



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Protect and Restore MN IBAs within the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands, Phase 2
Laws of Minnesota 2018 Final Report

General Information

Date: 10/27/2025

Project Title: Protect and Restore MN IBAs within the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands, Phase 2

Funds Recommended: \$829,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2018, Ch. 208, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd 2(j)

Appropriation Language: \$829,000 the second year is to the commissioner of natural resources for agreements to acquire conservation easements and enhance wildlife habitat in important bird areas identified in Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan. Of this amount, \$209,000 is to Audubon Minnesota and \$620,000 is to Minnesota Land Trust. Up to \$120,000 to Minnesota Land Trust is for establishing monitoring and enforcement funds as approved in the accomplishment plan and subject to Minnesota Statutes, section 97A.056, subdivision 17. Subject to evaluation criteria in Minnesota Rules, part 6136.0900, priority must be given to acquiring lands that are eligible for the native prairie bank under Minnesota Statutes, section 84.96, or lands adjacent to protected native prairie. A list of permanent conservation easements and enhancements must be provided as part of the required accomplishment plan.

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Alexandra Wardwell

Title: Prairie Project Manager

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Location Information

County Location(s): Kittson and Polk.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Forest / Prairie Transition

Prairie

Activity types:

Protect in Easement

Enhance

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Wetlands

Prairie

Forest

Habitat

Narrative

Summary of Accomplishments

Audubon and Minnesota Land Trust (MLT) successfully concluded this grant, protecting, restoring, and enhancing wildlife habitat on public and protected private lands within Important Bird Areas and/or Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan priority areas. In total, 840 acres of habitat were restored or enhanced (168% of goal) and 436 acres of habitat were protected. Audubon enhanced 772 acres of prairies and wetlands, while MLT restored and enhanced 68 acres (these acres are not reflected in the outputs as the restoration took place on the Skull Lake (Hidden Meadows Tree Farm LLC) easement, protected under this appropriation.

Process & Methods

Audubon Minnesota and the Minnesota Land Trust advanced the second phase of our Important Bird Area Protection and Restoration Program in the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands (TAP). The program stands out for its focus on Important Bird Areas (IBAs), critical zones for sustaining diverse bird populations, its commitment to restoring working grasslands, prairies, and threatened wetlands, and its use of a cost-effective reverse-bid model for conservation easement protection. Audubon and Minnesota Land Trust (MLT) designed the Protecting and Restoring Minnesota's Important Birds Areas Program to provide solutions to declining grassland and waterbird populations due to habitat loss in western Minnesota.

The Tallgrass Aspen Parklands (TAP) Region of Minnesota supports over 289 bird species including Greater Prairie Chickens, Sandhill Cranes, waterfowl, and numerous other grassland and wetland birds. Gray wolf, moose, elk, and fisher are among the other wildlife found in the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands region of Minnesota. This program advanced the Outdoor Heritage Funds legacy of habitat protection and enhancement for wildlife in Minnesota. With these funds we: 1) obtained two conservation easements on 436 acres of private lands, and 2) enhanced 840 acres of habitat within the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands region of Minnesota.

Audubon and MLT concentrated protection and restoration efforts within IBAs and Prairie Plan priority areas in northwestern Minnesota, where habitat work would most benefit target species and build off of existing conserved lands. Restoration/enhancement work occurred on permanently protected land, either public lands or private lands protected through conservation easement by MLT under this grant. Audubon enhanced 772 acres of habitat within Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge, a Globally Important Bird Area, which is one of the largest tallgrass prairie and wetland restoration projects in North America. The wetlands project had amazing success in creating new waterfowl habitat with both birders and duck hunters commenting on the number of waterfowl using the enhanced wetlands. These efforts increased habitat value for focal species and aligned with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) priorities. MLT, in partnership with the USFWS Private Lands Program, enhanced 68 acres of

habitat associated with the Skull Lake (Hidden Meadows Tree Farm LLC) conservation easement closed under this grant; as such, these acres are not shown in the final report Output Tables. These acres enabled MLT and Audubon to further increase the habitat value of these respective lands for focal species by targeting priority protected lands.

How did the program address habitats of significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, threatened or endangered species, and/or list targeted species?

Through its Blueprint for Bird Conservation, Audubon identified a group of priority breeding bird species that have experienced significant declines in the TAP region, are dependent on vulnerable habitat, and have been recognized as priorities by various resource agencies. This strategic list informed our conservation efforts. Thirty-two Species in Greatest Conservation Need and 11 MN State listed species were identified as priorities for this program's grassland and wetland habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement work, including Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrow, Green-winged Teal, Black Tern, Horned Grebe, Yellow Rail, Wilson's Phalarope, Franklin's Gull, Greater Prairie Chicken, Nelson's Sparrow, Marbled Godwit, and Trumpeter Swan. Protection and restoration/enhancement of habitat to support these species also benefits a large number of other non-bird SGCN and State listed species.

MLT and Audubon completed two conservation easements through this grant, each benefiting SGCN:

The Norway Dunes (Johnson-Abrahamson) conservation easement protects a diverse landscape of mesic aspen-oak woodland, northern wet brush prairie, northern wet meadow/carr, sedge meadow, fens, a small pond, and grasslands. The 335-acre property adds to a complex of protected land totaling 8,258 acres, including The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Norway Dunes Preserve, Lake Bronson State Park, and Halma Swamp, Pelan, and Devil's Playground WMAs. The property provides habitat for SGCN, including moose, fisher, American badger, and American woodcock, and lies within Audubon's Kittson-Roseau Aspen Parklands IBA. Beach heather (*Hudsonia tomentosa*), a State-listed Threatened plant species, was discovered on the property during the land protection process.

The Skull Lake (Hidden Meadow Tree Farm LLC) conservation easement lies just south of the US-Canada border in an area threatened by accelerating conversion of grasslands to row crops. This 101-acre property is dominated by wetlands and forests with a larger grassland that the landowners plan to maintain. This property adds to a complex of protected lands, including Caribou WMA, Skull Lake WMA, TNC's Wallace C. Dayton Conservation and Wildlife Area, and an adjacent 105-acre property protected by a conservation easement held by MLT. The property provides habitat for SGCN, including elk, fisher, and American woodcock, and lies within Audubon's Kittson-Roseau Aspen Parklands IBA.

How did the program use science-based targeting that leveraged or expanded corridors and complexes, reduced fragmentation, or protected areas in the MN County Biological Survey.

In an effort to protect some of the most unique wildlife habitat in MN, our proposal focuses on Important Bird Areas within the Prairie Conservation Plan and prioritizes the six counties within the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands (TAP) region. Audubon Minnesota and a wide variety of partners have identified 57 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Minnesota through a Technical Committee, comprised of bird experts and conservationists from across the state. Important Bird Areas have been identified in over 170 countries to provide essential habitat for one or more breeding, wintering, and/or migrating bird species. It is a proactive, voluntary, science-based program and works to identify, monitor and conserve the most essential habitats for birds. In short, these IBAs are the most important areas in which to preserve Minnesota's game and non-game avian legacy. Audubon Minnesota and the Minnesota Land Trust see tremendous opportunity for directing conservation resources to protecting habitats within IBAs and surrounding areas. We are also using additional plans and analyses, like the Minnesota Prairie Conservation

Plan and the MN Biological Survey biodiversity significance status, to further refine the geographic scope of our efforts to yield the highest conservation return on investment.

In addition to the rigorous process used to designate IBAs, Audubon Minnesota has also developed the Blueprint for Bird Conservation, which is a comprehensive compilation of national, regional and state bird and habitat conservation plans that address Minnesota bird species and Minnesota landscapes. A particular emphasis was placed on bird conservation documents developed by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). This Blueprint builds upon existing efforts by identifying the highest priorities in each ecological region and using select conservation focal species; synthesizing the best proven conservation practices for each species; establishing measurable goals for species' population targets; and identifying key sites for conservation work.

Explain Partners, Supporters, & Opposition

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) National Wildlife Refuge staff in northwestern Minnesota were an essential partner for the Partnership, providing technical expertise as well as in-kind services like use of a vehicle, office space, and other equipment for the Prairie Project Manager. These contributions strengthened Audubon's ability to accomplish so much restoration and enhancement work in Important Bird Areas and Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan Boundaries. Our supporters included Minnesota DNR staff including Area Wildlife Managers and county SWCD staff. Minnesota Land Trust worked closely with a USFWS Private Lands Biologist to accomplish enhancement work on a conservation easement secured under this grant.

We encountered no opposition to this program.

Exceptional challenges, expectations, failures, opportunities, or unique aspects of program

This was the second phase of this Program; we were still building program awareness with landowners. The Partnership benefited from strong relationships with partners and the MN Prairie Conservation Plan Local Technical Teams. Landowners in this geography were unfamiliar with conservation easements; substantial time was spent building understanding and addressing landowner concerns. Covid created significant challenges with travel, meeting with landowners, and subcontracting for professional services. With restoration/enhancement work, timelines had to build in flexibility as certain steps can only occur in certain seasons to avoid soil disturbance/compaction, and impacts to ground-nesting birds. Over the course of the grant, Audubon pivoted from restoring/enhancing lands protected under this grant to lands within GRNWR because R/E on the easements could not be counted toward deliverables. MLT worked with USFWS to meet the landowner's R/E needs with funding remaining in MLT's portion of the budget.

What other dedicated funds may collaborate with or contribute to this program?

N/A

What is the plan to sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended?

Land protected through conservation easements will be sustained through the best standards and practices for conservation easement stewardship. The Minnesota Land Trust is a nationally accredited and insured land trust with a very successful stewardship program that includes annual property monitoring, effective records management, addressing inquiries and interpretations, tracking changes in ownership, investigating potential violations and defending the easement in case of a true violation. Funding for these easement stewardship activities is included in the project budget. In addition, Audubon Upper Mississippi River and Minnesota Land Trust prepared a Habitat Management Plan for each landowner, providing ecological management recommendations for the properties over time.

The public lands that Audubon enhanced under this grant are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part

of the National Wildlife Refuge System and will be monitored and maintained going forward. Glacial Ridge NWR has a Comprehensive Conservation Plan and detailed Habitat Management Plan that guide the vision and habitat work on the Refuge. All U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stations have completed Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) which included a detailed Environmental Assessment and Intra-Service Section 7 Endangered Species Act analysis. Many of the priority grassland and wetland birds, mammals, native vegetation, and pollinators, will benefit from the improved habitat structure, increased floral diversity, and reduced competition from invasive species going forward.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2021-Perpetual	MLT Stewardship Funds	Maintain Easements	Annual Easement Monitoring Site Visits	Regular Communication with Landowners
2023-Ongoing	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)	Monitor R/E Projects with Site Checks	Regular Prescribed Fire Actions on R/E parcels	Monitor for Invasive Species and Follow-up Management Actions as Needed
2023-Ongoing	Audubon Upper Mississippi River, LSOHC/CPL	Monitor R/E Projects with Site Checks and for Use by Focal Species and SGCN Species, Report to Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS) and USFWS Staff	Plan for Follow-up Management Actions as Needed Overtime	Assist with Future Management Actions as Needed, Regular Communications with USFWS Staff

Budget

Grand Totals Across All Partnerships

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$154,800	\$203,200	\$200,100	\$30,000	\$35,200	Audubon UMR, MLT	\$184,800	\$235,300
Contracts	\$114,200	\$278,800	\$219,300	-	-	-	\$114,200	\$219,300
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$360,000	\$186,000	\$186,000	\$60,100	-	-, MLT	\$420,100	\$186,000
Easement Stewardship	\$120,000	\$48,000	\$48,000	-	-	-	\$120,000	\$48,000
Travel	\$12,000	\$12,000	\$6,200	-	-	-	\$12,000	\$6,200
Professional Services	\$52,500	\$73,000	\$69,100	-	-	-	\$52,500	\$69,100
Direct Support Services	\$13,500	\$24,000	\$23,500	-	-	-	\$13,500	\$23,500
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	\$1,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	\$2,000	\$3,000	\$500	-	-	-	\$2,000	\$500
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$829,000	\$829,000	\$752,700	\$90,100	\$35,200	-	\$919,100	\$787,900

Partner: Audubon Minnesota

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$104,800	\$113,200	\$113,200	\$30,000	\$30,000	Audubon UMR	\$134,800	\$143,200
Contracts	\$96,200	\$87,800	\$87,700	-	-	-	\$96,200	\$87,700
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Travel	\$6,000	\$6,000	\$2,500	-	-	-	\$6,000	\$2,500
Professional Services	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Direct Support Services	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$500	-	-	-	\$2,000	\$500
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$209,000	\$209,000	\$203,900	\$30,000	\$30,000	-	\$239,000	\$233,900

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Conservation management and support staff	0.38	5.0	\$113,200	\$30,000	Audubon UMR	\$143,200

Partner: Minnesota Land Trust

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$50,000	\$90,000	\$86,900	-	\$5,200	MLT	\$50,000	\$92,100
Contracts	\$18,000	\$191,000	\$131,600	-	-	-	\$18,000	\$131,600
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$360,000	\$186,000	\$186,000	\$60,100	-	MLT	\$420,100	\$186,000
Easement Stewardship	\$120,000	\$48,000	\$48,000	-	-	-	\$120,000	\$48,000
Travel	\$6,000	\$6,000	\$3,700	-	-	-	\$6,000	\$3,700
Professional Services	\$52,500	\$73,000	\$69,100	-	-	-	\$52,500	\$69,100
Direct Support Services	\$13,500	\$24,000	\$23,500	-	-	-	\$13,500	\$23,500
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	\$1,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	\$1,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$620,000	\$620,000	\$548,800	\$60,100	\$5,200	-	\$680,100	\$554,000

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Minnesota Land Trust Protection Staff	0.19	3.0	\$86,900	\$5,200	MLT	\$92,100

Direct Support Services

How did you determine which portions of the Direct Support Services of your shared support services is direct to this program?

In a process that was approved by the DNR on March 17, 2017, Minnesota Land Trust determined their direct support services rate to include all of the allowable direct and necessary expenditures that are not captured in other line items in the budget, which is similar to the Land Trust's proposed federal indirect rate. We applied this DNR-approved rate only to Minnesota Land Trust personnel expenses to determine the total amount of direct support services.

Explain any budget challenges or successes:

Audubon was able to exceed acre goals through careful budgeting and thoughtful execution of restoration/enhancement projects in wetlands and prairies on public lands. MLT experienced budget challenges related to protection work, partly due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Low TAP land prices, led to low conservation easement values, offering landowners little financial incentive to protect their lands. As a result, leverage fell short. Restrictions on travel, lodging, and in-person meetings made engagement with landowners more difficult. Work in the northern tier resulted in higher professional service costs for appraisals and surveys, driven by limited lodging/dining options.

Total Revenue: \$0

Revenue Spent: \$0

Revenue Balance: \$0

Of the money disclosed above, what are the appropriate uses of the money:

E. This is not applicable as there was no revenue generated.

Output Tables

Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Acres (AP)	Total Acres (Final)
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	0	0	0	560	436	560	436
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	640	772	640	772
Total	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,200	1,208	1,200	1,208

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Funding (AP)	Total Funding (Final)
Restore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$620,200	\$444,900	\$620,200	\$444,900
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$208,800	\$307,800	\$208,800	\$307,800
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$829,000	\$752,700	\$829,000	\$752,700

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro / Urban (AP)	Metro / Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	560	436	0	0	0	0	0	0	560	436
Enhance	0	0	640	772	0	0	0	0	0	0	640	772
Total	0	0	1,200	1,208	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,200	1,208

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro/ Urban (AP)	Metro/ Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	\$620,200	\$444,900	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$620,200	\$444,900
Enhance	-	-	\$208,800	\$307,800	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$208,800	\$307,800
Total	-	-	\$829,000	\$752,700	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$829,000	\$752,700

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

.08

Explain the success/shortage of acre goals

Low land prices in the TAP led to low conservation easement values, offering financially-motivated landowners little incentive to protect their lands. As a result, identifying willing participants was difficult. Conservation easements are also uncommon in this part of Minnesota, and building awareness is a long-term endeavor. The COVID pandemic further disrupted progress, stalling the program midstream despite an extension. Ultimately, one easement fell through when a landowner changed their mind, preventing us from meeting land protection goals. Remaining funds were redirected to enhancement work on the Skull Lake (Hidden Meadows Tree Farm LLC) conservation easement secured through this grant.

Outcomes

Programs in forest-prairie transition region:

Protected, restored, and enhanced aspen parklands and riparian areas ~ The success of this program resulted in our ability to protect, restore, and enhance habitats that built larger conservation estates for migratory and species of special concern in Minnesota. For each parcel or project, we developed a priority ranking criteria and developed habitat management plans to maximize the benefits for a wide range of species. We researched preferred habitat conditions and utilized an ecosystem approach to species management to select the proper management actions. We will continue to work with landowners/USFWS to adapt strategies to ensure optimal habitat conditions.

Programs in prairie region:

Increased participation of private landowners in habitat projects ~ Increased participation of private landowners in habitat projects~ We researched preferred habitat of priority species and utilized an ecosystem approach to species management to select the proper management actions, including timing. Conservation easement landowners were involved in creating a restoration vision for their high priority projects and worked directly with MLT, Audubon and USFWS staff to make that a reality. We conducted landowner outreach and will continue to work with landowners to monitor and maintain the conservation easements secured under this grant and to adapt strategies to ensure optimal habitat conditions for birds, SGCN, and landowner priority species.

Parcels

Sign-up Criteria?

[Yes - Sign up criteria is attached](#)

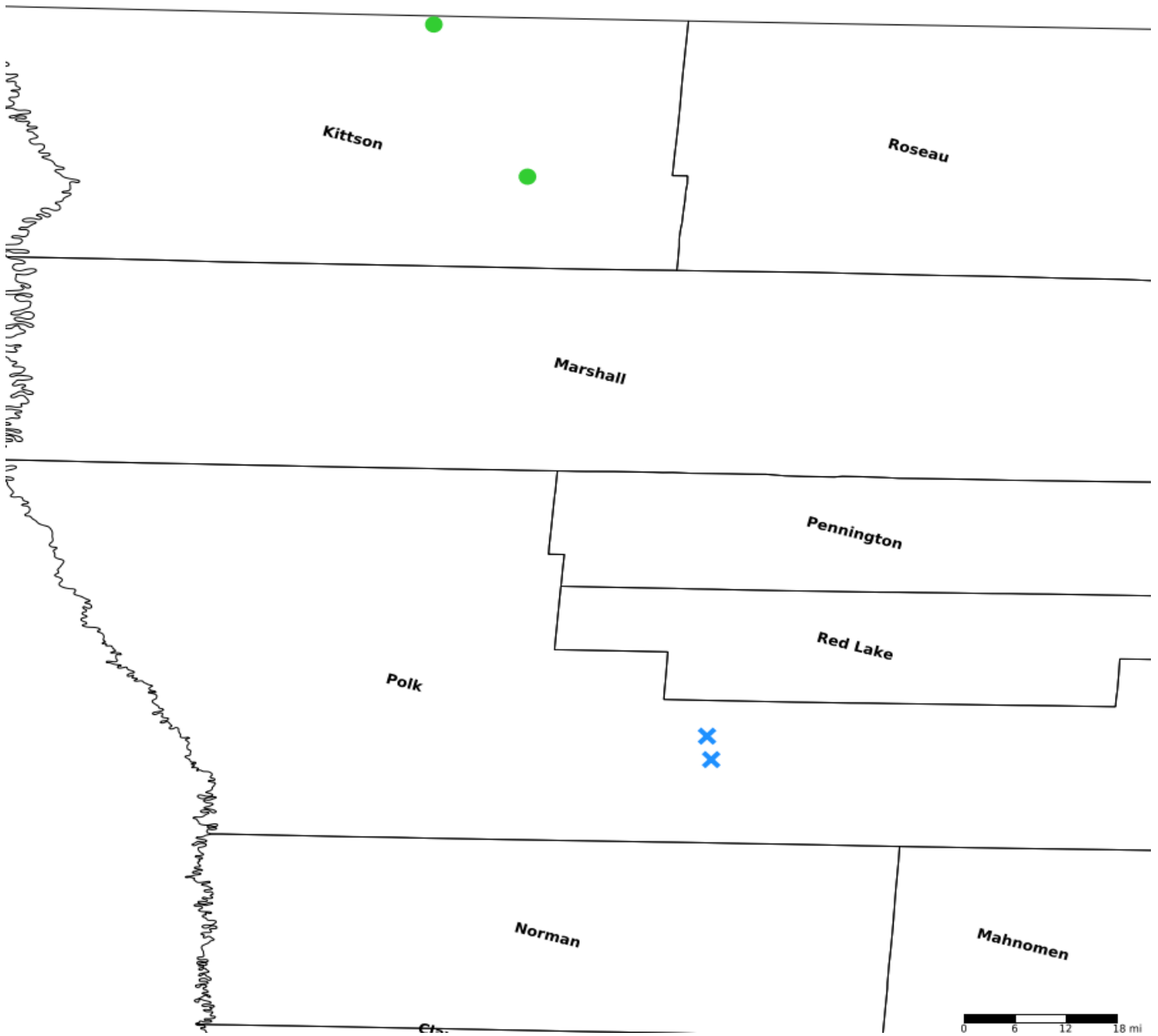
Restore / Enhance Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection	Description
GRNWR_Lee Large Tree and Brush Removal	Polk	14844208	9	\$15,257	Yes	Enhancement of 9 acres of upland prairie through large non-native tree and brush removal and prescribed fire (in kind by USFWS) on Glacial Ridge NWR's Lee Unit.
GRNWR_Wetland Enhancement Project	Polk	14944228	763	\$72,413	Yes	Enhancement of 763 acres of select wetlands in Glacial Ridge NWR (Glacial Ridge IBA and Prairie Core) to benefit ducks and other waterbirds. In-kind burn breaks and prescribed fire by USFWS.

Easement Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Norway Dunes (Johnson-Abrahamson)	Kittson	16046203	335	\$120,000	No
Skull Lake (Hidden Meadow Tree Farm, LLC)	Kittson	16447235	101	\$66,000	No

Parcel Map



- Protect in Easement
- ▲ Protect in Fee with PILT
- Protect in Fee W/O PILT
- ★ Restore
- ✕ Enhance
- ✚ Other