

# Prairies

News from Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota

# to Pines

2020 Update



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# Conservation News in Brief



A very curious yellow-headed blackbird  
© Richard Hamilton Smith

## New Type of Grazing May Benefit Birds

The Nature Conservancy, the University of North Dakota, Ducks Unlimited and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department are collaborating with area ranchers to study the effect of high-intensity, short-duration grazing on birds in the Prairie Pothole Region.

In recent years, some ranchers have started implementing this relatively new grazing practice that is designed to mimic the effect of bison. Cattle are moved through a small area where they graze anywhere from hours to a few days before they move onto new ground. Grazed areas are then rested for at least a year.

The practice is considered more sustainable for soil health and provides higher nutrient forage for the cattle, but its precise impact on wildlife is unknown.

“Grassland birds are experiencing steep declines, so this project allows us to compare holistic management of this type of grazing with more traditional rotational grazing to be able to truly give the larger picture of the pros and cons of such a practice,” says University of North Dakota biologist Susan Felege.

Graduate student Taylor Linder is excited by the study’s potential impact. “By understanding how cattle grazing operations move on the landscape, and understanding how breeding birds respond to them, we may be able to find creative ways to help ranchers across North Dakota integrate more bird-friendly and conservation-friendly grazing rotations that benefit ranchers, cattle and birds.”

## Baby Bobcats Monitored in the Black Hills

As part of an effort to learn more about an elusive predator, The Nature Conservancy authorized researchers to study bobcat kittens at our Whitney Preserve in South Dakota.

Biologists with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks determined this spring that a collared adult female bobcat was not only at Whitney but likely “denning”—preparing to have kittens.



Bobcat kitten at Whitney Preserve © Julie Brazell/TNC

TNC land steward Ben Pucket granted access for researchers to locate the den via radio telemetry, which they pinpointed in a gully up a steep, rocky incline.

The researchers discovered two kittens inside the den and fitted them with radio collars to monitor their survival and movements. They hope to recapture the kittens when they are one year old and fit them with adult collars at that time.

Little is known about bobcat den site selection, so researchers will compare the habitat at Whitney with other known den sites, says Erin Morrison, a West Virginia University graduate student working on the project. “This will expand our knowledge of bobcat ecology.”

## St. Paul Tree Plantings Guided by Science

More than 80 trees selected for their ability to endure climate change and benefit people were planted this summer

in St. Paul’s Payne-Phalen and Dayton’s Bluff neighborhoods.

Trees have the power to alleviate heat in cities, store carbon to help tackle climate change, improve air and water quality and reduce the risk of flooding, but it’s not always obvious where these benefits are most needed.

With support from the University of St. Thomas and Tree Trust, TNC has been developing a science-based mapping tool to identify sites within the Twin Cities metro area most in need of trees. The tool uses data such as tree canopy, heat vulnerability, air pollution, population density and area deprivation index to show high-priority areas.

TNC partnered with Tree Trust and the City of St. Paul’s Parks and Recreation on the St. Paul plantings. United Properties provided the funding as part of its UPLift community relations program.

TNC conservation specialist Marya Johnston-McIntosh looks forward to sharing the new tree-mapping tool. “Residents, municipalities and other nonprofit organizations can use it to better understand and show others how trees impact our urban environment and to show that we can be purposeful in where trees are planted to achieve certain outcomes.”



Planted in the right place, urban trees can improve our lives. © Doug Shaw/TNC



## INTERVIEW

# Building a Better World

New Minnesota-North Dakota-South Dakota Chapter Director  
Ann Mulholland Believes Nature Is Powerful and Brings Us Together



Ann Mulholland © Nancy Johnson

*The Nature Conservancy's work to protect prairies helps in the fight against climate change by storing carbon in the ground. © Richard Hamilton Smith*

### **A lot has happened since you started the job in March. Tell us about it.**

First and foremost, I have to say I'm thrilled to lead this exceptionally strong and forward-thinking chapter of The Nature Conservancy, and to be joining our incredible donors and staff in protecting nature.

I knew leading TNC's only tri-state chapter was a big job; however, I never expected to start as a global pandemic took hold and an economic downturn followed. But hey, adaptation is a core competency of ours! And while TNC was well positioned to work remotely before COVID-19, we had our fair share to adapt to.

After about two months on the job, we faced the murder of George Floyd, which shook our neighborhoods, our nation and our world. As a chapter and an organization, we recognize that we have an important role to play in building a better world and that remaining silent on systemic racism is not an option. Our vision is a world where nature and people thrive. That's challenging on its own, and it is exacerbated by the polluted waters, poisoned air, catastrophic flooding and deadly heat waves that too many people are forced to live with. We all benefit from

a healthy planet. To get there, we need everyone involved in this work.

### **How has the year impacted TNC's mission?**

Our mission has never been more important. The pandemic meant scaling back our seasonal field work to assure the health and safety of staff, and the economic downturn forced us to cut positions and decrease our budget. Yet, we're still moving forward boldly and with urgency, committed to our legacy of protecting nature while accelerating and scaling up our work to tackle climate change, which has multiple benefits. For example, the millions of trees we're planting along Lake Superior help store tons of carbon while protecting clean water and native species. And our partnerships with farmers and ranchers to improve soil health will have positive impacts on climate and water quality, as well as feeding a growing world.

Now more than ever, we're seeing how important human connections to nature are for the health and well-being of our communities. We arrived at a moment where so many of society's vulnerabilities were laid bare, showing us there's never been a more critical time to speak up for nature, climate-conscious policies,

and clean water and air for everyone—particularly those we've historically left out of the conservation movement.

### **What's the path forward?**

We must continue to be a force for nature. Following the November election, we'll be scheduling more meetings with elected officials of all parties, building on our nonpartisan, collaborative approach. We're in year one of a new strategic plan to tackle climate change, protect our lands and waters, and feed the world sustainably. And we're doing more to build an inclusive conservation movement to accomplish our ambitious mission. We've made progress by developing a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion vision statement; forming a work group to address these issues; and embarking on a staff learning journey. But we still have a long way to go.

It has been a tough year, but despite COVID-19, the troubled economy and the inequities resulting from systemic racism, I am hopeful about the future. Nature enriches our lives and brings us together. There has never been more urgency to achieve our vision of a world where people and nature thrive.

**FEATURE  
ARTICLE**

# Protecting Our Water In Every Way

Campaign Leverages Science, Land  
Protection, Partnerships and Advocacy

*In the Mississippi River's headwaters area, forests and wetlands are our first line of defense against water pollution. Minnesota's state bird, the common loon, requires cool, clear water to catch fish. © iStock*



*Intact grasslands play a huge role in capturing and filtering rainwater. © Richard Hamilton Smith*

We need water to drink and to produce our food. We also need clean water for manufacturing, agriculture and energy production. And, of course, our rivers and lakes provide habitat for fish and wildlife, beauty and inspiration—along with places to fish, swim and boat. Water is critical to our quality of life and our livelihoods.

Yet, the loss of forests, wetlands and prairie in the region is putting our water at risk. With your support of The Nature Conservancy's Our Water Campaign, we are taking bold action to protect and restore our most important lands to keep our water clean in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

## Keeping Water Clean in the Mississippi Headwaters

The Mississippi River and its headwaters area are an invaluable resource in Minnesota. The 13-million-acre expanse comprises only about one quarter of the state's geography but provides drinking water for 2.5 million Minnesotans—more than 44 percent of the state's residents. The region is also home to more than 350 species of mammals, birds and fish, including many species that are threatened, endangered, or of special concern.

TNC staff identified areas that are critical to water quality, flood storage and fish and wildlife habitat and set an ambitious goal of working with partners to protect and restore 200,000 acres in the region over the course of a decade.

Thanks to our supporters, here's what we've been able to help accomplish:

- The protection and restoration of more than 10,000 high-priority acres along the

Rum, Pine, Sauk and Crow Wing rivers as well as around lakes and wetlands in the Mississippi River's headwaters area.

- Nine partners have adopted TNC's blueprint to guide their work in the region, including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Trust for Public Land, Minnesota Land Trust and local soil and water conservation districts.
- Another partner, The Conservation Fund, announced an agreement to purchase 72,000 acres of working forests in Minnesota, including 30,000 acres in the Mississippi headwaters area.
- We've held community forums across Minnesota and signed up more than 3,500 people to write and call elected leaders, urging them to take action for clean water.

## Protecting Grass for Clean Water

Our work to protect the Mississippi laid the foundation for an effort to identify grasslands in North Dakota and South



Our rivers and lakes support a multi-billion-dollar annual tourism and recreational economy, including fishing, birding, wilderness recreation and other nature-based activities. © Shutterstock

Coldwater streams along the North Shore depend on healthy forests. © Christian Dalbec

Dakota that have the greatest impact on water quality. TNC's *Grass for Water Blueprint* is now guiding our work and the work of our partners in protecting and restoring prairies in priority conservation areas. The blueprint highlights the significance of North Dakota's Sheyenne River and South Dakota's Big Sioux River.

### Transforming Agriculture for Clean Water

Farms and ranches in the Midwest are among the world's most productive lands. However, some traditional farming practices have led to degraded soil health, putting more of our waters at risk.

Thanks to campaign supporters:

- TNC staff are working with partners and farmers to help tackle climate change by storing more carbon in the ground, as well as improving water quality, reducing flooding and providing more habitat for fish and wildlife—all while increasing crop production. All Acres for Our Water

is a new effort we helped launch in Stearns County, Minnesota (see page 6) to demonstrate this whole-system approach.

- We're engaging directly with agriculture retailers and crop advisers to help producers adopt best practices that improve water quality and farmers' bottom line.

### Protecting Forests to Protect Lake Superior

Lake Superior, the greatest freshwater lake on Earth, and its North Shore are sources of pride for Minnesotans. However, our forests are in decline due to climate change and historic overharvesting that reduced diversity and resilience. We saw an urgent need to restore our forests and planted more than 4 million trees—including white pine, white cedar, yellow birch and red oak. We will plant another 4 million over the next five years.

Of special concern are areas along rivers and streams that flow into Lake Superior.

By planting diverse and climate-resilient trees alongside our waterways, we're limiting sediment pollution and providing shade to keep our North Shore rivers and streams cool for brook trout and other coldwater species.

As part of the North Shore Forest Collaborative, TNC is working to preserve the scenic value and natural beauty along Highway 61. This highway runs along the North Shore and provides a beautiful backdrop for countless family memories. At Cascade River State Park and elsewhere, we are planting trees with climate change in mind. These tree-plantings will help this beloved part of Minnesota adapt to warmer weather and ensure that we continue to enjoy and benefit from our woods and waters.

With your help, we're doing everything we can to secure clean water. For more information, go to [nature.org/ourwater](https://www.nature.org/ourwater).



**FEATURE  
ARTICLE**

# All Acres for Our Water Aims to Transform Agriculture

Cover crops and other best management practices improve soil health and water quality. © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative

INSET: The Nature Conservancy is working with farmers, ag retailers and crop advisers to help transform agriculture. © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative

As more and more forests and grasslands have been lost to conversion, the quality of water in our lakes, rivers and streams has grown steadily worse.

Thanks to a generous donation from Greg Page, retired Cargill chairman and chief executive officer, The Nature Conservancy is now working with partners on a new effort to make agriculture work for both farmers and the environment.

All Acres for Our Water is a new pilot project in central Minnesota. TNC is helping encourage farmers and farm-related businesses to protect water quality and wildlife habitat—and ensure that they remain productive and profitable.

“We want to look at an area and figure out the best use for each acre within it as it relates to producing food, fuel and fiber for our country as well as achieving our water-quality goals,” says Leif Fixen, agricultural strategy manager for TNC in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. “We want clean water and we want a strong, healthy ag economy.”

All Acres for Our Water is focused on the Sauk River in Stearns County, east of St. Cloud. The area was chosen because of its need for improved water quality and

because it provides a great opportunity to work with farmers and ranchers.

Partners include the Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District, the Sauk River Watershed District, Minnesota Land Trust and local ag retailers.

“We wanted to challenge ourselves, but we also wanted to be successful and show how this could work,” says Fixen. “The Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District is one of the best in the state. They’re willing to think outside the box, and they have good relationships with the farmers.”

One of those farmers is Chuck Uphoff, who recently sold his 480-acre livestock business to his son and daughter-in-law. Over the years, he’s adopted no-till management of his feed-crop acreage and constructed a wetland to retain runoff, sediment and nutrients. The measures have greatly reduced soil erosion.

“I often said that over the years of doing conservation practices on the farm, I didn’t do conservation practices because they weren’t profitable,” Uphoff says. “I did conservation because they were profitable.”

All Acres for Our Water wants to make conservation the norm rather than the

exception by providing more financial incentives and technical support to make it easier for farmers to make changes that improve water quality and save them money.

These include “in-field” practices such as planting cover crops, reducing tillage, and more precisely applying fertilizer that pay water-quality dividends while building soil health. “Edge-of-field” practices include installing grassy waterways, planting field buffer strips, restoring wetlands and converting marginal cropland to hay or pasture.

The effectiveness of All Acres for Our Water will be measured yearly at two existing water-quality monitoring sites in the area.



Reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus entering the Mississippi River by 20%.

TNC aims to demonstrate how we can improve water quality and aquatic habitat by getting enough agricultural conservation practices in place to reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus entering the Mississippi River.

# Investments in the Our Water Campaign Are Paying Dividends

Many businesses and foundations recognize that securing our water is critical for our lives and livelihoods. © Richard Hamilton Smith

The Nature Conservancy is deeply grateful to the many generous individuals and families who have supported our efforts to protect and restore waters in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Several companies have also recognized just how essential clean water is to our economy, health, recreation, community well-being, and way of life.

The following companies have invested \$100,000 or more in the water protection initiatives of the Our Water Campaign. They know that clean water is a matter of corporate social responsibility and good business.

- Ecolab Foundation
- Pentair Foundation
- Cargill, Inc.
- U.S. Bank Foundation
- Xcel Energy, Inc.
- General Mills Foundation
- M.A. Mortenson Company, Inc.
- Securian Financial Foundation

There is a powerful economic argument for protecting clean water. A study by TNC, Ecolab and McKinsey & Company reveals that targeting 200,000 acres in the Mississippi River’s headwaters area for protection and restoration provides \$500 million in benefits to Minnesota. These

benefits include avoided water treatment costs and the public health benefits of clean air, along with retained property value, taxes, tourism revenue and jobs that are critical to our economy.

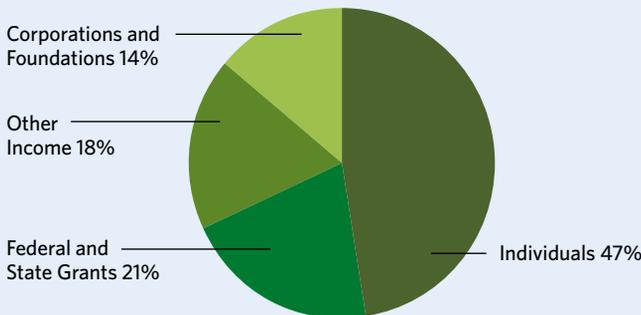
The study found that the price of inaction is much higher. If we do nothing, it will cost Minnesota up to \$2.7 billion to clean up the Mississippi and an additional \$4 billion to restore surrounding lakes.

The benefits of protecting our best rivers, lakes and streams are immense and enduring. We thank our supporters for making the Our Water Campaign a success!

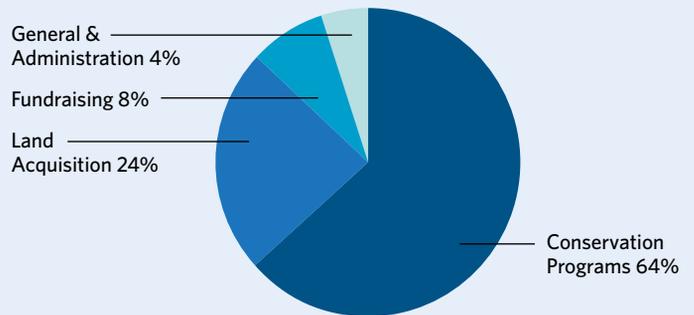
## You Make Conservation Possible

**Thank You!** Your support helped protect and restore high-priority forests, grasslands, lakes and rivers in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

**Income for Chapter**



**Chapter Programmatic Efficiency**



For details on our chapter income and expenses in Fiscal Year 2020, please call us at (612) 331-0700 or email us at [minnesota@tnc.org](mailto:minnesota@tnc.org).

Percentages will fluctuate annually due to land and easement purchase opportunities.



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*Minnesota prairie in private ownership protected by TNC. © Richard Hamilton Smith*

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