Title:

Goat Guardian volunteer success restores forests and fights invasive species in the Driftless

By:

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The Friends of Vernon County Parks and Forest and partners have wrapped up another successful season of shepherding near Viroqua! This project is focused on using a sheep and goat herd to do brush control. What started as a kid project for Ben Wojan of the Vernon Water County Land and Water Conservation district to control invasive species and maintain forests has turned into the Goat Guardians, a full community of volunteers and professionals dedicated to using this novel and pesticide free approach to land management. Work is achieved at a very low cost due to a synergistic public/private partnership. Volunteers tend the herd as they move from location to location to make sure they are contained and have enough forage to stay content. The diverse crew served conservation easements, public trails, and Esofea and Sidie Hollow County Parks by munching problem plants like wild parsnip and buckthorn that can ruin our hikes and crowd out native vegetation.

With such a challenging year we have a lot of gratitude to pass along that would normally go best with pizza at the Legion. In leu of that, we would like take a moment to thank Ben Robel of Vegetation Solutions who donates the majority of the use of the goats in exchange for their safekeeping and the right to a moving fee as he trailers them to new sites. Working with animals is 24/7 which means we are so grateful for everyone who volunteered time to make sure the herd was safe and happy. A special shout out to our shepherd mentors Tom Lukens, Ben Wojan, and Brandie Myhre who stepped up after a rained-out training to get more folks involved. And don’t forget “The Chucks” (Chuck Mulvaney-Kemp and Chuck Smith) who remained stalwart with all the partner groups and moved a lot of fence. An extra nod to Dave Krier of Valley Stewardship who took my call to help corral some feisty hooved friends at 8:30 AM on a Sunday morning when our family of volunteers noticed they had escaped. And thanks to you too, if you are one of the of 40+ committee members, volunteers, and landowners involved in the project!

The community is excited for the project to expand to new sites, and that means we need more folks for next year. Email vernoncountyfriends@gmail.com to get your name on the roster or stay tuned for announcements of trainings in the spring of 2021. Come join us in the field as we tend herd for a good cause.