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Conservation Education Tour scans Steuben projects



Doug Nusbaum with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Lake and River Enhancement program, right, leads participants in a Lake Erie conservation tour through Settlers Wetland Nature Preserve the morning of July 12.

- Amy Oberlin/Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy



A green heron hunts for food at Settlers Wetland Nature Preserve near Clear Lake.

- Amy Oberlin/Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy

FREMONT — Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy's Settlers Wetland Nature Preserve was one of three sites on the Conservation Education Tour of the Western Lake Erie Basin on July 12.

Hosted by the Indiana Conservation Partnership — which includes the Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Indiana State Department of Agriculture's Division of Soil Conservation, Purdue Cooperative Extension Service, the State Soil Conservation Board and the USDA — the tour began at the Robert and Susan Hurraw property near Hamilton. The wetland complex is enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Easement Program and a filter strip is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Next, the tour participants — who included Sen. Sue Glick, R-LaGrange — saw the Joel Conrad farm near Pleasant Lake. The grassland complex includes an expansive enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program, Grassland for Gamebirds and Songbirds Regional Conservation Partnership and other state and federal programs.

Settlers Wetlands was the final stop. The 3.5-acre closed preserve was established through a property purchase made possible by the Waterfield Foundation and land donation from Jim and Annie Skinner. It is positioned along the Cyrus Brouse ditch, which flows into Clear Lake and historically has shown high concentrations of nutrients that contribute to algae blooms and lower water quality.

The Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy regularly tests water samples through volunteer efforts of the Water Quality Committee of the Steuben County Lakes Council and has embarked on a comprehensive study in conjunction with Ecosystems Connections Institute, headquartered in Denver, Indiana. Major ditches flowing into the lake — Cyrus Brouse and Harry Teeters — are also monitored through testing by the Steuben County Lakes Council. The ditches frequently show higher than average nutrient content, believed to originate from agriculture.

In 1993, Cardno, formerly JF New, identified Cyrus Brouse ditch as a possible site for a wetland installation. With that in mind, the Skinners, who own property near the new wetlands, purchased an adjoining parcel when it became available. George Baatz, who has lived at the site of Settlers Wetland for 30 years with his family, agreed to sell some of his land for the project.

Land acquisition was followed by construction by The Stanger Group, Goshen, working closely with the county surveyor's office in 2021. An artificial riffle was created on the north end of a constructed wetland, slowing the flow. On the south side is a two-stage ditch. The two-stage ditch system allows sediment and nutrients to settle on earthen benches during high water flow instead of rushing downstream and into the lake. The Cyrus Brouse ditch funnels water draining off 1,100 acres of land south of Clear Lake.

The project has stopped 120 pounds of nitrogen, 71 tons of sediment and 60 pounds of phosphorus from entering the lake, said Doug Nusbaum of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Lake and River Enhancement program. He said it has likely reduced phosphorus even more dramatically than statistics show.

Settlers Wetland was named to recognize early settlers to area but is also a play on words — a tribute to how a two-stage ditch allows sediment and nutrients to settle during high flow.

The Baatz family experienced some changes in their backyard with the constructed wetlands but George said he wanted to be involved in the project to honor his late father, Tom. When Tom visited George and his family, he would walk with his grandchildren along the ditch and show them the different native plants and their uses.

George and his son, Drew, have fostered that knowledge themselves, taking the time to appreciate the wildlife and identify the flora growing at Settlers Wetlands, from poisonous but native water hemlock to showy iris.

The improvement also adds habitat. Around 200 wetlands and pollinator plugs were planted with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funding.

Support came from a DNR LARE grant, Steuben County Community Foundation's Clear Lake Fund, NiSource Foundation, NIPSCO and an anonymous donor.

Former Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy Executive Director Bridget Harrison said she is "incredibly proud" of the project, noting, "It was truly a group effort."

Along with the potential of improving water quality in Clear Lake, the Settlers Wetland Nature Preserve is "a showpiece right along S.R. 120," Harrison said.