

Ponders Tract, Sussex County

Landowner: The Nature Conservancy- Ponders Tract

City: Milton

Acreage enrolled: 30

Type of Restoration: Reforestation

Length of LIP contract: 5 years

In this unique partnership, the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife's Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) and the Delaware Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) joined efforts to create one of the largest private reforestation projects in Delaware's history. Ponders Tract is the site of the restoration project and is found within the Pemberton Forest Preserve near Milton, Delaware. TNC purchased the property in 2004 from a pine tree logging company. Ponders Tract consists of 908 acres, 188 of which were clear-cut and planted with loblolly pine just before TNC's purchase. When John Graham, TNC land steward, heard about the LIP, he said the partnership "seemed like a perfect fit." With the help from LIP, TNC could begin the large reforestation initiative.

Due to the size of the reforestation project, TNC proposed using 'habitat islands' to encourage the natural regeneration of the forest. Habitat islands have been used to accelerate successional growth for reforestation practices on farmland but, until now, they have never been used on land with pre-existing forest. Since Ponders Tract contains headwaters to the Broadkill River TNC decided to concentrate restoration efforts near wetlands and buffer areas, improving the surrounding watershed and habitat for aquatic life. Approximately 30 acres of pine trees were cleared in 8 different locations and replanted in 36 habitat island sites with a diverse stand of native hardwood seedlings and young trees. Brush and thin tree stumps were left to create habitat for terrestrial animals and provide perching posts for birds. Perching birds are expected to eat and carry seeds from the habitat islands to other parts of Ponders Tract, dispersing and diversifying the surrounding pine tree monoculture forest.

As part of the Delaware Landowner Incentive Program, 75% of project costs were covered, including the supplies and materials needed for planting. Volunteers and TNC land stewards logged 384.5 hours of labor planting 1,368 trees and shrubs providing the 25% in-kind services needed to match LIP's financial assistance. "We could not have done this without LIP and the volunteers," Graham stated. In less than 6 months the original 188 acre property of loblolly pines looked significantly different. "It is pretty big in results already," says Graham, referring to the removal of 30 acres of pine trees. Current wildlife present on the property includes ovenbirds, black and white warblers, red-tailed hawks, bald eagles, slender marsh pink, and a Southern leopard frog. In time, LIP and TNC expect to see an increase in plant and animal species.

Next spring, TNC plans to open the site to the public and provide 6-8 miles of walking/hiking trails with interpretive signs and identification brochures available as well. Over the next 30 years, the regeneration process will offer visitors a glimpse of what the forest historically looked like: a mixed hardwood forest with an array of wildlife.

For additional information about Ponders Tract and the Delaware chapter of TNC, visit:
<http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/delaware/preserves/art10711.html>

PHOTOS



Above, Habitat island with seedlings and pine tree perching posts. The remaining pine tree forest is visible in the background.
Below, a future and current forested emergent wetland.





Slender Marsh Pink (*Sabatia campanulata*)

Photo credit: Division of Fish and Wildlife



Above, volunteers planting at Ponders Tract.
Photo credit: Steve Billups