

# *As if born to it*

*Sure-footed graziers take over a tough job*



Deb McWilliams: "They seemed to know what they were supposed to do."

Photos: Rolie Henkes

**W**ielding a brush cutter, Rob McWilliams was making little headway against a jungle of brush as he struggled for footing up the side of a bluff.

It was enough to get anyone's goat, and that's exactly what he and his wife, Deb, decided to do. They got 44 goats, to be exact. This spring the animals took over the job of clearing the brush on part of the 30 acres that the McWilliams purchased two years ago near Lanesboro in the Root River Valley of southeastern Minnesota. Their land lies in the region of rocky outcroppings known as the Driftless, or unglaciated, area.

"I'm amazed at how much they seem to be in their element," Deb said as she watched the animals scramble up the

steep slope, dutifully nibbling away at buckthorn, honeysuckle, brambles and other plants that most graziers shun.

**Evolution.** Jesse Bennett, who supplied the goats, is not surprised. He's co-owner of Driftless Land Stewardship, a natural areas management company located in Bagley, Wis. "Goats are native to arid regions," he explains. "They evolved with plants that developed thorns and other defenses so they wouldn't be easily eaten. That's because there's not enough moisture for them to recover easily. Goats had to get around those defenses or starve to death. There isn't much that they won't eat, including brambles you can't grab without a leather glove. Multiflora rose? They love it," Bennett says.

Driftless Land Stewardship added prescribed grazing



with goats to its line of services two years ago, starting with 13 head purchased from a Wisconsin goat farm. Driftless's herd now numbers over 70. A Borer x Spanish cross, the goats are known as a prime meat-type goat. But Bennett and his partner, Jaye Maxfield, consider them just one more tool in a land-management arsenal that includes prescribed fire, herbicides and mechanical saws and cutters.

"Like fire, the goats set back brush and other plants to restore natural areas," Bennett says. "But fire needs fuel. One burn and you're done for the season. With goats you can keep bringing them back until you get the desired results."

A lack of fuel was exactly what the McWilliams faced. Wildfires had once kept the south-facing slope open. But when the fires stopped after settlement, trees such as boxelders and elms moved in. Invaders like buckthorn and honeysuckle took over the understory, shading out anything that would carry a fire.

Bennett brought in the goats the first of May this year, enclosing them in the target area with a polywire mesh fence electrified by a solar unit. Plans were to let them graze until mid-June, changing the location and size of the paddock as needed.

**Management.** "Like any animal, goats have preferences," Bennett says. "To get them to eat what you want,

you may need to adjust the paddock size or grazing duration. They love honeysuckle, for instance. If you want them to eat the buckthorn, you'll need to keep them in the paddock until the honeysuckle is gone. You can even force the goats to eat garlic mustard. But if you press them too hard they'll lose vigor or jump the fence. They're very intelligent animals."

Before they bought the land, the McWilliams knew it harbored a small prairie remnant. But they had no idea of the larger remnant that lay hidden like a jewel under the trees and brush. The land was so overgrown they couldn't even see the face of the bluff. After two years of hand clearing and now the goats, sunlight is finally reaching the sleeping prairie.

The McWilliams, who live in Rochester, Minn., have two children, ages 4 and 1. "We consider our 30 acres as one little piece of the earth that we hope our children and others will come to learn about and appreciate," Deb says.

"Landscapes like this one in the Driftless area were known as goat prairies," Rob adds. "It seems only fitting that goats are having a hand in restoring them."

~ Rollie Henkes

**Jesse Bennett • Driftless Land Stewardship LLC**  
**13761 County Rd X, Bagley, WI 53801 • (608) 996 2135**  
**• [www.driftlesslandstewardship.com](http://www.driftlesslandstewardship.com)**



*Boxelder stump sprouts.*

## Not baaad: A guide to goat gastronomy



*Burdock.*



*Common buckthorn and assorted Rubus and Ribes brambles.*