

The Nature  
Conservancy



Protecting nature. Preserving life.™

# THE PRAIRIE COTEAU

“This wonderful feature, which is several hundred miles in length, and varying from fifty to a hundred in width, is, perhaps, the noblest mound of its kind in the world; it gradually and gracefully rises on each side, by swell after swell, without tree, or bush or rock ... and everywhere covered with green grass ...”

George Catlin, 1844, describing the Prairie Coteau in *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians*



**NORTH DAKOTA**

**MINNESOTA**

*Sisseton-Wahpeton  
Reservation*

MARSHALL

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*Waubay Lake*

ROBERTS  
COUNTY

*Bitter Lake*

GRANT

CODINGTON

*Lake Kampeska*

Watertown

**Clear Lake**

CLARK

HAMLIN

*Lake Marsh*

*Lake Poinsett*

DEUEL

KINGSBURY

*Lake Albert*

BROOKINGS

LINCOLN

*Lake Preston Lakebed*

*Lake Whitewood*

Brookings

*Lake Benton*

Marshall

**SOUTH DAKOTA**

*Big Sioux River*

*Flandreau Reservation*

*Lake Shetek*



Leafy spurge  
© U.S. Department of  
Agriculture

LAKE

MOODY

PIPESTONE

MURRAY

COTTONWOOD

*South Heron Lake*

MINNEHAHA

ROCK

NOBLES

JACKSON



Prescribed fire in the  
Coteau © Bryan Simon



Aerial of Prairie Coteau  
© Pete Bauman/TNC



River otter  
© iStockphoto.com/  
pixonaut



Prairie Coteau rancher  
Nathan Atyeo  
© Kerri Larson



Sharp-tailed grouse  
© Jim Williams

**The Nature Conservancy in the Prairie Coteau**

- Prairie Coteau
- Major Lakes
- Tribal Lands
- The Conservancy's Prairie Coteau Office
- National Wildlife Refuge
- City
- Conservancy Preserve





## SHARED LANDSCAPE

One of the last great grasslands of the United States, the Prairie Coteau encompasses more than two million acres from southeastern North Dakota across South Dakota to southwestern Minnesota. Most of the land is privately owned ranch and farm land.

Glaciers formed the Coteau, and the resulting rolling topography has created a rich mosaic of habitats. Grasslands cover the hilltops and east-facing valleys are forested with oak, basswood and maple. Fens occur wherever mineral-laden groundwater seeps to the surface. Numerous ponds and lakes provide additional aquatic habitats. The Coteau supports abundant wildlife including game birds such as sharp-tailed grouse. They find the expanses of prairies and pastures suitable for their courtship displays and the grasslands provide the protection needed for their nests and chicks.

While many wildlife species are declining, some are thriving. River otters, for example, are making a comeback in South Dakota along secluded stretches of the Big Sioux River.

## PRODUCTIVE GRASSLAND

Much of the Coteau's rocky soils and steep slopes discouraged the plow. As a result, the area is home to some of the largest remaining blocks of northern tallgrass prairie in the continental United States. Native grasses not only provide excellent habitat for wildlife, they also make for good grazing.

Nathan Atyeo, a rancher near Clear Lake, South Dakota, uses sustainable grazing and fire to improve his land. "I want to make my grass the best I can so I can continue ranching. I want good grass, the kind that will put pounds on my cattle because pounds are dollars."

Invasive species such as leafy spurge are a big obstacle to managed grazing. This noxious weed spreads relentlessly and chokes out native plants. Cattle won't eat it — its milky sap is toxic. Biological control has proven to be highly effective in combatting spurge.

Prairie is most productive for wildlife and cattle when it is utilized and managed well. Scheduled rest and disturbances such as grazing or fire allows the prairie to rejuvenate itself.

# The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy is a nonprofit conservation organization that has worked on the Coteau for more than 50 years. We own and manage a few select wildlife preserves in the area and work to provide new and innovative tools to landowners through private lands programs like biocontrol of leafy spurge, conservation grazing and prescribed fire.

The Conservancy and its partners encourage the use of conservation easements that preserve native grasses and wildlife habitat while providing landowners additional income. Landowners continue to own, manage and make a living from their property through cattle grazing or haying.

Most of the Conservancy's funding is raised privately, and our commitment to common-sense strategies that recognize the dynamic nature of managing property for wildlife and for profit distinguishes us as an ally and an asset to Coteau landowners.



The Conservancy's Pete Bauman talks with Prairie Coteau ranchers.  
© Michael Pressman/TNC

This brochure was paid for with a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant.

Rolling hills in the Prairie Coteau © Steve Chaplin/TNC

***Landowners who want more information on prescribed fire, conservation grazing, invasive species and conservation easements can contact The Nature Conservancy:***

#### **Prairie Coteau Office**

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(605) 874-8517

#### **The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota**

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#### ***Prairie Coteau Partners***

*Bureau of Indian Affairs  
Day County Conservation District  
Deuel County Extension Service  
Ducks Unlimited  
Ecosun Prairie Farms  
Minnesota Department of  
Natural Resources  
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation  
National Park Service  
National Resources Conservation Service  
Northern Prairies Land Trust  
Pheasants Forever  
Private landowners*

*Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate  
South Dakota Department of Agriculture –  
Wildland Fire Suppression  
South Dakota Association of  
Conservation Districts  
South Dakota Department of Game,  
Fish and Parks  
South Dakota Fire Marshall's Office  
South Dakota Grassland Coalition  
South Dakota Natural Resources  
Conservation Service  
South Dakota State University  
Upper Big Sioux Watershed Project  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*