Goats Step in to Clear a Hillside

After Brian Suckow rolled down the steep bank toward the lake with his weed whipper still buzzing, he knew it was time for a safer plan to control weed growth. A previous experiment involving a mower and a rope had nearly sent the mower swimming.



“I had to find something else,” he said. “That’s not very safe.”

Looking for a better way to tackle the overgrowth on the hill, Suckow found goat wrangler Bryan Simon.

Suckow and several relatives share 425 feet of shoreline across three East Battle Lake lots, where the land drops sharply to the water and the steep bank had become tangled with prickly ash, Canada thistle and buckthorn.

“We take pride in our lake property and worried how it looked, both from the cabin and from the lakeside,” Suckow said.

A Goat Wrangler

Simon and his wife, Jessie, operate Lakeside Prairie Farm, about 30 miles west of Alexandria near Barrett, where goats are put to work controlling invasive brush. Buckthorn is a favorite snack, and the goats also browse prickly ash and Canada thistle and other unwanted weeds. The result is a natural—and far less nerve-racking—alternative to mowers, weed whippers and chemical applications.



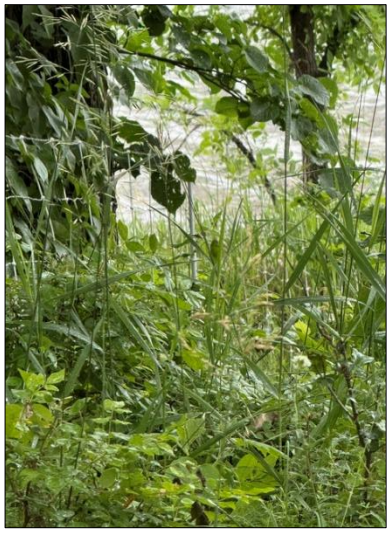
Simon came to the goat-grazing focus because of his love for the land -- he has a bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Minnesota, Morris, and his master’s degree in ecology from South Dakota State. After his schooling, he went on to work for the Student Conservation Association, the U.S. Park Service, and The Nature Conservancy in Idaho, Texas, Hawaii, and South Dakota, where he further developed his love for the land, gained an appreciation for the diversity of our native ecosystems, and became aware of the problems faced by native ecosystems due to modern agriculture, according to the farm’s website, https://www.lakesideprairiefarm.com

Bryan and Jessie Simon’s goal is to produce an ecologically restorative service, while improving soil health, water quality, wildlife habitat, and the vitality of our rural community.

“Our goal is to help you restore your wild spaces from acres choked with buckthorn to a more open area you can explore and enjoy,” Simon says on the farm’s website. “What sets us apart from other farms is our commitment to improving and maintaining the native prairie, wetlands, and oak savanna in our region.”

Goats Gobble Up Vegetation

Goat grazing is a simple concept: goats naturally strip the leaves, weakening the plants’ reserves so they are less likely to survive the winter.





Simon said the goats usually need to defoliate the area a couple of times during the growing season, and full control often takes two to three seasons.

Simon dropped the goat herd off at Suckow’s on a Monday in June and they had finished the first round of browsing by the following Tuesday — a fast pass from a four-legged landscape crew. A second round of grazing goats made another pass in late-August – it only took them a few days to finish the job and Simon picked them up and moved them to a new job.

To get the goats only required approval from Girard Township, where Suckow has lake property.



The ordinance allows up to 50 animals for vegetation management, so Suckow soon had 47 goats and three sheep happily clocking in on the steep hillside.

“Goats are made for that kind of terrain,” Simon said, adding that the inclusion of sheep is important because they crop vegetation closer to the ground.

Simon keeps the grazing crew contained with electric netting, which takes roughly a couple hours to set up,

and as long as there is plenty to eat, the animals stay within the fencing confines.

Suckow's hill ends at the lake, so the goats had access to water, but Simon said they get most of their water from the plants they eat. In locations not accessible to a lake, he provides water to ensure the landscapers are well hydrated.

Since his initial investment of goats, Simon hasn't had to purchase additional goats, as they self-propagate. This year alone, 200 kids were born -- all are named and provided with an ear tag.

"It's my kids' job to come up with new names for the babies born every year," he said.

For Suckow the goat crew checked all his boxes, the first one being a safe alternative to make his hillside aesthetically pleasing. "I can't say anything negative, it's like somebody mowed it," Suckow said. "(Simon) was very professional and a nice guy."