landowners. Most existing leases are good until August 2020.

Wildlife incentives

The intent of VPA-HIP is not only to allow more public access to private lands, but also to create wildlife habitat by providing financial incentives to landowners for eligible NRCS practices. This improves local conditions for wildlife and provides a better quality user experience.

Lease amounts paid to landowners participating in the program are calculated per acre and vary by land type, with base rates of \$3 per acre for agriculture land, \$10 for grassland and wetland, and \$15 for forest land. In addition, landowners may elect to participate in a variety of wildlife habitat enhancement activities that pay additional incentives.

For example, landowners may choose to participate in prescribed burns (\$171 per acre) and planting pollinator habitat (\$970 per acre on cropland). Other landowners may elect to plant a short-term wildlife food plot on cropland for an incentive of \$595 per acre. These plots can be installed for just one year or for the length of the lease.

Other habitat practices from which landowners can choose include establishment of native grass and wildflowers, brush management and invasive species control.

Addressing concerns

A common concern for VPA landowners and their neighbors is the idea they might become overrun with hunters.

Hunting is among the activities popular on lands that are privately owned but open for use through the state's public access program.



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Signs like this one clearly mark areas that are “Private Lands Leased for Public Access” through the federally funded and DNR-managed Voluntary Public Access program. Users may enter on foot only and must follow all hunting, fishing and trapping regulations.

Based on VPA-HIP user surveys, the average number of other users encountered on a trip to a VPA property is 1.7. On a large property, there is more than enough space to accommodate multiple users. On a smaller property, hunters generally know how best to space themselves and move on if there is not enough room.

A second landowner concern is having liability for accidental death or injuries to users. However, Section 895.52 of Wisconsin statutes protects landowners from responsibility for injury or death of individuals participating in outdoor recreation on their property. Courts have consistently interpreted this statute to protect landowners to encourage them to allow others to recreate on their lands.

A third worry of VPA landowners involves the courtesy of users. All visitors are encouraged to follow the program’s code of conduct including adhering to posted boundaries to prevent trespassing, parking only in designated areas or

safely along right-of-ways, and traveling only by foot. Hunters must maintain a shooting buffer of 300 feet around houses and buildings and use only temporary blinds and stands that are removed daily.

All users are asked to pick up litter and leave wild edibles to the wildlife. Showing respect and gratitude to VPA landowners is a given. The user code of conduct is essential for the long-term sustainability of the program. It takes just one bad interaction with a user to cause a landowner to drop out.

Footville success story

One of the largest concentrations of VPA lands is within the Footville Wildlife Area near Evansville in Rock County. Footville is a 7,500-acre wildlife area representing a complex of 38 VPA properties with a few hundred acres of public access easements and DNR-owned wildlife habitat.

This area is unique in that it is the only large VPA complex in Wisconsin and

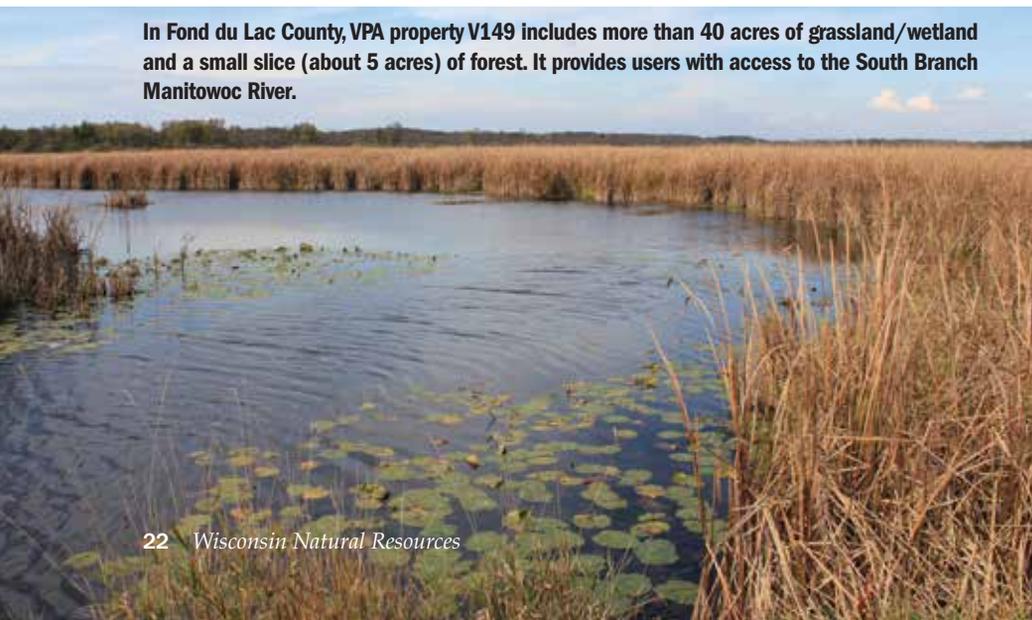
represents 22 percent of the land enrolled in the program. Most of the land is in agricultural production with about 25 percent in grassland / wetland cover.

This property is stocked with pheasants on an annual basis, so it is a prime location for pheasant hunting. The local Pheasants Forever chapter is actively involved in creating and maintaining the existing habitat and many of the group’s members use the properties for hunting.

The majority of the Footville VPA landowners have provided public access since the 1970s and ’80s through the now-retired Public Hunting Grounds program. As with most VPA-HIP participants, there is a culture of public access among these landowners that goes hand-in-hand with the goals of the program. ❧

DNR wildlife biologist Anne Reis is coordinator of the state’s Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program. Wildlife biologist Tim Lizotte also contributed to this story.

In Fond du Lac County, VPA property V149 includes more than 40 acres of grassland/wetland and a small slice (about 5 acres) of forest. It provides users with access to the South Branch Manitowoc River.



>>> MORE INFORMATION

The DNR’s Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program is open for new enrollment. For information, check dnr.wi.gov and search “VPA.” Landowners can apply to enroll via the website or by contacting VPA-HIP coordinator Anne Reis at 608-279-6483 or email anne.reis@wisconsin.gov. The website also has information for users and the general public, including interactive maps to find VPA properties statewide.

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