

August 1993

WELLS CREEK WATERSHED PROJECT
WILDLIFE RESOURCES

Prior to settlement of southeastern Minnesota the area supported prairie wildlife species such as bison, elk, deer, sharp-tailed grouse, varied shorebird and waterfowl species. Major wildlife species occurring in hardwood areas were ruffed grouse, deer, squirrels, rabbits, passenger pigeons (on a localized basis) and a rich variety of migratory bird species.

Human disturbance in the form of farming, roadbuilding and homesite development caused significant changes in the character of the landscape of southeast Minnesota. Those changes, in turn, altered wildlife resources of the area.

Today the area encompassed by the Wells Creek watershed supports wildlife populations that include game species such as deer, ruffed grouse, turkeys, pheasants, gray partridge, Canada geese, Blue-winged teal, woodducks, mallards and coyotes, and a myriad of nongame species such as turkey vultures, pileated woodpeckers, kingbirds, timber rattlesnakes and tree frogs.

Uncommon and unique plant and animal species occurring within the watershed are listed in Minnesota's Heritage Program database and are treated in a separate report (right Ellen?).

In recent years the white-tailed deer population of southern Goodhue County has been maintained at a level that is very close to the management goal of 5 deer per square mile. The actual level has fluctuated between 4.5 and 6 deer per square mile. The annual

hunting kill for the last five years in the watershed area has averaged about 3.1 deer per square mile.

Pheasant populations in the vicinity have never been strong when measured against statewide averages. This is primarily due to the strong mix of forestland in the watershed and intensive grazing and row crop farming. For the past five years roadside surveys have shown pheasant populations in the area to be at a level of about 20 birds per 100 miles, compared to an average statewide of about 51 birds per 100 miles.

Ruffed grouse populations in southeast Minnesota, as related to available habitat, are somewhat comparable with range-wide numbers. Spring counts in the past seven years for the southeast zone have shown an average of 1.2 drums per stop. The range-wide average in Minnesota for the same period is 1.3 drums per stop. The Wells Creek watershed does not have extensive blocks of suitable habitat for grouse that can be found in other portions of the bird's range.

As noted above, waterfowl species common to the Wells Creek area include Canada geese, mallards, woodducks and Blue-winged teal. Mallards and teal are dependent upon shallow marshes for courtship and brood rearing. Their productivity tends to fluctuate greatly from year to year depending on rainfall. Woodducks have exhibited a more constant production history over the last ten years due to reduced disturbance in the riparian woodland during that time. In the late 1980's Canada geese reappeared as a breeding bird in the watershed after an absence of many decades. The resurgence in their numbers is due to efforts to reestablish

nesting populations in various parts of southern Minnesota. Nesting Canadas have been noted in the lower portions of the watershed as well as in the Pleasant Valley Creek wetlands complex that lies nearby.

Woodland wildlife habitat has been improved in recent years in the Wells Creek watershed due to reduced livestock grazing. Recovery of a damaged woodland is a slow process that can be accomplished through cessation of grazing activity. Some landowners have taken the initiative of seeking technical advice in forest management that in many cases involves improvement of wildlife habitat.

The federal Conservation Reserve Program and the Reinvest in Minnesota effort have resulted in an increase in grassland acreage within the watershed. Grasslands established under those programs must be managed in an undisturbed condition for soil erosion control and wildlife habitat purposes. Quantitative analysis is lacking, but there have been noticeable enhancements in grassland related wildlife populations. Most notable is the increased abundance of small mammals which provide an important prey base for many predator species.

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