

Prairies

News from Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota | Spring 2026

to Pines

A forest with a future

At the end of 2025, The Nature Conservancy completed our largest land acquisition in Minnesota in 25 years—adding more than 12,000 acres to our [Sand Lake/Seven Beavers Preserve](#) north of Two Harbors.

On this newly protected land, moose tracks crisscross regenerating forest where TNC has planted new trees in the scar of the 2021 Greenwood Fire. Threatened songbirds like the boreal chickadee return to rare peatland forest habitat, rich with diverse flora and fauna. This year, wild rice blankets much of Stony Lake—a sign of clean water and thriving habitat.

This land sits at a critical crossroads of water, wildlife and climate resilience. It's now part of a 40,000-acre network of connected, protected lands that includes the Rainy River headwaters—which flow to the Boundary Waters—and vast carbon-rich peatlands. These forests and wetlands work every day to keep water clean, cool the

climate and provide habitat for wildlife. Sand Lake/Seven Beavers also remains open to hunters, birders, skiers and explorers looking for a quiet escape to the Northwoods.



The land is a haven for moose. © Christine Haines

Protecting land is only the first step. Ensuring that it remains healthy for generations requires long-term care. Thanks to your support, we can make sure the Sand Lake/Seven Beavers Preserve will be a resilient, connected habitat long into the future.

Our teams have already begun restoring forest areas damaged by the Greenwood Fire, planting climate-resilient trees and

using science-backed tools, like prescribed fire, to reduce future fire risk and strengthen habitat.

“We’re focused on helping the forest recover post-fire,” says Jim Manolis, director of forest strategy and stewardship. “We’re prioritizing areas that need the most help, while letting nature lead where recovery is happening on its own.”

To prepare for a changing climate, the team is planting trees that naturally grow in the region, but sourcing seeds from slightly farther south—giving future forests a better chance at withstanding a warmer, drier climate.

In 2026, we have an exciting opportunity to protect another large piece of Minnesota’s Northwoods and expand this network of protected lands. If you’re interested in supporting our Northwoods work, please contact us at **612-331-0700** or minnesota@tnc.org.

Top: Vast forests, rivers and lakes cover the new preserve addition. © Laura Slavsky/TNC

Listening to the prairie

Long-running grassland monitoring program guides conservation decisions

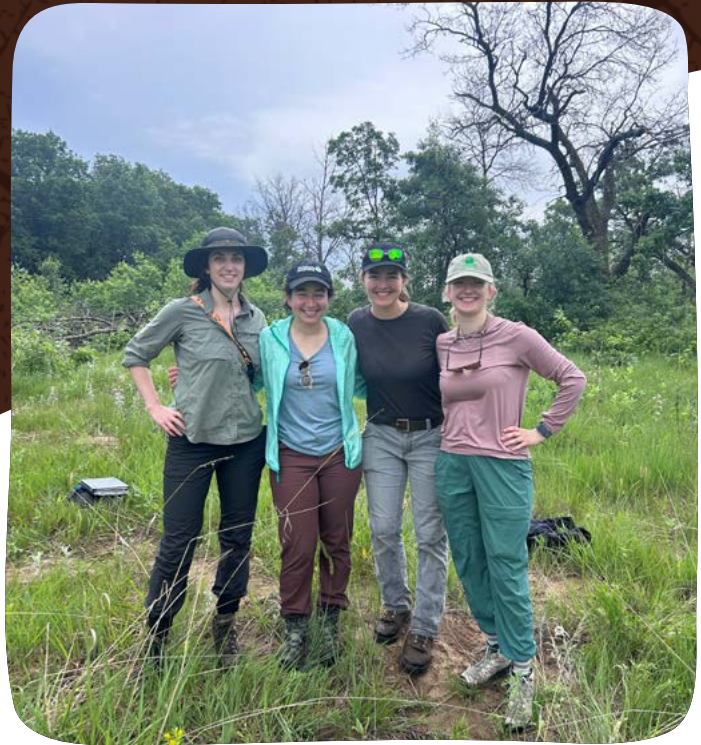
At first glance, prairies can seem quiet and unchanging—a wide sweep of grasses under an open sky. But look closer and the prairie tells a different story. Deep roots anchor the soil and store carbon. Native flowers feed pollinators, while meadowlarks and bobolinks flit through the grass. Today, with less than 4% of North America’s original prairie remaining, listening carefully to these places has never been more important.

For nearly 20 years, The Nature Conservancy, together with partners at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, has been doing just that through one of the longest-running grassland monitoring studies in the region.

Each summer, a team of grassland monitoring technicians travels across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota to collect data. For many it’s an early step in a career in conservation, but the results of their work will influence grassland health for years to come.

Over nearly two decades, technicians have completed more than 8,000 surveys across 218 sites with a range of management approaches. They gather detailed information on native and invasive plants and the balance between grasses and flowering plants. The data reveal how prairies respond to management practices—such as prescribed fire and grazing—over time.

“The power of this program is monitoring across thousands of acres and multiple decades,” says Marissa Ahlering, director of science for TNC in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. “Observing change takes time. With these data, land managers



The grassland monitoring team surveys transects at Helen Allison Savanna Preserve. © Katelyn Campbell/TNC

can see if the prairie is improving or degrading and determine if the management practices are effective.”

The work will continue, but the findings are already apparent: active management matters. Prairies managed with fire and grazing support more native species, while unmanaged sites are more likely to lose ground to invasive grasses and shrubs. TNC provides site-level maps and detailed data to landowners and partners, helping guide grassland stewardship and restoration across the region.



Sherrie and her father, Bob, on the family homestead in 1996 © Courtesy of Sherrie Beal

'Our mission is permanent'

Connecting people to lasting impact

Associate Director of Gift Planning Sherrie (Crampton) Beal knows first-hand how planned giving leaves a lasting impact on the planet.

Sherrie's path to TNC began with a desire to protect her childhood home. While serving in the Marines, her father sent his military pay home so his parents could buy land near Staples, Minnesota. With river access, acres of prairie and cousins living nearby, "every day was like summer camp" for the Crampton kids.

Those years instilled in Sherrie a deep love of nature. As her dad aged, he worried about the future of the land and its wildlife. The family began a multi-year process to protect the property. Finding a way to put an easement on the property led Sherrie to a career at TNC and ignited her passion for problem solving and planned giving.

Through her 25-year career, Sherrie has helped donors support major milestones like the protection of Glacial Ridge, the nation's largest prairie and wetland restoration project. "This work opened my eyes to so much more than my backyard," she says. "It broadened my vision of what it means to take care of the planet."

Sherrie loves collaborating with Legacy Club donors. Now, the donors she introduced to TNC early in her career are thinking about retirement. As a Legacy donor herself, she feels honored to support others as they "find joy in giving, not just toward the end of their lives, but all along."

Planned gifts are essential to TNC's funding base, providing stability amid the changing landscape of public funding. Legacy Club donors don't just make a long-term impact on our organization: they leave a lasting legacy for nature.

If you'd like to learn more about joining TNC's Legacy Club or other planned giving, call **1-833-336-7526** or email legacy@tnc.org.



Minnesota State Capitol © James Reiningger

Advocating for nature

At The Nature Conservancy, we work across borders, aisles and sectors to



advance policy solutions that benefit people and nature. Our nonpartisan approach and commitment to science help us advance tangible, lasting conservation solutions.

This year, we are continuing to advocate for strong public investments in wildlife habitat, healthy forests and sustainable working grasslands.

But we need your help. Last year, our members sent more than 2,000 letters to lawmakers across our three states. It's important for lawmakers to know what matters to their constituents when they are considering bills that affect water quality, grassland conservation, forest management and more.

Learn how you can make a difference and speak up for nature:

MN: nature.org/mnadvocacy

ND: nature.org/ndadvocacy

SD: nature.org/sdadvocacy

Letting a stream find its way again

© Ellie Scholtz/TNC

This year, The Nature Conservancy is breaking ground on a restoration project just 45 minutes from downtown Minneapolis. What might look like heavy construction at first glance is actually the start of a holistic restoration project—one that will allow Cedar Creek, and the land around it, to get back in sync with natural processes.

More than 120 years ago, this stream was straightened for agricultural purposes, which resulted in a faster, deeper channel that disconnected the creek from its floodplain—the surrounding low-lying land that absorbs and slows water during high flows.

Now, TNC is partnering with the University of Minnesota (UMN) and Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve to restore those lost curves and meanders, thanks to funding from Minnesota's Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment.

By “re-wiggling” the stream, the team will create over a mile of natural stream, adding habitat for fish and wildlife and allowing water to feed wetlands in the floodplain. The old ditch will serve as oxbow habitat for turtles and birds.


“By letting the stream behave like a stream again, we’re restoring the natural processes that support the entire system. That includes restoring partially drained peatlands—a unique type of wetland,” says Chris Lenhart, restoration ecologist with TNC and research professor at UMN.

This work is part of TNC’s efforts to restore Minnesota’s peatlands, which store immense amounts of carbon and clean water and provide habitat to rare plants and animals. Minnesota has more peatlands than any other state in the contiguous United States, yet many have been degraded, allowing stored carbon to escape into the atmosphere.

Keeping peatlands wet—or rewetting those that have been drained—is one of the most effective ways to help them store carbon. At Cedar Creek, that starts with something simple: letting water find its way again.

“Usually, peatland restoration requires plugging ditches to raise water levels, but here the restored stream will do the work itself—slowly rewetting the wetlands as it reconnects with the land,” says Lenhart. “It’s a holistic approach to restoration that will create a more resilient system.”

Throughout the project, scientists are collecting data across the site on hydrology, soil and vegetation. Because Cedar Creek is a long-term ecological research site, the team will be able to track changes for years to come.

 CBS Minnesota visited the project. Get the story: bit.ly/4tAkZLG

YES! I want to help protect clean water, healthy lands and wildlife habitat across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

- I will send my gift by mail.
- I will make a gift now at nature.org/P2P.
- I'd like to talk with someone about how I can make a deeper impact. Contact us at **612-331-0700**.

