

by Ann Haas and
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Partners for Fish and Wildlife



The Partners for Fish and Wildlife program began in the Midwest about 15 years ago, mainly as an effort to help restore “prairie potholes” on private lands for migratory waterfowl. Landowners who valued these birds looked to the Fish and Wildlife Service for assistance in making the small wetlands a key feature on their landscapes once again.

Private landowners are the stewards of over two-thirds of our nation’s land, and their participation in conservation is essential to the long-term health of our nation’s fish and wildlife resources. We recognize that effective partnerships are the key to success. Our Partners for Fish and Wildlife program provides restoration assistance and funding to landowners to restore habitat for trust species such as migratory birds, anadromous (migrating between salt and fresh water) fish, and declining animals and plants.

From its humble beginnings, the program has fostered partnerships with private landowners and tribes to restore over one million acres (0.4 million hectares) of wetland, prairie, and forest, and 3,200 miles (5,150 kilometers) of stream and streamside habitat. Some sites are as small as a single acre while others are as large as several hundred acres. Available in every state and Puerto Rico, the program has a waiting list of people who want to participate.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is a strictly voluntary effort and landowners retain complete control of their property. “We help with quality assistance,” says Mike Johnson, a biologist in our headquarters office, “by creating diversity in agricultural landscapes. When we restore wetlands, I call it the ‘English muffin effect’—we add nooks and crannies. High spots dry out sooner. Different plants and animals live and grow in the different habitats.”

This Salmon Creek fish ladder allows salmonids, particularly bull trout and West Slope cutthroat trout, to migrate to native spawning grounds in tributaries of the Blackfoot River in Montana.

Photo by Greg Neudecker/USFWS





Partners for Fish and Wildlife program biologist Dean Vaughn with Bill Lundstrom (left), a landowner in Mission Valley, Montana.

Photo by Greg Neudecker/USFWS

What began in 1987 as an effort to restore small prairie wetlands has evolved into a wider initiative to incorporate other land and water management activities that benefit a broad range of species. The growing sophistication of ecological restoration techniques has made it possible to address a variety of habitat types that require careful reconstruction of their physical, biological, and biochemical components. We're now helping landowners restore stream channels and stream banks, replant native plant communities (e.g., bottomland hardwood forests, native prairies, and long-leaf pine communities), control invasive plant species, and remove barriers in streams (e.g., small dams and culverts) to allow fish passage.

Partners projects also benefit species that are listed as endangered or threatened. In Montana, for example, the Partners program is assisting landowners and other partners in habitat restoration for a variety of wildlife, including such listed species as grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*), gray wolves (*Canis lupus*), and bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*). In one restored creek, bull trout returned to spawn the first year after the habitat restoration was accomplished!

The Partners program places a priority on working with landowners located near national wildlife refuges, thereby enhancing refuge activities. We also work in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, helping it incorporate fish and wildlife considerations into the conservation provisions of the Farm Bill (e.g., Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program). In Fiscal Year 2001, Congress appropriated approximately \$25 million for the Partners program nationwide. So far, the Partners program has had the pleasure of working with landowners and tribes on 24,000 restoration projects, and we smile every time the phone rings.

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Almost 42 acres (17 hectares) of wetlands were restored at this site on the Geoff Foote ranch in the Blackfoot Valley of Montana. Before the Partners project, bull trout were not documented in the stream. The next year, biologists found the species in the restored area.

Photo by Greg Neudecker/USFWS