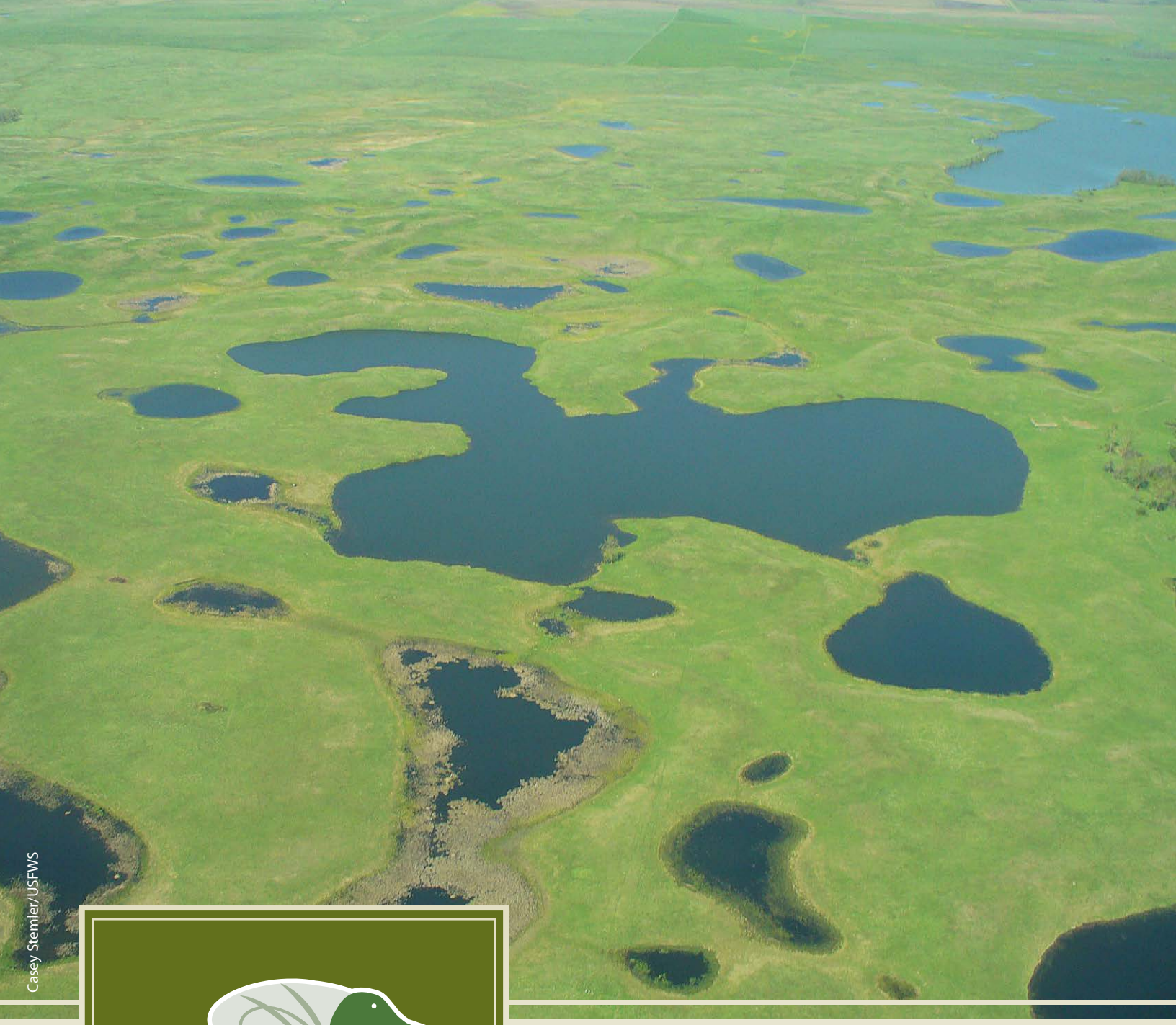


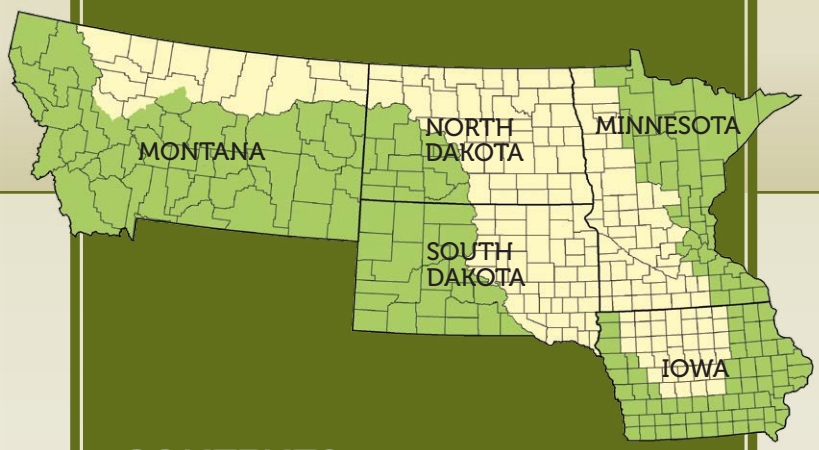
Casey Stemler/USFWS

Prairie Pothole Joint Venture

2015

Annual Highlights Report

Letter from the Coordinator



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Dear PPJV Partners,

LET'S TAKE A MOMENT TO CELEBRATE the many accomplishments you delivered in 2015! Working in the face of constant challenges can be demoralizing and exhausting. Nevertheless, your optimism and determination to make a difference for habitat and wildlife conservation across the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region remains strong. The diversity of your accomplishments in 2015 is proof of your many efforts. All your work is worthy of highlighting, however this Annual Report shares just select examples from across the partnership. For example, several accomplishments from 2015 include:

- Over 175,000 acres of wetland and grassland habitat were protected, enhanced, or restored. In turn, this habitat provided direct benefit to birds, mammals, insects, and aquatic life.
- The USDA Conservation Reserve Program celebrated its 30th anniversary and the Prairie Pothole Region, and bird enthusiasts across the continent, have greatly benefitted from this program. For example, some 12.3 million waterfowl from five species of ducks were produced from 2005 to 2011, due to CRP grasslands. Further, CRP grasslands in the prairies supported 1.6 million pairs of Savannah Sparrows.
- Delta Waterfowl Foundation partnered with North Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Service to launch a new pilot project to evaluate the utility of voluntary, incentive-based, term easements to conserve at risk wetlands. The new Working Wetlands Pilot Project focuses on small temporary and seasonal wetlands important to breeding ducks that are at the highest risk of loss due to their small size, temporal inundation, and location usually embedded within cropland.

In the end, nothing is possible in a joint venture without a wide collection of committed and caring partners. Thank you for all your past accomplishments and for your continued outstanding efforts.

I know 2016 will be another successful year for conservation in the PPJV. Thanks again for your level of involvement and interest in the prairies, since without you the PPJV does not have success! In the meantime, I hope you find of interest the highlights in the 2015 PPJV Annual Report.

Casey Stemler
PPJV Coordinator

THE USDA-CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM IN THE PRAIRIE POTHOLE REGION OF THE UNITED STATES

The USDA Farm Service Agency marked the 30th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in 2015. The CRP was created with the passage of the Food Security Act in December 1985. Under CRP, farmers, ranchers, and forest owners retire marginal cropland and pasture land from agricultural production for 10 to 15 years in exchange for annual rental payments and financial assistance to restore, maintain, and manage conservation covers established on lands enrolled in the program. At its peak in 2007, CRP enrollment nationally approached 37 million acres. Enrollment is now approximately 23.4 million acres. The Prairie Pothole Region contains a significant portion of the nation's CRP enrollment. For 30 years, CRP has helped agricultural producers balance commodity production with natural resource conservation. As a result many soil conservation, water quality, and wildlife habitat benefits have been enjoyed by farmers and the public, including:

- Reduced soil erosion by more than 9 billion tons, enough to fill 600 million dump trucks;
- Sequestered 1.4 million metric tons of greenhouse gases, equal to taking 9 million cars off the road annually;
- Reduced nitrogen and phosphorus in runoff by 95 and 85 percent respectively;
- Restored 2.7 million acres of wetland;
- Protected water quality and aquatic habitats through establishment of forested and grass buffers along 170,000 stream miles;
- Important contributions to both waterfowl and grassland nesting bird populations


Casey Stemler/USFWS

Several scientific papers/reports show the important benefits CRP provides to both migratory and non-migratory birds within portions of the PPR. However, these papers/reports were completed in 2007 or earlier, and therefore do not examine the time period of sharp declines in CRP enrollments since that time. Consequently, USDA-FSA contracted the PPJV to reexamine the importance of CRP within the PPR given the current level of enrollment. In 2015, the results of the reexamination were documented in the report that can be found here: http://ppjv.org/assets/docs/resources/drumetal2015_crp_prr_final.pdf

Scientists used spatially explicit landscape-scale models of species-habitat relationships to estimate the benefits of CRP grasslands for waterfowl and grassland passerine birds in the PPR of the United States. They found that CRP grasslands increased the carrying capacity of associated PPR wetlands for five species of breeding waterfowl by approximately 200,000 pairs—5% of the study area's waterfowl carrying capacity. Additionally, 1.5 million waterfowl recruits were produced per year, with an estimated 12.3 million waterfowl recruits produced from 2005 to 2011, due to CRP grasslands. However, the average percent increases in production resulting from CRP were approximately 10% lower than those reported for the peak CRP years in a pre-2007 analysis.

The scientists also applied spatially explicit models to estimate breeding pair abundance for 10 grassland passerines species to evaluate the biological benefits and related spatial patterns of CRP benefits for a subset of migratory grassland songbirds. The benefits provided by CRP were variable across species and ecoregions, ranging from supporting over 34% of the population of Le Conte's sparrow to supporting 6% of the grasshopper sparrow population in PPR.

Within the tallgrass ecoregion of the PPR, approximately 50% of the Le Conte's sparrow population was found to be dependent on CRP grasslands. Savannah sparrow exhibited the greatest number of total birds supported by CRP (1.6 million pairs; 12% of the total PPR population), followed by bobolink (1.2 million pairs; 11% of the total PPR population). Baird's sparrow, clay-colored sparrow, and sedge wren also exhibited CRP-related benefits, with 12%, 15%, and 15% of their populations supported by CRP, respectively. For all seven passerine species that exhibited CRP-related benefits, models indicated that, as of 2011, approximately 4.8 million pairs (9.6 million individuals) of grassland birds were dependent on CRP in the tallgrass and mixed grass ecoregions of the PPR. Indirect (off-CRP) benefits from CRP grasslands were found to extend beyond the CRP parcels for most species, indicating extensive value-added landscape context benefits for grassland birds provided by CRP.

REVISION OF PPJV IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The backbone of each migratory bird joint venture is its implementation plan. The plan guides the actions and investments taken by the joint venture. The most recent Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) plan was finalized in 2005. PPJV partners delayed revising our plan for several reasons, including a desire to see how climate change research evolved, and to allow the revision of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan to be completed. In 2015, the time was right to move forward and revise/update the PPJV Implementation Plan. Since then, scoping meetings have been held with partners in all five PPJV states. The 2016 Plan will strategically direct the PPJV technical and management activities for at least the next five years. To do so well, the Plan will incorporate changes in farm policy, technology, funding, climate change, and science, while emphasizing socioeconomic issues and opportunities as they relate to the overall goals.

The 2016 Plan is an opportunity to build on the strong foundation provided in the 2005 Plan by addressing information gaps and leveraging partnerships to achieve common priorities. Members of the Technical Committee have convened small group meetings across the PPJV landscape to discuss how to proceed with the planning process. Throughout the spring and summer, meetings have been held in Minneapolis, MN; Helena, MT; Des Moines, IA; Bismarck, ND; and Pierre, SD. Group discussions have focused on addressing short term habitat goals, research needs, and document organization. These small group meetings will be used to help develop step-down state tactical plans to facilitate conservation actions as part of the 2016 Plan.

THE NORTHERN TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE TAKES ROOT

The big skies are still there, but the vast expanses of prairie grass and wildflowers that attracted settlers to the Midwest are hard to find today. Much of the rich prairie that provided habitat for meadowlarks, bobolinks, and other grassland birds was converted to cropland and other uses years ago. And today, the remaining grasslands in Minnesota and other parts of the Midwest and Great Plains are being lost eight times faster than they are being protected.

In western Minnesota and northwest Iowa, however, landowners, state and federal government and The Nature Conservancy are working together to save grasslands at the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge.

The Refuge was established in 2000 to save remaining prairie remnants and the wildlife that depend on this habitat. The ultimate goal is to protect 77,000 acres of grassland in partnership with landowners who love their land and want to see it protected.

Tim Burdick, a rancher and farmer who grew up in the area around Big Stone County, Minnesota, remembers riding his bike to his neighbor's property to go hunting in the duck sloughs. Today he and his wife Karen are focused on protecting their land. "I've always loved the wild land," Burdick said, "but many of those places where I used to walk as a boy are gone now. We want to make sure the land stays the way it is and always provides a spot for wildlife."


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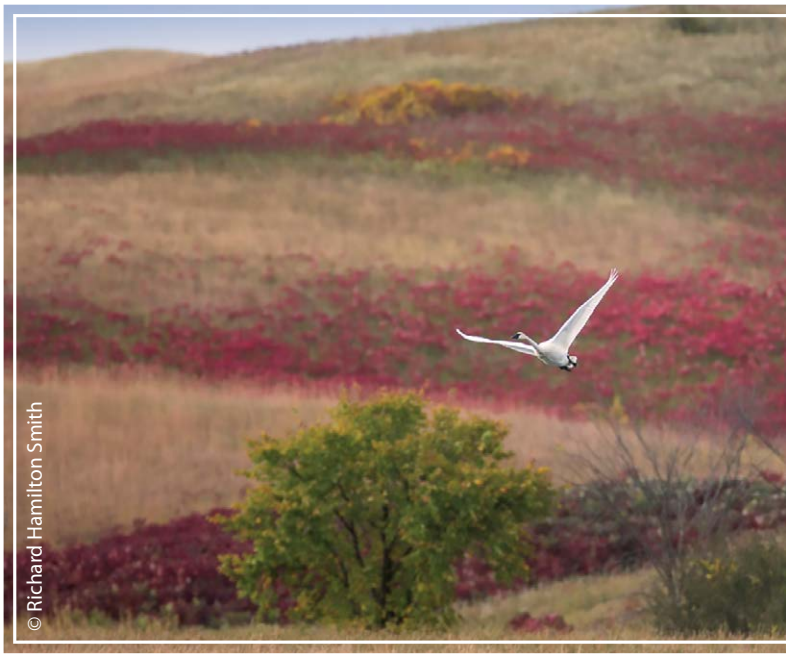
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Using a grant from Minnesota's Outdoor Heritage Fund, The Nature Conservancy has completed 30 projects with willing landowners, including the Burdicks, to protect more than 3,600 acres of grasslands and wetlands that are being added to the Refuge.

MARBLE – HOTTES LAKES ENHANCEMENT PROJECT COMPLETED

Ducks Unlimited completed the much-anticipated Marble-Hottes Lakes Enhancement project in Dickinson County, Iowa, in 2015. The project began as part of a Ducks Unlimited and Iowa Department of Natural Resources Shallow Lakes partnership and grew into a collaborative effort with many partners and community support.

Nearly 20 percent of the water that enters Big Spirit Lake flows through the Marble-Hottes Lakes system. Completing this project helps improve water quality in Big Spirit Lake, enhance more than 450 acres of emergent marsh, and provide better hunting and fishing opportunities on these popular lakes. The project included installing pump facilities on West Hottes and Marble Lakes to regulate water levels and a fish screen installed on East Hottes at outlet to Big Spirit Lake to exclude carp.

The restoration is expected to transform the shallow water areas of the lake from murky, open water to stands of emergent vegetation such as cattail and bulrush. Areas greater than three feet deep will be dominated by dense submerged aquatic vegetation that thrives in clear water. Aquatic vegetation such as sago pondweed is a favorite food for ducks such as wigeons and diving ducks.

This project is modeled after the Diamond Lake project, Iowa's first Shallow Lake enhancement project. Since Diamond Lake was restored in 2009, waterfowl use has increased dramatically, with spring waterfowl surveys recording more than 12,000 ducks on the 160-acre lake.

Marble-Hottes was a true community effort, with support coming from Iowa Department of Natural Resources, the Dickinson County Water Quality Commission, the Waitt-Carlton Family Foundation, Ducks Unlimited supporters, the Clean Water Alliance, and the North American Wetland Conservation Act.

BIG WALL LAKE RESTORATION

On October 15th, more than 50 people gathered to dedicate acquisition of the 100 acre Dinsmore tract bordering over half a mile of shoreline of Big Wall Lake. After restoration, the tract will support eight restored prairie pothole wetland basins interspersed within 91 acres of tallgrass prairie. Wetland restoration will include a 28 acre semi-permanent marsh currently drained via an agricultural drainage well.

The tract will be purchased in May 2016 through the Prairie Lakes 8 NAWCA grant with funding assistance from Jim and Patricia Dinsmore. Jim Dinsmore was a long time faculty member at Iowa State University whose research on migratory bird use of restored

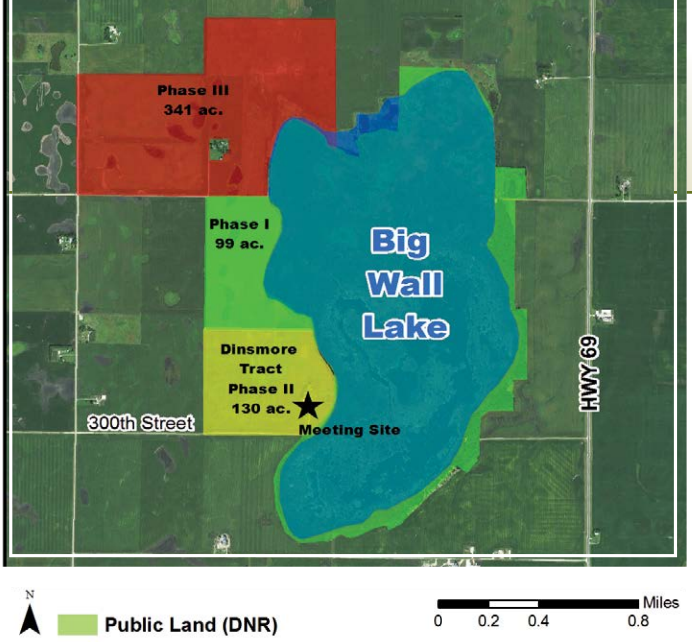
wetlands helped to inform the strategy employed today via the PPJV Priority Area concept. The tract is adjacent to the 100 acre Nomsen tract which was acquired in 2013 through a previous NAWCA grant with funding assistance from Pheasants Forever in the name of Dick Nomsen, a former wildlife research biologist for the Iowa Conservation Commission. The tract conserves 1,060 meters of shoreline and resulted in restoration of 10 prairie pothole wetlands and 80 acres of prairie.

Big Wall Lake is a natural, 850 acre glacial lake deeded to the State of Iowa in 1900 as sovereign land. As such, public ownership extended only to the edge of the marsh. This wetland is part of a long chain of marshes that form one of the primary migration routes through the Prairie Pothole Region of Iowa. The lake has been held 0.5 feet above natural crest since 1974, contributing to declining vegetation. In 2002, the lake was listed on EPA's 303d list of impaired waters, due to Common Carp.

In 2005, the Wright County Soil and Water Conservation District (WSWCD) received a watershed improvement grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) via Section 319 of the Clean Water Act. The proposal included construction of an outlet for the lake to allow periodic draw downs to eradicate the carp populations and re-establish emergent vegetation, which will lead to the expected increases in water quality.

Typical minor water level fluctuations will be conducted annually toward the overall goal of maintaining a 50/50 ratio of open water to vegetative cover. This will result in dramatically improved water quality to support the intended high quality diverse aquatic community that provides production and migration habitat for the large numbers of waterfowl and other migratory birds historically observed on Big Wall Lake.

Since the Big Wall Lake renovation project was completed, Iowa Department of Natural Resources and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, along with the WSWCD have been working with adjacent landowners who have expressed an interest in enhancing water quality and wildlife



habitat in and around Big Wall Lake. IDNR private lands biologists and SWCD staff worked with the Frye family to get their 341 acre farm enrolled in a 15-year contract under the Conservation Reserve Program practice 37, known as the Duck Nesting Initiative.

The Frye family has since sold their farm to INHF for future acquisition by USFWS as a Waterfowl Production Area. IDNR wildlife management biologists and NRCS staff also worked with the owners of the Nomsen and Dinsmore tracts on enrollment in permanent WRP easements.

Big Wall Lake was the initial Living Lakes Project in Iowa. The impact it had on our conservation efforts was surprising. What was considered too controversial to pursue has proven to be a catalyzing force. In case after case, we are witnessing the riparian landowners approaching the area biologist, whom they developed a working relationship with through the Living Lakes Project, about restoring wetland and grassland habitats on their farms, and selling to a public agency to insure their long term management and contribution to the wildlife management area. Big Wall Lake has become the poster child for conservation efforts. Migratory bird species have responded almost immediately to the newly restored habitats, including iconic species such as Sandhill Cranes, Trumpeter Swans, and American Bitterns. A storied waterfowl destination has been restored and along with it a newfound enthusiasm to be part of the effort to bring the birds back to the marsh; a trend that is expected to continue with the restoration of the Dinsmore tract.

DUCKS UNLIMITED AND MINNESOTA DNR DEDICATE STATE LINE LAKE

Ducks Unlimited (DU) and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) joined with local partners Saturday, July 18, to celebrate the successful enhancement of 446-acre State Line Lake in Freeborn County, Minnesota. For decades, State Line Lake was in poor environmental condition. High

water levels and invasive carp degraded water quality and the aquatic ecology to the point the water was too turbid to support wildlife habitat and provide outdoor recreational opportunities. To remedy the situation, DU purchased a 45-acre parcel of land on the lake's outlet. DU engineered and installed a new weir to control water levels and a fish barrier to prevent the re-infestation of carp in the lake in 2013.

Minnesota DNR used the structures in 2014 to temporarily lower water levels in the lake, which rejuvenated aquatic plants and invertebrates. The draw-down helped consolidate sediment and nutrients and kill invasive fish during winter months. Water levels were restored this spring. The water is clear and supporting aquatic life again, including waterfowl and other wetland-dependent migratory birds.

"As with other shallow cooperative lake enhancement projects around the state, our partnership with DU's Living Lakes Initiative and strong local supporters made this project a successful reality," said Laurie Martinson, Minnesota DNR director of operations.

The shallow lake enhancement project was funded through a state appropriation from the Outdoor Heritage Fund as recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, and by philanthropic investments by DU major sponsors. Other project partners included State Line Lake Restoration, Inc., Freeborn County, City of Emmons, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Worth County Conservation Board, Shell Rock River Watershed District, the Brackey Family, Unimin Corporation, Flint Hills Resources, and dozens of individual DU Living Lakes Initiative Major Sponsors.

For more information on Minnesota DNR Shallow Lakes Program, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/wildlife/shallowlakes.

MINNESOTA PHEASANT SUMMIT ACTION PLAN

Going back to the early 1960's, roughly 270,000 hunters would crisscross Minnesota landscapes in pursuit of ring-neck pheasant. As time progressed, both fewer pheasants and fewer hunters were found across these landscapes. Hunters (of all game species) spend $1.32 billion in Minnesota annually, much of this in the rural parts of the state. Recognizing that a long-standing tradition was slipping away, along with the grasslands and other habitats important to pheasants, action was needed. As a result, in December 2014, Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton convened a "Pheasant Summit" with a charge to participants to work together and develop an "Action Plan" that will address this serious issue facing rural Minnesota.

Through the work of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and many partners, the 2015 MN Pheasant Summit Action plan was released to the public. The action plan includes goals for a four-year time frame, but recognizes that necessary habitat conservation/restoration activities will need to extend well beyond a short time frame. The aggressive plan puts forth a strategy for retaining and adding grassland habitat to western and southern Minnesota. While pheasants are the flagship species for this plan, it's clear that grassland habitat protected or restored for this pheasants will also provide habitat for a wide range of waterfowl, songbirds, and other wildlife.

As implementation of the Plan proceeds, great news recently was received that the Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Fund approved over $60 million in appropriations for grassland and wetland habitat projects in the prairie region of the state!

WATERFOWL PRODUCTION AREA ACCELERATION PARTNERSHIP IN MINNESOTA DELIVERS NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN RESULTS

Since passage of the Legacy Amendment in 2008, the Outdoor Heritage Fund of Minnesota has been investing significant resources into partnerships that protect wetlands and prairie/grasslands. The Waterfowl Production Area Acceleration Partnership (Partnership) has worked with multiple Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) partners (Pheasants Forever, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Minnesota DNR, and Ducks Unlimited,) and willing landowners. Together, we have delivered more than 8,000 acres of wetland habitats, restored grasslands, and ultimately places for people to recreate and connect to our waterfowl and wildlife resources.

Working in the largely converted Prairie Pothole Region of Minnesota, this partnership seeks to put habitat back on the landscape in a targeted manner so that functional systems for breeding waterfowl production and other grassland/wetland birds can be recreated. This partnership typically builds upon past investments in permanent conservation (either easements of fee acquisitions) to further enhance and develop functioning grassland/wetland systems. Priorities include protecting native remnant prairie and parcels that enhance access to public resources or have significant restoration potential due to past investments in wetland and grassland conservation.

One example completed this year was on the Talcot Lake Waterfowl Protection Area (WPA) addition in Murray County, Minnesota. This 320-acre tract contains 72-acres of native prairie, and 63-acres of wetlands, which are now restored and protected. This addition connects the existing 40-acre Talcot Lake WPA and the 5,262-acre Talcot Lake State Wildlife Management Area, thereby increasing the size of this protected area with historically high densities of both wetlands and

breeding waterfowl. Several nearby private land tracts with wetlands and grasslands have also been protected through USDA, USFWS, and stateside (Re-Invest in Minnesota) easements. If you add in other areas enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, there is now a larger area that is highly productive for both agriculture and wildlife.

PHEASANTS forever The Habitat Organization

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

HABITAT PAYS PROGRAM IN SOUTH DAKOTA DEVELOPS AND MAINTAINS WILDLIFE HABITAT

What do South Dakota hunters and farmers have in common? A lot, including a passion for the land and a love for tradition. That is why the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks is teaming up with the South Dakota Department of Agriculture on the new Habitat Pays campaign. Habitat Pays connects farmers and ranchers with the tools to help them develop and maintain wildlife habitat in ways that make sense on their land.

In December 2013, Governor Daugaard hosted a Pheasant Habitat Summit. Hundreds of stakeholders gathered in Huron to learn more about the condition of South Dakota's habitat through presentations and discussions from key leaders throughout the state. Following the summit, Governor Daugaard formed a habitat work group. He charged members with developing recommendations focused on practical solutions for maintaining and improving pheasant habitat compatible with agriculture production. The group met regularly, reviewing survey results, scientific data, letters and suggestions, and released a report in September 2014, available at habitat.sd.gov.


South Dakota Game Fish and Parks

One of the group's recommendations was to create an awareness campaign to connect landowners with the many resources available for establishing habitat on their land. Another recommendation was to implement a website specific to habitat management with information on federal, state, local and non-government programs for landowners to learn about and access when appropriate. Together these recommendations became Habitat Pays.

"South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks' understands working with agriculture, and specifically the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, is key to the success of Habitat Pays. Agriculture is the state's number one industry, with a $25.6 billion economic impact," Hepler noted. "Truly understanding the farmer's point of view is a critical component for success."

South Dakota Department of Agriculture Secretary Lucas Lentsch agrees. "Farmers and ranchers know what is best for their land and their operation. With Habitat Pays, we want to help landowners find the right programs to help them meet their personal land use goals."

The newly developed Habitat Pays website is a great resource for the farmers and ranchers of South Dakota. Videos on the site feature stories of landowners in various parts of the state who have taken advantage of programs to maintain or establish habitat. The site includes a comprehensive list of resources, along with a list of habitat advisors who are experts in conservation programs and habitat planning. They possess the knowledge of federal, state, and local programs to assist landowners in finding the right program or programs to meet their personal habitat and land use goals. Habitat advisors are available to assist landowners in designing, developing and funding habitat improvements on private lands. Background information, images and contact information for each of the habitat advisors is available on the website so landowners can put a name and a face together.

"There are many programs run through the federal government, state government and private organizations that provide cost-share and technical assistance to producers looking to establish or maintain habitat acres on their land. The complexity of navigating the large number of habitat programs can be overwhelming for landowners to know which of the many programs best meet their specific needs," said Secretary Lentsch. That is where the habitat advisors come in.

"Habitat Pays provides landowners with the resources and financial incentives they need to achieve their individual habitat development goals. Habitat truly does pay because of opportunities for improved soil health, increased land value and abundant wildlife for all South Dakotans," concluded Secretary Hepler.

USFWS PARTNERS FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAM CONTINUES SUCCESSFUL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS IN SOUTH DAKOTA

During 2015 the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW) continued to work closely with a wide variety of Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) stakeholders to implement voluntary grassland and wetland conservation on private land. A central theme of this work is partnering with

ranchers to maintain grassland-based agriculture as part of the PPJV landscape and social fabric of the region. Many observers have noted the long-term viability of grassland-dependent bird populations and ranching are intertwined in the PPJV portion of South Dakota. Likewise, a primary goal of the USFWS Land Protection Plan for the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area is to *"conserve working landscapes based on ranching and livestock operations that support a viable livestock industry."* The South Dakota PFW program implemented this philosophy in 2015 by partnering with 77 landowners to deliver 20,913 acres of grazing management systems.

The majority of these projects are comprised of native prairie tracts with high wetland densities. This effort is generously supported by a wide variety of PPJV partners including Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetland Conservation Act grants, and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks. All of these projects are only possible through the support and encouragement of participating landowners. Landowner interest in these types of projects continues to be very high for 2016 and beyond.

URBAN WOODS AND PRAIRIES INITIATIVE

The *Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative* is a joint project between Audubon Dakota, Fargo Parks District, Buffalo- Red River Watershed District and the cities of Fargo and Moorhead to restore grassland and woodland areas in Fargo and Moorhead. Nearly 1,000 acres along the Red River are enrolled in the project, idle flood buyout sites overrun with non-native grasses and trees. These areas, when managed properly and planted with native vegetation, will restore important ecological functions to this area of the Red River Valley, provide excellent habitat for birds and wildlife species, while also offering natural areas for the residents of Fargo. The important ecological functions restored by the project along the 28 mile stretch of the Red River include: increased water quality; increased resiliency of the shoreline and wetland water carrying capacity as a result of more appropriate vegetation species, and; wetland restorations, which will significantly help flood control within these areas of Fargo.


Marshall Johnson

In the summer of 2015, the first 200 acres were seeded with native grasses and flowers. Woodland management practices were also conducted over the summer. The prairie restoration of the sites within the *Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative* will take approximately 3-5 years of monitoring and maintenance before becoming fully established prairies. The woodlands at each site will be enhanced by the removal of woody invasive species such as buckthorn and prickly ash.

Species such as Blue-winged Teal, Gadwalls, Mallards, and Great Blue Herons will utilize the newly created, restored and enhanced wetland basins while the native prairie will support declining grassland birds such as Bobolinks, Upland Sandpipers, and Meadowlarks. Over 140 species of birds will be able to inhabit and thrive in these restored areas. Native plantings will also be more conducive to pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, as well as provide an opportunity for environmental engagement and education. After the initial establishment, Audubon Dakota and partners will work to maintain these areas and maximize benefits to both wildlife and the community. As urban Fargo expands, it is important to conserve these critical natural habitat areas to preserve North Dakota's cultural heritage of land ethic.

DELTA WATERFOWL LAUNCHES WORKING WETLANDS PILOT PROJECT IN ND

This spring Delta Waterfowl launched a new pilot project to evaluate the utility of a new voluntary incentive-based term program to conserve at risk wetlands. The new Working Wetlands Pilot Project focuses on the small temporary and seasonal wetlands important to breeding ducks that tend to be at the highest risk of loss due to their small size, temporal inundation, and usually embedded within cropland.


Fred Greenslade, courtesy of Delta Waterfowl

Delta Waterfowl partnered with North Dakota NRCS to launch the program. The pilot also benefitted from extensive collaboration with North Dakota agricultural leaders and the technical input from PPJV partners.

In all, the pilot will enroll approximately 80 landowners and roughly 4,500 acres in the five year pilot effort. In addition to habitat protection efforts, Delta Waterfowl has partnered with North Dakota State University (NDSU) to evaluate the program. NDSU will conduct extensive surveys with participating landowners to solicit their feedback on the program, and determine the strengths and weaknesses of the program from the landowners' vantage point. Delta is hoping that the Working Wetlands program can grow into another mechanism to conserve the small at-risk wetlands most crucial for breeding ducks--a key priority of the PPJV partnership.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY PROTECTING PIPING PLOVERS IN NORTH DAKOTA

The Nature Conservancy (the Conservancy) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation are working together to improve nesting habitat for piping plovers at John E. Williams Preserve in North Dakota. The Conservancy is also teaming with the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to better understand the nesting requirements and use of nesting areas by the plovers in the region.

Piping plovers are a small shorebird listed as a threatened species in the northern Great Plains region of the U.S. The Conservancy's John E. Williams Preserve is an important nesting area for this species. The plovers nest on gravel beaches along the preserve's alkali lakes and feed on the numerous invertebrates that thrive in the highly mineralized water found there.

In the 1980s, as many as 200 piping plovers nested in the preserve. In recent years, however, those numbers have fallen to as few as 50 birds. Heavy rainfall and high groundwater levels have resulted in grass and other plants encroaching on the beaches, causing the plovers to abandon former nesting sites. Even so, this one site within the Prairie Pothole Region produces more piping plover chicks than most Great Lakes beaches combined.

To boost the number of piping plovers that nest and fledge at the preserve, the Conservancy is removing grass encroaching on the beaches and using controlled burns to prevent its return. Gravel is also being brought in to provide additional nesting habitat.

A $100,000 cost-share grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is funding the work. The grant also is paying for a technician to monitor nesting plovers in 2015 and 2016.

The U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are also banding plovers at the preserve as part of a larger effort to study the birds' nesting requirements over a huge swath of North Dakota and Montana.

MONTANA LAUNCHES PRAIRIE POTHOLE WETLANDS AND GRASSLANDS RETENTION PROJECT

The first enrollment period in Montana for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Prairie Pothole Wetlands and Grasslands Retention Project (PPWGRP) was well received across the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) this spring. The 3-year PPWGRP initiative is intended to assist producers in the PPR in implementing conservation practices to encourage the retention of wetlands and grasslands, improve wildlife habitat for migratory birds, improve water quality and quantity, improve grassland health, and reduce soil erosion and sediment. The PPWGRP provides opportunities for producers to manage working lands for agricultural production and good stewardship, including those lands expiring from the Conservation Reserve Program.

Montana announced its first sign-up for this special initiative on March 15th with applications due just a month later -- on April 15th. Due to the tight deadlines, NRCS and its partners worked diligently to inform landowners of this new conservation opportunity. A partner supported Conservation Specialist position hosted by Ducks Unlimited, visited Daniels and Sheridan Counties to work with local District Conservationists and other agency biologists. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) sent mailings to over 200 landowners announcing the enrollment period and opportunities for producer cost share with FWP.

The outreach by Montana's conservation partners was rewarded. NRCS received approximately 100 applications in the 30-day period. Montana funded 13 applications that impacted over 4,500 acres for a total of 1.7 million dollars. These applications included conservation practices to assist with grazing, upland habitat management, wetland habitat management, fencing, water development, and native seed planting. Montana will be able to offer this conservation opportunity to producers for one more year, and NRCS expects a high level of participation based on the success of the 2015 sign-up.


Kevin Barnes, USFWS

GAINING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MONTANA BIRD POPULATIONS THROUGH AN EXPANDED BREEDING BIRD SURVEY

The Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET) office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) Technical Committee teamed up with Montana conservation partners to expand the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) throughout the state to help ensure more complete coverage of this important survey and monitoring effort. The BBS has been active in the PPJV area since the late 1960s, providing data used to estimate breeding bird population trends. Analysis of recent BBS data has indicated breeding populations


Kevin Barnes, USFWS

of several species of grassland nesting birds in the Northern Great Plains of eastern Montana have declined dramatically. Grassland nesting species showing the largest apparent declines include Sprague's pipit, Baird's sparrow, McCown's longspur, and chestnut-collared longspur. Before the expansion of the BBS, 65 survey routes existed in Montana. Given Montana's size, this resulted in one of the lowest route densities in the continental United States (and a lot of grassland habitat perhaps important to nesting birds). The BBS Office at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland recently designated 42 new roadside BBS routes across Montana, including eleven new routes in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR).

Data from BBS are the longest active breeding population survey datasets available for these and many other species of concern. In addition to population trend analyses, modeling approaches relating BBS observations to habitat characteristics have been important for understanding the effects of habitat loss and other stressors on breeding populations. These models provide PPJV partners decision support tools to strategically guide conservation actions.

The new PPR routes were completed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, MT Fish Wildlife and Parks, the Nature Conservancy, and private citizens. Observations from the new routes will augment the existing survey database and provide additional information to land managers and researchers to inform bird conservation.

MATADOR RANCH GRASSBANK GRASSLAND BIRD STUDY SHOWS VALUE OF INTACT GRASSLANDS

Grassland songbirds are experiencing the most severe and consistent declines of any bird assemblage in North America. A recent University of Montana graduate student study supported by the BLM, Plains and Prairie Potholes Landscape Conservation Cooperative, and The Nature Conservancy improved our understanding of how conservation and management helps grassland songbirds. While these birds often occupy territories of two acres or less, the value of local habitat to each bird was found to be dependent on its landscape context at a scale of up to 370,000 acres. Landscapes fragmented by cropland had a significant reduction in densities of Sprague's pipit (Anthus spragueii), Baird's sparrow (Ammodramus bairdii), chestnut-collared longspur (Calcarius ornatus), and McCown's longspur (Rhynchophanes mccownii).

Consequently, protection of intact grassland landscapes should be the conservation priority due to the influence of landscape conditions on bird densities. From a land management perspective, grazing strongly interacted with underlying patterns of soil productivity and moisture availability to produce a variety of suitable herbaceous cover for birds across relatively broad scales.

The Nature Conservancy is using these study results to guide operations on its Matador Ranch Grassbank, which incentivizes grazing management on over 250,000 acres. Numerous partners have also been working together over the past decade to secure tens of thousands of acres of vulnerable grasslands in north central Montana through the purchase of conservation easements using North American Wetland Conservation Act, Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act, State, and other funding sources.

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