



CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Day County Ranch Impresses Birdwatchers

This story was adapted from an article that was first published in June 2008 in the Aberdeen American News Farm Forum by Sarah Ottney.

Grass is very important to Darwin Peckham. The rural Bristol farmer and rancher became a member of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition (SDGC) board of directors about a year ago.

“Grass has been a lifetime interest of mine,” Peckham said. “The grass resource is really important to me. I just like to be around people who are successful with managing grass and learn from them. I believe we’re all made to live here and work here and I believe we need livestock on the land. It will co-exist if we just give it a chance.”

According to the SDGC web site, www.sdgrass.org, the Coalition is “a call to action” and a “a call to renew our commitment to South Dakota’s grassland resource.”

The coalition believes that “what happens on the land is crucial to our economic and environmental well-being. The coalition is open to everyone, Peckham said – not just for people who own grassland.

“The goal is not just to teach people, but to get them to think about how important it is that birds,



Darwin Peckham farms and ranches near Bristol, SD. He is standing in front of native grassland on his property. Photo by Sarah Ottney.

frogs, ducks, geese, people, cows, and plants all can live in the same community,” Peckham said. “Just like people, we’re not all the same, but we all live together. It {the grass-

land resource} is not just for the birds, or just for the cows, or just for you and me. It’s for the good of the state. And, if it’s good for the state, it’s good for the people.”



Photo by Deb Peckham.



During the Bird Tour, participants learned “first hand” of “the why’s and how” of bird banding and identification from South Dakota wildlife specialists. Photo by Susan Rupp.

Threats: Native grass has an abundance of invaders right now, including non-native grasses, Peckham said. “Grass is under siege. Once we lose this, it is gone, never to return,” he said. “Grassland has been manipulated by time. It’s been changed, it can’t go back.”



Photo by Richard Rames.

That’s true, said Darrel DuVall, former District Conservationist of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Webster. “Once it’s broken up to be farmed, grassland won’t ever get its native diversity back,” DuVall said. “It’s impossible.”

There’s not a lot of native grassland left in eastern South Dakota, but Peckham has “probably some of the best in the county,” DuVall said.

Grassland is managed to ensure that it doesn’t decline in diversity and “to make it more like Mother Nature intended,” DuVall said. It’s not a hands-off method, though. “No way, there’s management involved, and a lot of it,” Peckham said. “There’s timing and selection of grasses. We need great diversity out there. It is needed for your ecosystem to be healthy.”

Peckham is clearly proud to be a part of the SD Grassland Coalition.

Birdwatching: Peckham said he didn’t know much about birds before the birdwatchers came, but was impressed by what they found. Sixty-one species of birds were observed on Peckham’s land, said Justin “Judge” Jessop, project coordinator with the coalition.

“When we were preparing for this tour, I never would have imagined they’d find that many birds,” Peckham said. “It’s just unbelievable. There’s

a lady who saw a “lifetime bird” today (June 7). That really impressed me.”

That lady – Lois Rames of Estelline – was one of about 48 people who attended the event. Rames has been birdwatching for about 25 years and kept a list of every bird she’s ever seen. A lifetime bird means it’s the first time Rames has seen that species of bird in her lifetime. She saw a Northern Mockingbird on Peckham’s ranch. Although these birds have been spotted as far north as Canada, their summer range extends only into Nebraska or southwestern South Dakota, Rames said. “That was pretty neat,” she said.

Peckham gave a tour of his native grassland and spoke to the birdwatchers a little about grassland management. “I think ours is a pretty simplistic method – we try to have more grass than cows,” Peckham said to laughter. “But I see lots of places that have more cows than grass.

As far as the grass and the birds and all that, I think it all works together.” Peckham recalled a day in high school when his agriculture teacher said, “You never own the land – you just borrow it for a while.”

“I still believe that,” Peckham said. “Hopefully, when I’m done with it, someone else will carry on and take good care of it.”