

who then becomes a teacher of local habitat stewards around the U.S. The goal is to widen the knowledge base about native plant gardening.

Cummings trained six eager volunteers in her first seminar who are now certified habitat stewards. Cummings herself assisted the Berwyn YMCA in planning and planting a native garden and each of her steward trainees also adopted a public garden project. The National Wildlife Federation encourages stewards to plant their gardens in public places, like schools, parks and around municipal buildings, to further public education about native plants.

"My real goal in training habitat stewards is education. I want to share the beauty and ease of my native garden with others and show them how they can benefit wildlife, too. I've affected a lot of people already," she said.

Cummings is about to embark on an even more ambitious native garden at her new home in Wheaton. The yard is huge and borders on the Illinois Prairie Path and she is raring to yank all the bluegrass and get started on a native garden that will better serve even more wildlife than she hosted in Berwyn and please passers-by on the Prairie Path.

#### **Buying Land for Birds**

The Illinois Audubon Society has an impressive record of buying bird habitat in all corners of the state. Volunteers in 2,400 households from 19 chapters and a small staff write grants, conduct fund-raising campaigns, and identify natural areas that need to be protected. Illinois Audubon will often buy the land and manage it as a bird sanctuary until a public agency has assembled enough money to purchase the property.



*Marilyn Campbell, Executive Director of Illinois Audubon Society, poses here with Robert Montgomery, past president of Illinois Ornithological Society at a joint annual meeting with both organizations held several years ago.*

"It's really a revolving land acquisition program," said Marilyn Campbell, Illinois Audubon's Executive Director. "We buy and hold the land until the state can buy it from us, then we recycle the money gained from the sale into another property," she said.

One of Illinois Audubon's most important, recent land acquisition campaigns has been to add more land around Prairie Ridge State Natural Area in Jasper and Marion counties. The Nature Conservancy began to purchase land for a prairie-chicken refuge in 1961, and 12 tracts were added between 1961 and 1998, said Campbell. The Nature Conservancy sold the lands it purchased to the state and moved on to other projects.

Illinois Audubon volunteers and staff took a close look at Prairie Ridge in 1998 and realized that the current 2,000 acres did not form a preserve large enough to sustain populations of the endangered Greater Prairie-Chicken and other grassland nesters, such as Short-eared Owl and Upland Sandpiper. The original refuge plan called for 5,000 acres in each county to be set aside and protected, so Illinois Audubon started writing grants and raising funds to expand the acreage. The Society now maintains the Robert Ridgway Grasslands, adjacent to Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, and just received a C2000 grant from the state to help purchase an additional 40 acres at Robert Ridgway.

In the last two years, Illinois Audubon has purchased about 300 acres for grassland birds in Marion and Jasper counties. As a non-governmental body, Illinois Audubon can be more nimble than a state agency, Campbell said. "We got a desperate call last year. An important piece of property was coming up at auction, and the state would never have been able to pull the money together so fast. We were able to step in and buy the land."

Illinois Audubon has a good relationship with local farmers who contact the Society as they think about retiring or down-sizing their acreage. Since there is little threat of sprawl in the Prairie Ridge area, Illinois Audubon can work cordially with local land owners and pay reasonable prices for the land. Volunteers who live in the area have helped with trail construction and stewardship at the grasslands IAS has purchased, Campbell said.

Sometimes, Illinois Audubon is the beneficiary of a gift that's worth more than the money it would take to buy it. The Society was especially fortunate to receive a gift of more than \$4,000 worth of native Illinois ecotype prairie forb seed for planting at Robert Ridgway Grassland from Lou Nelms, owner of Earthskin Nursery in Mason City. That's a lot of high-quality seed material that's already in the ground that will enhance bird habitat at this central Illinois prairie restoration project.

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