



SOUTHERN DRIFTLESS GRASSLANDS 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Southern Driftless Grasslands (SDG) is a dynamic partnership of public and private organizations working together to conserve the grasslands of Southwest Wisconsin through landscape-scale change.

We envision Southwest Wisconsin as a place with healthy grasslands, successful farms, clear streams, diverse wildlife, and people who value and enjoy this landscape. Together, we can make this vision a reality.

CAPACITY UPDATES

Southern Driftless Grasslands (SDG) worked with a facilitator to establish a sound framework for growth. We identified the need for a more transparent leadership structure including the adoption of bylaws and establishment of a formal steering committee. Jen Filipiak, Executive Director of Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC), now serves as Chair, and Marty Moses, Wisconsin State Coordinator for Pheasants Forever (PF), serves as Vice-chair, both for two-year terms.

This reorganization is already yielding results:

- SDG received a \$740,000 grant from the Conservation Partners Program of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, under leadership of PF. We are now working to establish Wisconsin's first prescribed burn association and engage more landowners in management. These funds also add two more positions to the SDG team, a Prescribed Burn Coordinator and a Conservation Outreach Coordinator. Both positions are in the final hiring stages. The selected candidates are expected to begin early 2025.
- The steering committee navigated a staff transition. Cindy Becker left in August, but before leaving, she completed a detailed succession plan for the next Project Manager. The steering committee led a successful search and hired Andy Bingle in mid-November.
- The Nature Conservancy (TNC) renewed their commitment to the partnership by awarding SDG a 3-year capacity grant and hiring a Conservation Communications and Partnership Engagement Fellow, Jenni Foshey, who works half time on SDG work. Jenni started early November.
- The Prairie Enthusiasts' (TPE) land protection coordinator retired in May. Becky Bradish took over their land protection work and is focusing on securing the Uren Trust Addition to Erbe Grassland.
- TPE ecologist Dr. Dan Carter devoted more time to helping SDG assess and prioritize high-conservation value projects. He is contributing significant work to developing land protection proposals, including conducting biological surveys and researching the historical significance of projects going before TPE's Land Protection Committee.
- TPE's Executive Director, Debra Behrens, joined the SDG Steering Committee in February 2024 and has been able to work more closely with private landowners. She also participated in Gov. Tony Evers' Earth Week hike, and met with Gov. Evers' staff to provide background and advocate for SDG's priorities for the pending reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund (KNSF) grant program.



Andy (left) and Jenni (bottom right) learning about climate communications with TNC's Ann Calhoun (center).

SDG STAFF EXPANSION

ANDY BINGLE, SDG PROGRAM MANAGER

Andy fell in love with the Driftless while living in Baraboo and working for the International Crane Foundation. He later returned to his native Colorado and for five years led environmentally-focused programs there as well as co-founding the Colorado Agrivoltaic Learning Center. Andy and his wife have returned to Wisconsin (where she is from) and currently live in Spring Green.

Outside of the office, you will find Andy hiking slowly with binoculars, playing his favorite nylon string guitar, listening to folksy mandolin (or possibly modern funk), visiting relatives in the greater Midwest, swinging a golf club, or attempting a new or revived hobby, from beer brewing to ceramics to trail running.

JENNI FOSHEY, ENGAGEMENT FELLOW

Jenni attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison for both undergraduate and graduate studies. During her undergrad career, she studied Conservation Biology, Environmental Studies, and Digital Studies. She also studied wildlife conservation in Tanzania and ran the Wisconsin Society for Conservation Biology Student Chapter. After graduating, Jenni took a gap year and did environmental restoration work in Hawai'i, where she helped remove thousands of invasive species on the Big Island.

Beyond conservation and communications, Jenni enjoys paddle boarding, longboarding, scuba diving, camping, spending time with her pups, lifting, traveling, creating content for social media, and cooking vegan meals.

LAND PROTECTION UPDATES

Protecting the Uren Addition to Erbe Grassland

TPE is making exciting progress in protecting the Uren Trust Addition to Erbe Grassland in the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area. As of the end of 2024, after much work, an access agreement is pending approval from the local municipality. TPE is working toward a fundraising goal to protect the property, combining support from state and county grants with private donations. A major milestone came in early 2024 with a \$394,000 grant commitment from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund (KNSF). This victory was made possible by a July Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling that removed legislative barriers to large conservation grants. The final phase of fundraising - engaging the broader community - will kick off in early 2025.

Securing a Tract at Perry-Primrose Bird Conservation Area

In another promising project, the DALC has secured an option to purchase a 80-acre tract, located at the heart of the Perry-Primrose Bird Conservation Area. DALC received a \$460,000 grant commitment from KNSF to support the purchase.

The project received enthusiastic support from the Dane County Parks and Open Space Committee in November 2024. A final grant decision from the county is expected by February 2025. If successful, this effort will protect the land from nearby development threats - entirely with public funding - freeing up other donor contributions for future land management work in the region.

Creating a Conservation Corridor with ACEP-ALE Applications

In 2024, DALC submitted seven federal funding applications through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE), five of which are within the SDG zone. If approved, these applications will help protect over 220 acres, including a keystone parcel at Barneveld Prairie State Natural Area. This work would also help connect existing conservation areas - linking the Perry-Primrose Bird Conservation Area to York Prairie State Natural Area - creating a permanently protected corridor for native species and habitats.

ACEP-ALE

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easement component (ACEP-ALE) is a voluntary federal conservation program implemented by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that protects agricultural land from conversion to non-agricultural uses.

ACEP-ALE provides matching funds to eligible entities (including land trusts like DALC and TPE) to acquire conservation easements on farm and ranch land. Since the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, an unprecedented amount of funding for easements has been available, with a special focus on protecting grasslands. These programs are intended to protect working lands from development.

The conservation of working lands is a key component of the Bird Conservation Area model in southern Wisconsin - we want to fully protect remnant prairie and savanna, but in the larger landscape we need to protect working farmland from development, and especially working grasslands. The farmers and graziers still own the land and farm it, but they are able to receive 75% of the value of the easement from NRCS, often paying down the mortgage on the farm, letting the current generation retire, and making the land more affordable for the next generation. The entity holding the easement (DALC or another land trust) becomes a trusted partner in land management. Plus, since the land is permanently protected from development, those lands rank higher for other cost-share programs to improve habitat.

The NRCS programs are incredibly complex, but the end result is a win-win-win for farmers, wildlife, and rural communities.





COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UPDATES

SDG coordinated and hosted two peer-to-peer learning opportunities in 2024:

- “Agroforestry Planning in a Grassland Context” introduced conservation professionals to wildlife concerns in grassland landscapes. The event drove a critical conversation on thinking at both the field and landscape scale to avoid unintended impacts to grassland birds from tree and shrub plantings. 45 people attended.
- “Reading the Land” introduced conservation professionals to the wide array of online resources available for identifying prairie and savanna remnants on private lands. 15 people attended.

Buoyed by funding for outreach events through both the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Partnership and the Sand County Foundation’s Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, SDG also hosted 3 events for landowners:

- “Sunrise Bird Chorus” introduced participants to Bloomfield Prairie and grassland birds at sunrise. 23 people attended.
- The “Laxey Creek Sheep Farm Field Day” introduced participants to methods of planting pasture and rotationally grazing sheep on a farm that only three years ago was in row crops. 60 people attended.
- The “McGraw Farm Grassland and Savanna Restoration-in-Progress” tour and potluck included savanna sites in different stages of restoration; grasslands and pastures being actively managed for invasives through strategic mowing, herbicide, and prescribed fire; and a discussion of cost-share program options available to landowners. 39 people attended.

LAXEY CREEK SHEEP RANCH

The Laxey Creek Sheep Ranch, started by Jeremie Favre and Ellen Geisler in 2022, is a 180-acre grass-fed lamb operation. Jeremie and Ellen have converted all of the formerly row-cropped acres into rotationally grazed pasture, and have partnered with NRCS and SDG to cost-share pasture renovation and internal fencing, and to survey their land for grassland birds, remnant prairie and savanna. It’s been great to see a new grass-based business taking off in the heart of the Barreltown Bird Conservation Area.

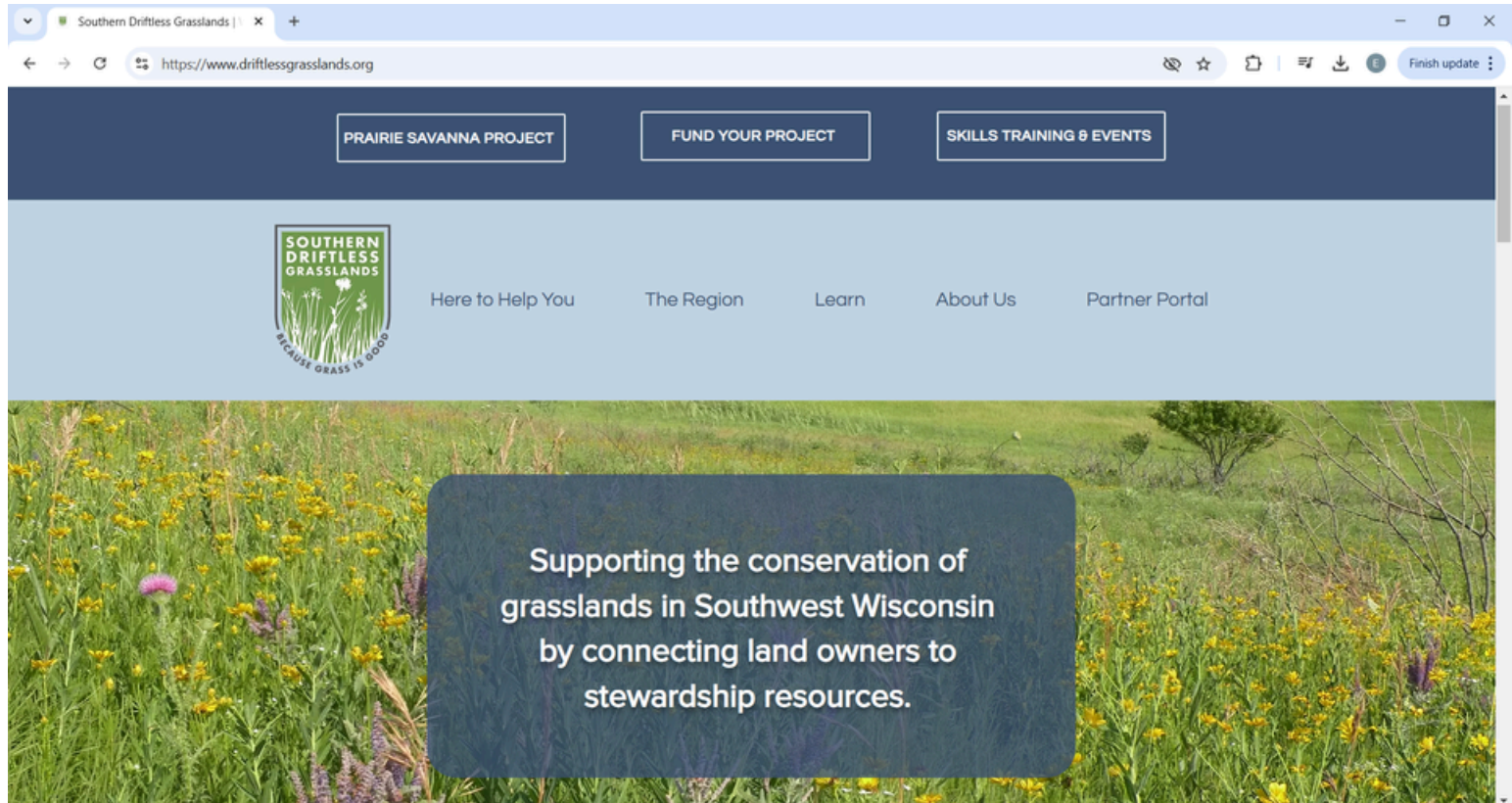
The photo above shows Ellen moving the flock to the next pasture, with son Eric on her back. The photo below shows some of the 60 participants visiting the farm at the 2024 field day coordinated by SDG.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UPDATES, CONT.

In addition to in-person events, SDG increased our online presence:

- The website got a much-needed update, thanks to funding support from the Natural Resources Foundation's CD Besadny grant. The site, www.driftlessgrasslands.org, now offers easier navigation and caters to both landowners and farmers/ranchers.



- Wisconsin Public Television recorded and broadcast a presentation on the Prairie and Savanna Remnant Project, given by Matt Noone and Cindy Becker at the Wisconsin Garden Expo. The recording is linked on SDG's "In The News" page: www.driftlessgrasslands.org/the-region. Nearly 30 people attended the live presentation at the Garden Expo.
- Four short YouTube videos showcasing conservation on private lands can now be viewed at www.youtube.com/@southerndriftlessgrasslands

THANK YOU FOR MAKING 2024 AN AMAZING YEAR FOR SDG!

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