

Changing the landscape of conservation

By: Caitlin Williamson, Director of Conservation Programs

The landscape of the Driftless Area contains some of Wisconsin's most iconic features: deeply-carved hills and coulees, Class 1 trout streams, the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway, and the Mississippi River bluffs. Many people feel a strong connection to this beautiful region, and for good reason.

The Driftless Area is an ancient landscape, one that escaped the ice during the most recent glacial period that significantly altered most of Wisconsin. The Driftless Area also represents one of the most biodiverse areas in Wisconsin, due to the diversity, size, and quality of habitats such as prairies, savannas, oak barrens, wetlands, floodplain forests, and relict conifer stands. All of these distinct and varied habitats provide a home for dozens of rare plant and wildlife species.

For years the Foundation has taken a broad and far-ranging approach to annual conservation project planning. Like the Wisconsin River, we were making an impact that was broad, but not particularly deep. We wanted to find a way to continue to make a broad impact, but also to identify some priority landscapes where we could make a deeper impact as well.

Conserving a landscape

Many of the last remnants of Wisconsin's native landscape — our prairies, savannas, old-growth forests, fens, marshes, and more — are found in State Natural Areas (SNA's). These lands, and the plants and animals found within them, are the most crucial and

vulnerable repositories of our state's biological, geological, and archaeological heritage.

SNA's make up only one percent of Wisconsin's total land area, but protect more than 90 percent of the plants and 75 percent of the animals on Wisconsin's list of endangered and threatened species.

Wisconsin has well over 600 designated State Natural Areas and while all are ecologically important to Wisconsin, some contain land that is unique and important on a continental or even global level. The Driftless Area alone is home to approximately 145 State Natural Areas.

With help from our conservation partners we are identifying critical landscapes — like the Driftless Area — that need conservation work. We then work together to outline multiple SNA's within that landscape that have the highest priority for funding. By grouping land management projects within a centralized landscape region we create efficiencies while also creating a larger cohesive project that will result in a very clear, measurable impact on an entire landscape.

"Landscape-level planning and funding allows us flexibility and helps ensure we are working on the highest priority projects," said Nate Fayram, an ecologist with WDNR. "By combining several sites into one larger project, we can make consistent progress on a larger scale."

TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Donors, like investors, are more willing to fund organizations and projects that have clear, well-developed plans. A landscape-level strategy must be created in concert with conservation partners in order to develop a realistic plan for implementation, often over several years.

Because large-scale, landscape-level projects generally cannot be completed in a single year, multi-year grants are critical to the success of this strategy. "Consistent habitat gains on several sites is more sustainable than a single project, since much of the work we do requires a long-term commitment to achieve our goals," explained Nate Fayram, WDNR ecologist. Multi-year grants provide the commitment and stability conservationists need to make a real and lasting impact on the ground.



To better understand Wisconsin's State Natural Areas and their management needs, the Foundation works closely with the WDNR to develop a priority list of State Natural Areas that are most in need of our support, and that truly represent the most ecologically-significant landscapes in Wisconsin and the world.



.....Landscape-level.....
Conservation

PROJECT SITES

- Arena Pines and Sand Barrens
- Bakken's Pond
- Battle Bluff Prairie
- Blue River Bluffs
- Cassville Bluffs
- Dewey Heights Prairie
- Ferry Bluff
- Gotham Jack Pine Barrens
- Hogback Prairie
- Limery Ridge Savanna
- Mazomanie Oak Barrens
- Ridgeway Pine Relict
- Rush Creek
- Smith Slough and Sand Prairie
- Snow Bottom
- Woodman Lake Sand Prairie and Dead Lake

Getting started in the Driftless

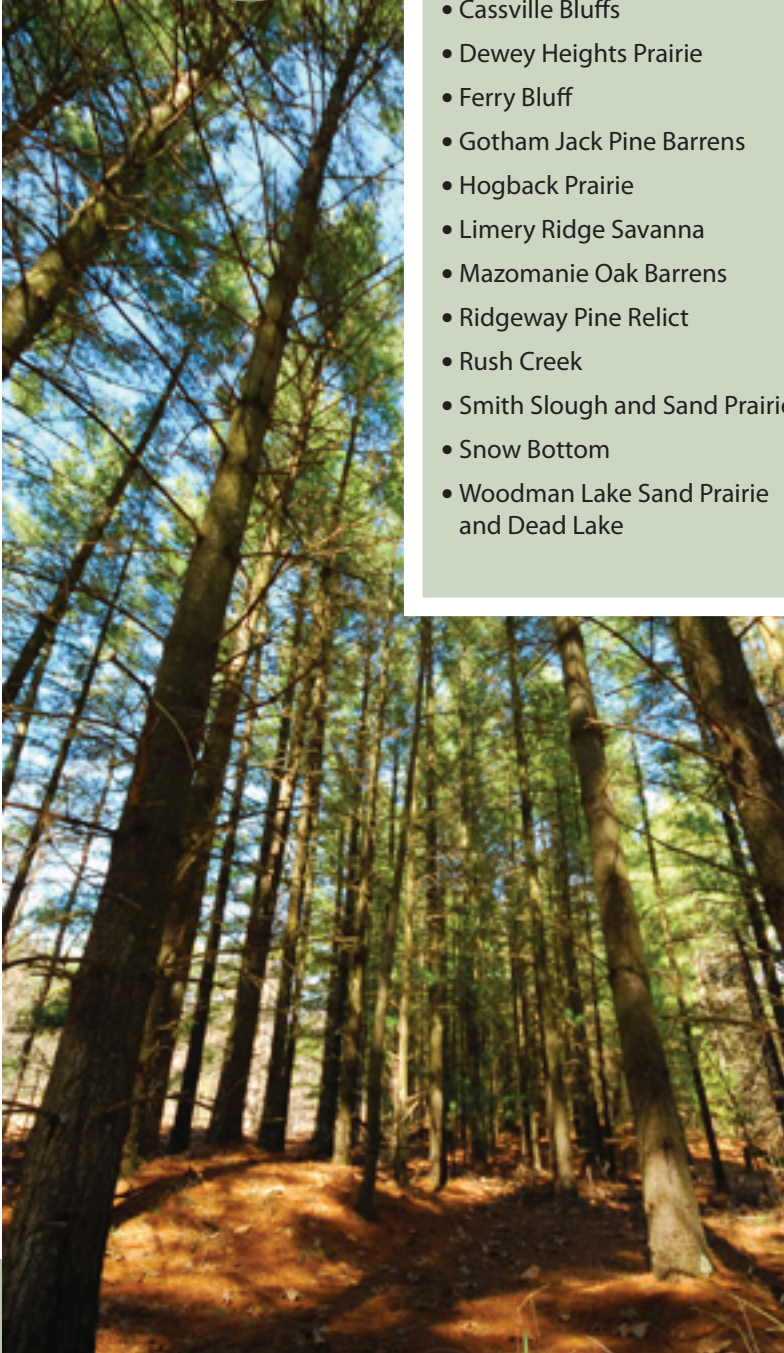
Starting in 2017, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin is partnering with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Natural Heritage Conservation Program to make a profound impact on 16 State Natural Areas in the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin.

This project is made possible through a two-year grant from the Caerus Foundation, Inc., a foundation with deep Wisconsin ties and a passion for the natural world.

This large, landscape-scale ecological restoration comprises more than 2,300 acres within the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway and the Mississippi River bluffs of southwestern Wisconsin. The work will take place on publicly-owned State Natural Area properties, but will also leverage conservation work with other programs and organizations, such as the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Landowner Incentive Program, Trout Unlimited's Driftless Area Restoration Effort, and the Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

The 16 sites that will be supported through this grant protect some of the last vestiges of Wisconsin's biological heritage, and provide critical habitat for many of the state's threatened and endangered plant and animal communities. They protect significant populations of rare, threatened and endangered plant and wildlife species and represent some of the best and last remaining natural communities of their type left in Wisconsin. A few of the rare species that will benefit from this project include the regal fritillary butterfly, whip-poor-will, red-headed woodpecker, and the blue racer snake.

The restoration work that will take place includes establishing burn units, conducting prescribed burns of prairie, woodland, and savanna habitat, removing herbaceous invasive species, clearing brush and trees, collecting and sowing native plant seeds, conducting restorative timber harvests, and prairie plantings.



To find out more about State Natural Areas and other public land conservation efforts, visit WisConservation.org/conserving-land.