



MOUNDS VIEW GRASSLAND PHOTO: STEPH JUDGE

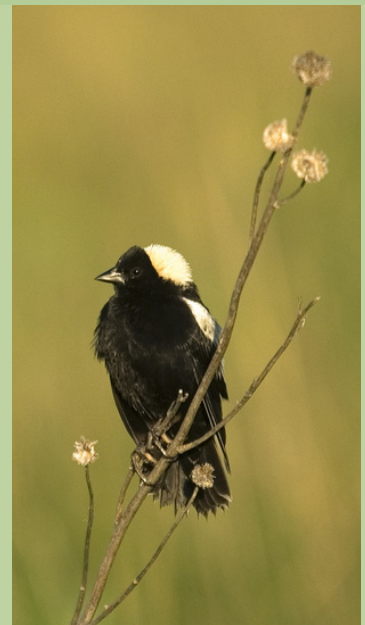
PROTECTING AND RESTORING OUR SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS GRASSLANDS

Wisconsin's Southern Driftless Grasslands region provides the best opportunity for landscape-scale grassland ecosystem conservation in the upper Midwest that can secure the survival of rapidly declining pollinators, grassland birds and other wildlife – and the Southern Driftless Grasslands partnership serves as the best opportunity for meaningful collaborative conservation in this critical region.

WHY?

THIS LANDSCAPE HARBORS:

- The highest concentration of unplowed prairie remnants and oak savanna in the Upper Midwest, hosting native banks of biodiversity;
- Regionally significant populations of grassland birds, which as a group are facing an urgent conservation crisis;
- A rural economy based on multi-generational and innovative rural farms, many interested in or embracing grass-based agriculture for premium products;
- A thriving and engaged partnership of local, state and federal agencies as well as nonprofit conservation organizations. The partners in the Southern Driftless Grasslands (SDG) share this mission: to facilitate the conservation of landscape-scale grassland systems, including prairie and savanna remnants, in Southwest Wisconsin for the benefit of the plants, wildlife and people that depend on them.



BOBOLINK. PHOTO: ©CHRIS HELZER/TNC

THE CHALLENGES AND THE OPPORTUNITY

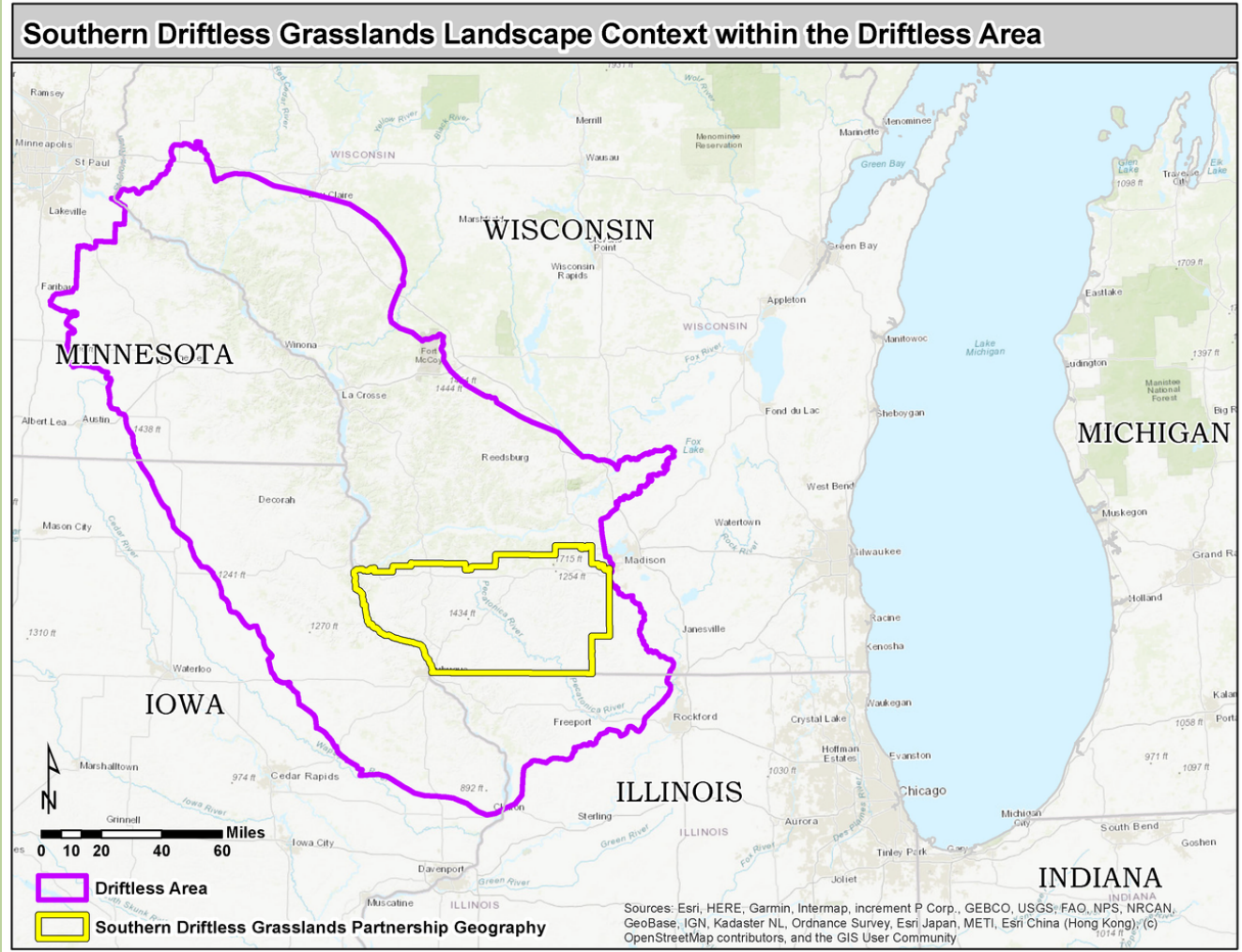
The Southern Driftless Grasslands region provides the last and best stronghold for grassland birds in Wisconsin and the Great Lakes region. Once abundant birds like the Upland Sandpiper, Northern Harrier, Henslow's Sparrow, Bobolink and Western Meadowlark have declined severely as large open grasslands have disappeared to make way for row crop agriculture and development.

Rare and declining pollinators like the rusty patched bumblebee, regal fritillary butterfly and monarch butterfly similarly depend on this land of remnant and reconstructed prairies, pastures and idle fields that still exist in Southwest Wisconsin. Some rare invertebrates survive only on remnants of native prairie in this Southern Driftless Grasslands region.

Today, this very landscape is at urgent risk as land ownership fragments, fire no longer renews grasslands, invasive species overtake remaining prairie and oak savanna habitat, runoff from steep cultivated land pollutes streams and more farmers retire or face bankruptcy. The pace of rural subdivision and housing development has quickened since the pandemic and we need to rapidly accelerate fee title and easement acquisition before this fragmentation permanently impedes the long-term viability of rare species and habitats.



STATE LISTED (THREATENED) UPLAND SANDPIPER. PHOTO: DAN MCGRAW. PRIVATE LANDOWNER IN KEY BIRD CONSERVATION AREA.



OUR PLAN TO SAVE GRASSLAND BIRDS & OUR PRAIRIE LEGACY

- Follow the Science of the Bird Conservation Area (BCA) Model to Sustain Grassland Birds
- Rapidly Accelerate Fee Title & Easement Acquisition across BCAs and the SDG Region
- Grow the Prairie & Savanna Remnant Project to ID & Preserve Banks of Genetic Diversity
- Establish a Restoration Program to Triage Management Across Public & Private Lands
- Re-Grow the Grass-Based Rural Economy

BIRD CONSERVATION AREAS

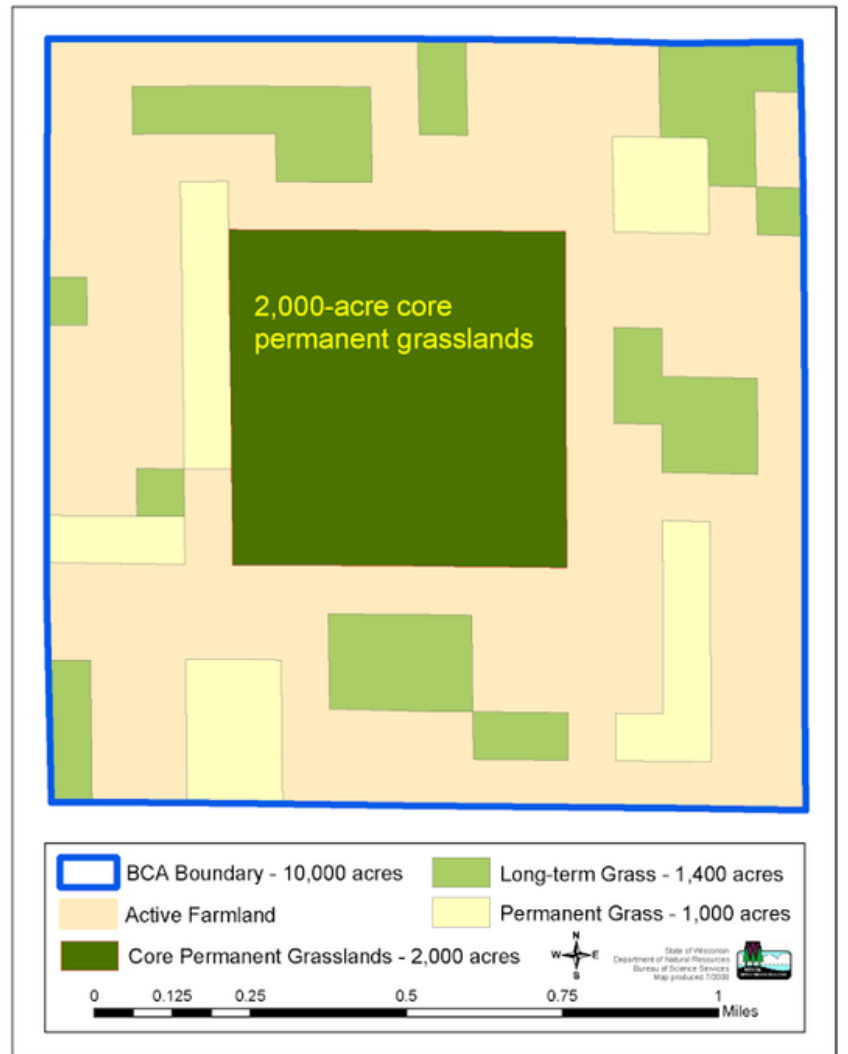
Grassland Bird Conservation Areas (BCAs) provide a science-based solution for protecting grassland birds, pollinators and other conservation targets within an agricultural landscape. The model ensures there will be enough large blocks of grassland to support area-sensitive species, as well as quality habitat in close proximity for plants and wildlife to disperse to other sites.

Bird Conservation Areas result in conservation successes beyond grassland birds because they mitigate the effects of habitat fragmentation and development for non-bird species. As our climate warms, myriad species will need to migrate. Strategically designing rural landscapes to facilitate movement of grassland birds and pollinators will help ensure their survival.

Numerous State and Federal conservation plans have adopted the Bird Conservation Area Model including the Upper Mississippi River/Great Lakes Joint Venture and Partners in Flight.

The Wisconsin DNR's Master Plan for the Southwest Savanna Ecological Landscape, which is encompassed by the Southern Driftless Grasslands, also calls for use of this model to secure the survival of species within this landscape.

THE BIRD CONSERVATION AREA (BCA) MODEL



The Wisconsin DNR has acquisition authority in three BCAs within the "Southwest Grassland and Stream Conservation Area." Other SDG partners have established a fourth BCA.

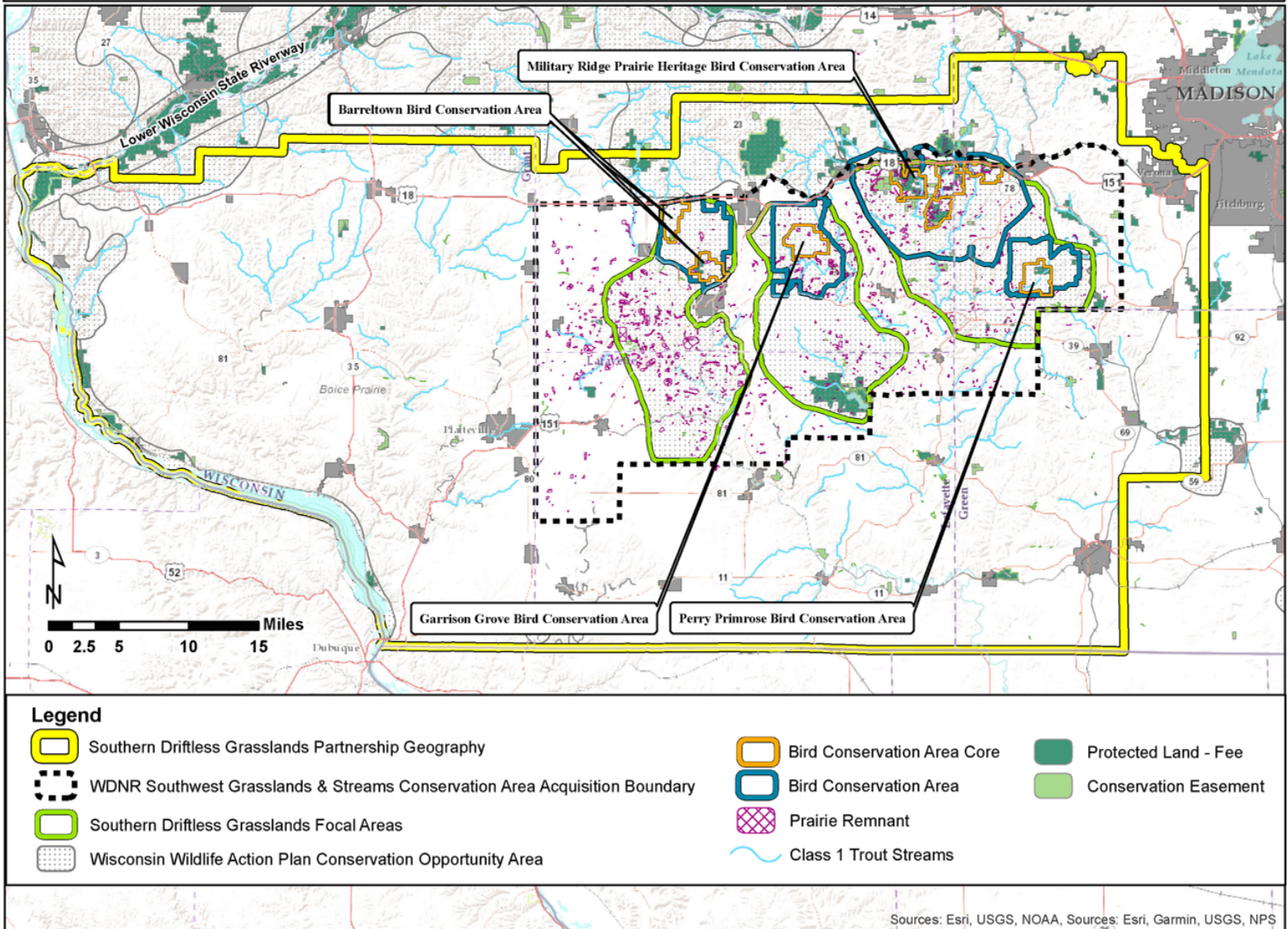
Look to this plan on page 117 for more detail:

<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/fl/PropertyPlanning/SouthwestSavanna>

BUILD OUT EXISTING BIRD CONSERVATION AREAS (BCAs) ACROSS THE REGION

Four BCAs were established in the region around 2009 with the Wisconsin DNR leading land acquisition and management at three areas including Barreltown BCA, Garrison Grove BCA and Perry Primrose BCA. Other SDG partners including The Prairie Enthusiasts, The Driftless Area Land Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy took the lead in building out the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage BCA. These sites were chosen as starting points because of their substantial remaining grass cover, density of prairie remnants and imminent development pressure along the Highway 18/151 corridor west of Madison.

Southern Driftless Grasslands Partnership Geography



CONSERVATION LAND TO DATE IN THE SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS GRASSLANDS

Wisconsin DNR: 16,500 acres owned & managed; 850 of which are in BCA Core Areas

The Prairie Enthusiasts: 1,616 acres owned & managed; 174 acres under 3 conservation easements

Driftless Area Land Conservancy: 537 acres owned & managed; 400-acres co-managed with Iowa County; 4,279 acres under 24 conservation and farmland protection easements

The Nature Conservancy: 1,899 acres owned & managed

Dane County: 1305 acres owned & managed

Mississippi Valley Conservancy: 470 acres under easements

Groundswell Conservancy: 409 ac. under easement

BadgerLand Foundation: 176 acres owned & managed

RAPIDLY ACCELERATE FEE TITLE AND EASEMENT ACQUISITION

The SDG partnership has identified over 150 priority parcels covering 30,000 acres across four established BCAs. With the experienced staff of partner organizations and many existing landowner relationships, we're well-poised to accelerate land protection and increase landowner-by-landowner outreach if we gain the resources to scale up investments in conservation real estate. SDG partners are committed to step up and take responsibility for owning and managing strategically located easements and fee-title properties.

PURCHASE, HOLD AND RESTORE:

- All available prairie remnants as biodiversity banks, sufficiently large grassland parcels and parcels that provide protected lands a buffer from agriculture and development.
 - Core project partner: The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE) with assistance from other land trust partners.
 - 2,000 acres of prairie or surrogate grassland in each of three WDNR-directed BCA cores, and an additional 2,000-3,000 acres within each of these broader BCA zones for a total not to exceed 12,000 acres.
 - Core project partner: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), with assistance from land trust partners, if needed, to hold property until approval to accept the land is received from the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board.
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PURCHASE, RESTORE [IF NEEDED], PROTECT AND RESELL:

- Large parcels with reserved easements that require maintenance of perennial cover and allow prescribed conservation grazing.
 - Core project partner: Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC), with assistance from other partners.
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PURCHASE, PROTECT AND RESELL:

- Farmland at risk of conversion to housing.
 - Core project partner: Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC), with assistance from other partners.
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DIRECTLY SECURE CONSERVATION EASEMENTS THROUGH PURCHASE OR CHARITABLE GIVING

- At-risk prairie and savanna remnants and any sufficiently large parcel at risk of conversion
 - Core project partner: Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC), with assistance from other partners.
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SECURE MANAGEMENT ENDOWMENTS:

- Equal to 20-25% of the purchase price for all fee title and easement acquisitions. SDG partners anticipate funds would be held by either the Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation or contributed to an SDG partner's existing endowment, if applicable. Funding will be used to manage land and easements.



MOUNDS VIEW GRASSLAND WITH VIEWS OF BLUE MOUNDS STATE PARK, OWNED & MANAGED BY THE PRAIRIE ENTHUSIASTS PHOTO: STEPH JUDGE

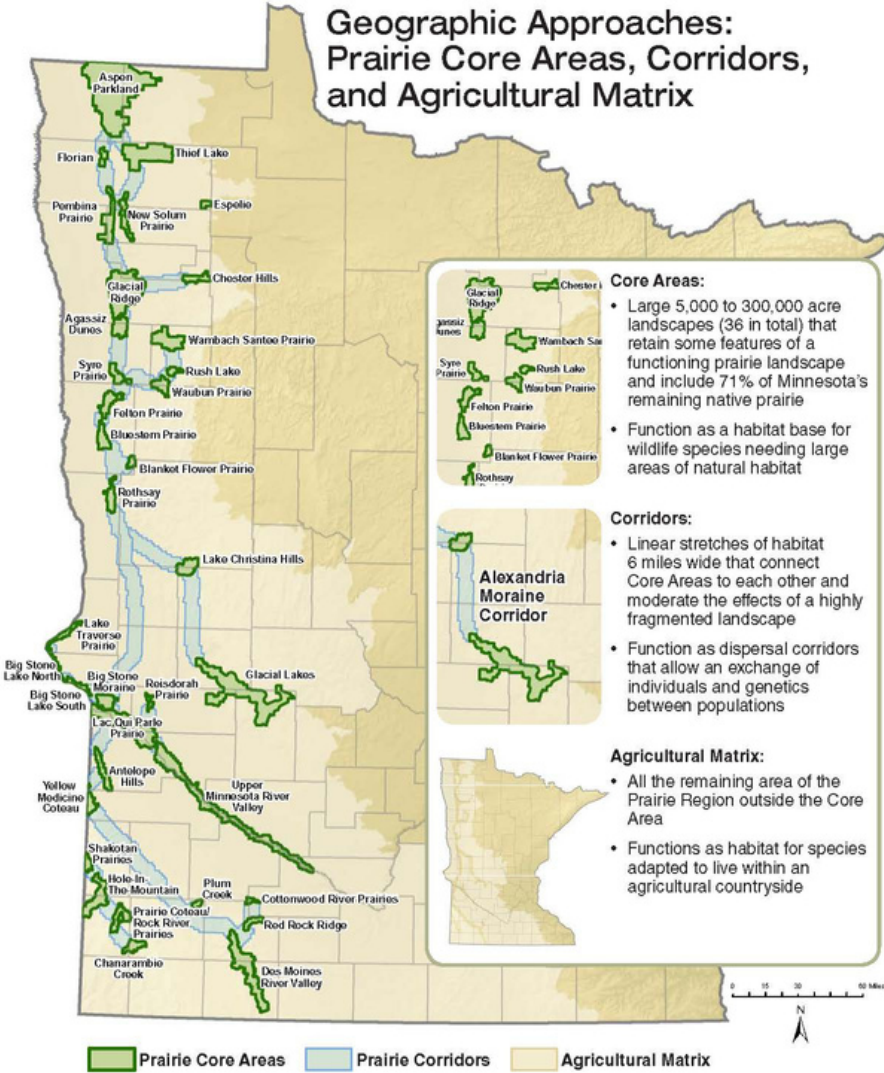
PRAIRIE & SAVANNA REMNANT PROJECT - PRESERVING THE GENETIC DIVERSITY OF OUR PRAIRIE LEGACY

Prairie remnants hold banks of genetic diversity that are too valuable to lose, yet they face rapid declines as brush and weeds encroach on unmanaged sites year after year. The SDG Prairie & Savanna Remnant Project, initiated in 2022, is a multi-year effort to locate, inventory and rank prairie and savanna remnants across the SDG landscape. Nearly 800 sites, ranging in size from 1 acre to 60 acre in size, have been scouted but not ground-verified and many more sites likely exist beyond the extent of previous surveys.

We seek to provide strategic protection and management of quality, restorable prairie remnants, and to create the connectivity needed for genetic resiliency and species movement by working with landowners to locate pollinator plantings within identified prairie remnant corridors. We envision growing the existing project into a Prairie Legacy Program with inspiration from Minnesota's Prairie Bank-branded conservation program illustrated below. SDG's program would support long-term protection of native sod prairie and savanna remnants (genetic banks) while engaging and empowering their landowners and those in between.

MINNESOTA'S PRAIRIE BANK PROGRAM PROVIDES AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO CONNECT PRAIRIE REMNANTS ACROSS THE SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS

Geographic Approaches: Prairie Core Areas, Corridors, and Agricultural Matrix



The entire Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan may be found at http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/mn_prairie_conservation_plan.pdf



TOP: PRICKLY PEAR CACTUS BLOOMS AT A RECENTLY ACQUIRED DALC SITE UNDERGOING RESTORATION
 BOTTOM: LEADPLANT & PRAIRIE CLOVER BLOOM AT NEWLY PROTECTED REMNANT PHOTOS: STEPH JUDGE

THE SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS RESTORATION PROGRAM - TRIAGING CRITICAL, TIME-SENSITIVE RESTORATION ACROSS LAND OWNERSHIPS

With every passing year, we lose more of our prairie legacy to encroaching brush and weeds, but it's not too late to save the globally-rare prairie and oak savanna habitats found across the Southern Driftless Grasslands. The SDG partnership seeks to triage basic restoration of the highest value prairie bank and oak savanna sites, as well as expansive grasslands, whether on public or private land so their genetic diversity isn't lost forever.

SDG partners envision establishing formal agreements to facilitate collaborative management across the ownerships of SDG partners as well as those of our neighboring landowners with high value sites. We've gravitated toward a model of establishing roving crews equipped to maximize efficiencies in clearing and treating undesirable brush, interseeding with native grasses to stem erosion and provide fuel, implementing regular prescribed fire and monitoring sites for progress. Roving crews will work on fee-title, easement-encumbered and private lands through a system that prioritizes sites with the highest ecological value first. We foresee funding in part by an endowment and in part funded by some recipients at a reduced cost.

This Restoration Program will also serve as an apprenticeship program for early career professionals interested in management and all aspects of conservation. Southern Wisconsin's existing restoration practitioners are oversubscribed and we hope to fill a pipeline of restoration professionals who have learned a range of restoration methods applicable to varying sites across the Southern Driftless.



PHOTO: STEPH JUDGE

AN OAK SAVANNA WITH REMNANT PRAIRIE UNDERGOING CLEARING AT A DRIFTLESS AREA LAND CONSERVANCY SITE IN DANE COUNTY. THE AREA AT RIGHT ISN'T YET CLEARED OF UNDESIRABLE BRUSH AND TREES THAT HAVE GROWN AS A RESULT OF FIRE SUPPRESSION.



TNC & DNR FIRE CREWS BURN AT BARNEVELD PRAIRIE, PART OF THE MILITARY RIDGE BCA
PHOTO: STEPH JUDGE



CREW ADMIRING THEIR WORK AFTER CLEARING BRUSH TO RESTORE SAVANNA & SWEEPING VIEWS
PHOTO: ZACH PACANA



HAND MOWING WEEDS TO STOP SEED SET
PHOTO: STEPH JUDGE

COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY CONSERVATION - RE-GROWING THE GRASS-BASED RURAL ECONOMY FOR THE BENEFIT OF PEOPLE & NATURE

A 2013 University of Wisconsin study reveals that well-managed prescribed grazing can yield higher forage quantity and quality compared to continuously grazed systems, and an analysis by the UW Center for Dairy Profitability found dairy farms applying prescribed grazing can be more profitable even if they produce less milk per cow.

Grassland-based agriculture is the pathway for increased farmer profitability, yield stability and nutrient and water efficiency, while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resilience. Through the Grassland 2.0 Driftless Area Learning Hub, focused on Iowa, Sauk, and Lafayette Counties, discourse on federal policy, locally driven solutions to build local supply chains, and decision and planning tools to help farmers make changes to their operations and businesses fuel innovative change.

Momentum and funding is increasing to help farmers transition from cropland to perennial vegetative cover for prescribed grazing. The SDG partnership is working with the agricultural community to help new graziers access large expanses of open grassland and prairie and to connect producers with resources such as the National Audubon Society's Conservation Ranching Program. Two Audubon technical providers are expected to begin work in the region in 2023.



MANY SMALL DAIRY FARMS HAVE DISAPPEARED, RESULTING IN PASTURES AND HAY FIELDS BEING PLANTED TO MAKE WAY FOR CROPS WITH LIMITED HABITAT BENEFIT.



LOCAL FARMER AND GRAZIER DICK CATES SHARES HOW HIS FAMILY TRANSITIONED FROM CONFINEMENT DAIRYING TO A GRASS-BASED BEEF OPERATION THAT YIELDS PREMIUM PRICING.



CREW FROM THE NATURE CONSERVANCY CONDUCT A PRESCRIBED BURN AS PART OF A PATCH-BURN GRAZING OPERATION IN WHICH LOCAL GRAZERS ROTATE CATTLE ONTO PRESERVE LANDS AT STRATEGIC TIMES.

PHOTOS: STEPH JUDGE



PUBLIC FUNDING SOURCES HELPING TO ADVANCE THE SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS GRASSLANDS PARTNERSHIP

PUBLIC FUNDING SOURCES FOR LAND PROTECTION

Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson State Stewardship Program

- Grants up to \$250,000 for fee title conservation land acquisition or easements with public access.
- Grants over \$250,000 require legislative approval that necessitates maintenance of an agricultural component.

Dane County Conservation Fund - Matching grants for conservation land acquisition.

USFWS Section 6 Endangered Species Program - In cooperation with states, territories, willing landowners and local partners, funds support land acquisitions that aid in imperiled species recovery.

Pittman-Robertson (PR) Funding available from the sale of ammunition for conservation land acquisition in collaboration with public partners.

Wisconsin Farmland Protection Project RCPP sponsored by American Farmland Trust (AFT) - \$7M in funding available to purchase easements, provide cost share for practices (cover crops, prescribed grazing, agroforestry & riparian buffers), and technical assistance for partners including NRCS and AFT.



REGAL FRITILLARY. PHOTO: ©CHRIS HELZER/TNC

FUNDING SOURCES - SDG POWERED

Grasslands and Oak Savannas for Water and Wildlife RCPP sponsored by Sand County Foundation. SDG is a primary partner.

- Up to \$700,000 available over 5 years for practices to improve prairie and savanna habitat and perennial vegetation on working lands, including but not limited to Brush Management, Prescribed Burning, and Prescribed Grazing
- Up to \$350,000 available over 5 years for land rental payments to support transitions from cropland to perennial vegetative cover as prescribed grazing, agroforestry and prairie buffers and borders.
- Up to \$141,000 available for conservation planning assistance for prescribed grazing, agroforestry, and savanna restoration plans.

Pollinator Habitat Enhancement Program awarded to SDG by the Natural Resources Foundation

- \$2K - \$4K awards for 10 landowners with known populations of at risk bumble bees and/or butterflies. Priority given to lands adjacent to or serving as connectivity sites across the SDG landscape.

Stamp Fund Habitat Improvement Program awarded to SDG through the WDNR Turkey and Pheasant Stamp programs

- \$35K for oak savanna and southern oak forest habitat on private lands.
- \$37K for grassland habitat enhancement and creation on private lands.

PUBLIC FUNDING SOURCES FOR LAND MANAGEMENT

USDA Programs: Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency drive grassland conservation on marginal and sensitive lands through the following programs:

- **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)** - annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource-conserving cover on eligible farmland.
- **CRP SAFE (State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement)** program funds grass and flower planting mixes and may be applied to areas not classified as highly erodible cropland.
- **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)** provides annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource-conserving cover on environmentally sensitive land near rivers and streams.
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** provides financial and technical help to implement conservation practices on agricultural land, including prescribed grazing and fencing and water system installation.
- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** provides annual payments to producers who practice good stewardship on their agricultural lands. The program is designed to reward the best conservation stewards of the most environmentally sensitive areas in targeted watersheds.

Dane County Continuous Cover Program supports landowners seeking to convert traditional row-cropped agricultural land to perennial cool-season grass, native prairie or grazing mixtures.

USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program offers technical and financial assistance for habitat restoration on private lands. Since 2001, the Program has worked on 638 projects, investing \$2 million in funding, impacting 12,249 acres in the SDG geography.

Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) provides cost-sharing on private lands to improve and manage habitat for rare (at-risk) species. Funded by USFWS, it is implemented by the WDNR. The southern/western prairie and savanna ecological landscapes of Wisconsin are a program priority.

WHO WE ARE: THE SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS GRASSLANDS PARTNERSHIP

Landscape-scale collaborative conservation within a working landscape requires an energized and motivated partnership of local, state and federal agencies as well as non-profit conservation organizations. Southern Driftless Grasslands provides that model.

LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION GOALS

- Stabilize and ultimately increase declining grassland bird populations in the region;
- Protect and expand high quality prairie remnants;
- Build resilience by creating grassland connectivity;
- Support declining pollinator populations;
- Work towards delisting and protection of threatened and endangered species while “keeping the common species common”;
- Benefit cold-and warm-water streams and wetlands;
- Facilitate conservation in collaboration with local communities to maintain vibrant rural livelihoods.

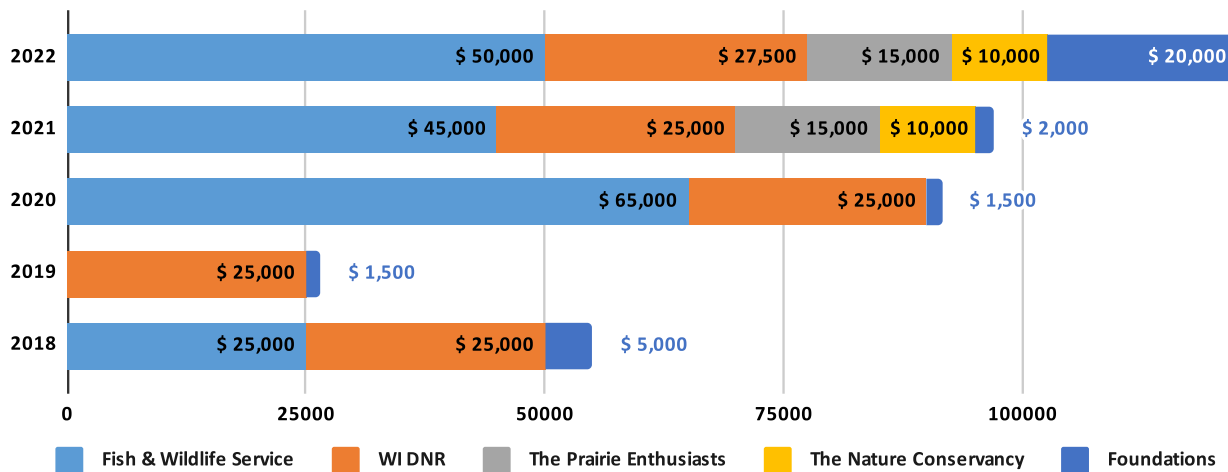


SDG PROJECT MANAGER CINDY BECKER SUPPORTS LANDOWNERS ACROSS THE REGION
PHOTO: MIKE ENGEL/FWS

SDG focuses where we can have the greatest impact despite limited resources. With 96% of land in Southwest Wisconsin being privately owned, we work to move landowners up the ladder of engagement from interest to advocacy to management to protection. Partner land trusts work with private landowners to ensure long-term land protection through acquisition.

The delivery of technical and financial assistance to private landowners plays a large role in our landowner engagement - and our focus centers on key lands within the BCAs. Since 2018, \$537K has been invested in the region through voluntary cost-share programs leveraging landowner funds to improve and enhance the quality of 1710 acres.

Capacity Funding 2018 - 2022



INCREASING FUNDING FROM PARTNERS & FOUNDATIONS DEMONSTRATES SDG'S SUCCESS IN THE LAST 4 YEARS

COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION AT THE **GRASSROOTS** LEVEL –
BECAUSE GRASS IS GOOD.



Our growing learning hub provides a resource for landowners wanting to create, steward and protect grassland habitat on working and non-working land in Southwest Wisconsin.

WWW.DRIFTLESSGRASSLANDS.ORG

BARNEVELD PRAIRIE PHOTO: ©MARK GODFREY/TNC

Southern Driftless Grasslands is a partnership of government agencies, non-profit organizations and other stakeholders who actively support the conservation of grasslands to benefit Southwest Wisconsin's wildlife, water, farms and communities.

We envision this region to be rich with healthy grasslands, successful working farms, clear flowing streams, diverse wildlife and people who value and enjoy this landscape.

The partnership assists landowners of working and non-working lands to create, steward and protect grassland, prairie and savanna habitat in Southwest Wisconsin.

SELECTED PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS



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