

Tree trimming helps plants, wildlife branch out

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The 13 acres of land surrounding Izaak Walton Lake are just a bit prettier than they used to be, thanks to forester Bob Petrzelka.

For the past couple of weeks, Petrzelka has been thinning the trees around Izaak Walton Lake to foster future growth and create hospitable cover for local wildlife. He was hired by the Hope Haven Development Center, which has slowly been improving the lake area for the past decade.

"The area had become very overgrown and unmanageable," said Julie Anderson, director of development and community relations for Hope Haven. "It was so overgrown that you could barely see the east side of the lake."

Since Izaak Walton Lake sits adjacent to the Hope Haven Development Center, there's good reason to keep it maintained. Anderson said the lake is a valuable resource not only for Hope Haven residents who like to walk there, but for the community at large.

"I think it's really neat, because a lot of folks don't know it exists," Anderson said. "We want to encourage picnicking. Some people come back here and fish."

The tree-thinning project is only the latest step in the beautification process. Over the last couple of years, local Eagle Scouts have been clearing brush and laying crushed limestone for a trail that eventually will encircle the entire lake. Anderson said the trail is more than a quarter done and should be completed in the next few years.

"We also put up a little kiosk where we can post happenings at Hope Haven," Anderson said.

For Petrzelka, who founded his company Geode Forestry Inc. a decade ago, the job was a nice change of pace from his usual logging schedule. He cut down or altered more than 1,000 trees in the area, which increases the vigor of individual trees and creates more species diversity.

"It was really more of an enhancement than a cleanup," Petrzelka said. "There are deer going through there, and there are a lot of mammals and different birds."

Besides cutting down smaller trees, Petrzelka also girdled several of the larger ones. Girdling is the process of completely removing a strip of bark around the tree, which eventually will cause it to die and decay. Once the tree becomes soft, cavity nest birds such as woodpeckers will make their home there. The logs of cut trees were left on the ground to decompose to foster more growth.

"That's the most immediate effect," Petrzelka said. "I also opened up the oaks to produce more acorns."

Petrzelka also eliminated some foliage covering several patches of eastern red cedar trees, which should allow them to grow more freely.

"It's a cedar that grows native here. Those make excellent winter cover," he said.

Petrzelka noted the area is plagued by black locust and catalpa trees, two non-native species that quickly invade an area and suck up all the root territory. Though Petrzelka did what he could to thin the numbers, total annihilation was not an option.

"I wasn't trying to eradicate them, because they are too intense, and that would cost a lot of money," he said.

The tree thinning was paid for by a \$35,000 federal WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program) grant that was acquired by the Walton Recreation Education Conservation committee about seven years ago.

"We still have enough money left to plant some trees, which is probably what we will do next," Anderson said.

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