

A crowd gathered recently for a tour on the farm of Dr. Shirley Johnson. They were there to see firsthand a management technique not widely used in this area to control honeysuckle, multiflora rose and other invasive species in her woodland. They were there to see the goats.

For the past year or more, Shirley has worked with a number of partners to develop a forest management plan and implement a brush management plan without the use of herbicides, instead using goats to control invasive species in her woods.

The plan involved high intensity grazing, or in the case of goats, browsing on small areas. A portable electric fence would be set up around areas of roughly 1/2 to 2 acres in size and the goats would be left to munch on leaves until they had browsed all of the vegetation they could reach.

Goats are non-discriminating eaters and were able to defoliate much of the vegetation. The strategy was for the goats to remove the vegetation from an area, then move them to a new area to tackle the invasives inside that paddock location. Once the goats were moved out of an area, the vegetation would resprout and later the goats would be brought back to browse the area again. The goats' job is to eat the growth, exhausting the root system of the invasive shrubs so they will not be able to resprout and die.

Finding someone locally with enough goats to do the job was a challenge. Shirley eventually found a supplier out of Iowa. The goats, over 100 of them, came for the first time last summer, once in May and then again in early fall. The goats did a respectable job of removing everything they could reach. That eat everything up to about 6' tall. Some of the honeysuckle was just too tall for the goats to reach in spite of their ability to climb, sometimes even on one another, and to use their horns to hook and pull branches lower to reach the leaves.

Mechanical methods including hand clearing and pulling were used to mechanically remove shrubs too high for the goats to reach, particularly in the ravines. The defoliated vegetation and the vegetation removed by cutting will likely resprout. The regrowth, however, will be goat height, and they will be able to browse it more easily this time around.

This summer the goats from Iowa weren't able to return. Shirley took the step of purchasing her own goats. She now has more than 20 goats and is still adding to her herd. She says she has developed a network of goat mentors. One benefit of having her own goats is that they will be on site during the entire growing season moving from one area to another.

Once the honeysuckle and multiflora rose are under control, and once there are enough grasses and forbs to carry a fire, the plan is to use prescribed fire as a management tool. Fire favors oak, hickory and native savanna vegetation. Prescribed fire will also be less costly and require less management to use.

As an Academic, Dr. Shirley Johnson, took advantage of this project. If she was going to do this, she wanted this be a study. She wanted to be able to evaluate the results of the techniques she was using and then share that information with others.

Test plots of 21 foot by 21 foot were established randomly on site. We visited one the day of the tour. Before management, that same plot contained 51 honeysuckle stems larger than 1 cm in a little over 400 square feet. On the day of the tour there were few honeysuckle stems to be seen. The goal is to return this landscape to an oak savanna something that will take time. Having seen the site from the beginning to now, Tom Branson, IDNR Forester, commented, "We are looking for progress, not perfection." So far, the results are encouraging.

This project has been a collaborative effort. A number of partners have helped make this project possible. They shared their involvement and information about their programs including Emily Hodapp, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Private Lands Biologist, Zach Stephenson, Pheasants Forever Biologist, Kristopher Reynolds, American Farmland Trust, Cate Loomis U.S. Department of Agriculture North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, Tom Branson, IDNR Forester, Mike McKim, owner of Invasive Plant Removal and Maintenance, Charlie Hensley, Peoria County Farm Bureau, and Dan Sahn, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Conservationist.

If you would like to find out more information about this project, check out this article in the May issue of Outdoor Illinois at <https://outdoor.wildlifeillinois.org/articles/goats-grit-persistence-and-partnerships>.



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