

Land Trust Management Case Study

Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy: Building Songbirds from Soybeans at Sand Creek Preserve

Project Summary: Convert 55 acres of soybean fields into prairie habitat to support grassland birds. Funding was supported by enrolling the land into the USDA Conservation Reserve Program, a grant from a private foundation, and private donors. The preserve now supports local populations of state-listed grassland birds that are on a national decline. Success of the project has led to further funding support for the preserve, Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SWMLC) as an organization, and additional land protection projects.

Regional Setting: Southwest Michigan contains the confluence of northern, southern, eastern, and midwestern landscapes. The region is a dynamic mix of habitats ranging from dunes and beech maple forests along the shores of Lake Michigan to oak savannas and rare fen wetlands in the eastern edge of the region. The northern portion of the service area contains portions of northern hardwood forests and bog wetlands while the southern portion historically contained some of the largest prairies in the state.

Land Trust Mission: Work with willing landowners to protect the natural, historic, and scenic landscapes to ensure the health and quality of life for the people of southwest Michigan.

Service Area: Nine counties of southwest Michigan (Allegan, Barry, Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, Saint Joseph, Van Buren).

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Biodiversity Values

Kalamazoo County has one of the greatest diversities of state-listed species documented in Michigan. It contains a good representation of habitats found throughout the region. In particular, this area contains some of the highest quality remnants of oak savanna and prairie habitats that support numerous rare and declining species of plants and animals. Grassland bird populations have declined precipitously both locally and nationally. Habitat restoration efforts in the region have shown quick success in providing breeding habitat for rare bird species.

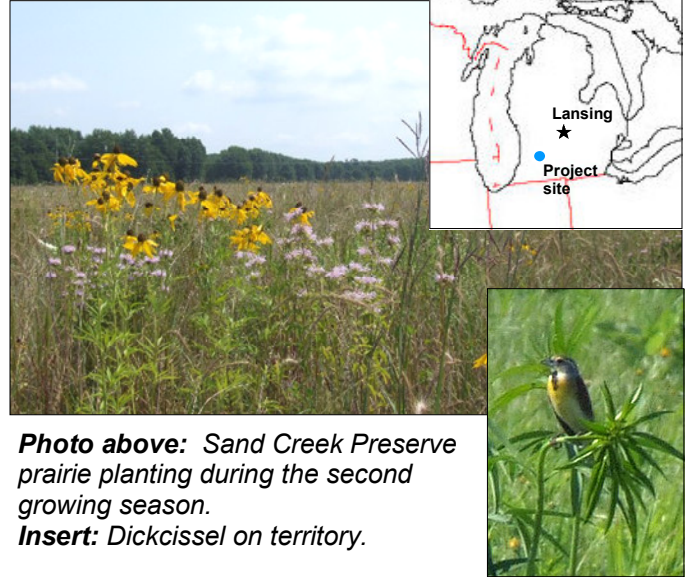


Photo above: Sand Creek Preserve prairie planting during the second growing season.

Insert: Dickcissel on territory.

Conservation Strategy

SWMLC underwent a comprehensive land conservation strategic planning to identify and prioritize conservation values for their service area. These values help direct the land protection and management activities of the organization.

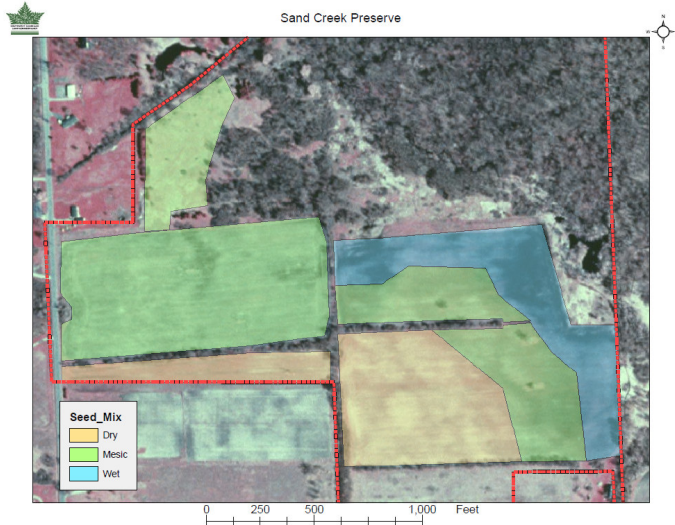
SWMLC actively works to protect intact habitats whenever possible, but due to the historic extensive land use of the region, large tracts of high quality habitats are rare. Restoration must be an essential component of conservation value protection.

Restoration activities are typically expensive and labor intensive but offer significant opportunities for outreach, education and partnership building that can provide additional benefits over time. Grants, cost share programs, and volunteer support offset many of the expenses.

Creating Habitat for Rare and Endangered Species

Owners of 116 acres along Sand Creek in Kalamazoo County approached SWMLC in 2002 about possibly donating their land as a preserve for the benefit of regional wildlife. 55 acres of their land was in active agriculture as a corn and soy bean crop rotation while the remainder of the property was largely wet forest. Their hopes were to see the farmed portion of the property converted into grassland bird habitat but the expenses and management level needed were beyond their capacity.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through the USDA was a natural fit for the property to help offset costs in establishing a rare habitat type that has all but disappeared from the region. The donors enrolled the property in CRP shortly before donating the property to SWMLC in the winter of 2003, creating the Sand Creek Preserve. SWMLC received a grant from a regional foundation to supplement the



plant diversity in the prairie planting in conjunction with including Kalamazoo College to study germination and patch development. Tree lines dividing the agricultural fields were cleared shortly thereafter to maximize breeding bird habitat. Three prairie seed blends (dry, mesic, and wet) were made up from 10 species of grasses and 75 species of wildflowers acquired through purchase and volunteer collection. The site was sown in the spring of 2004.

Grasshopper sparrows, a state special concern species, were found breeding at Sand Creek Preserve the very first year. Several national “watch-species” such as Eastern meadowlarks and dickcissels, colonized the site in the next two years, along with the state threatened Henslow’s sparrow. Additionally, state special concern Eastern box turtles began using the site for nesting and shelter.

Additional grants from the Audubon Society of Kalamazoo have supported ongoing management costs such as invasive species control, shrub management, and prescribed burning. In turn, these grants have been used as matching funds for a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant that would provide over \$500,000 to SWMLC for restoration management and habitat acquisition.

Partnerships and Funding

SWMLC works with a number of organizations to support restoration and management efforts at the Sand Creek Preserve:

Kalamazoo County Conservation District oversees the CRP agreement between SWMLC and the USDA.

Hanes Foundation provided funds to supplement the seeding costs of the project while supporting research by Kalamazoo College.

Kalamazoo College provided time and materials towards research of seed germination rates and patch development at Sand Creek Preserve and is currently studying native bee populations.

Photo:
Hatchling Eastern box turtles emerge from a nest at Sand Creek Preserve.



Western Michigan University is including Sand Creek Preserve in a study of habitat response to prescribed fire over varying ages of prairie restorations in southwest Michigan.

Audubon Society of Kalamazoo has provided multiple grants to support grassland bird habitat management on the preserve.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources Landowner Incentive Program provided professional assistance and materials cost for invasive species management.

Pottawatomie Resource Conservation and Development has pledged financial support for the restoration of additional grassland and an intermittent stream at Sand Creek Preserve.

Ducks Unlimited has pledged support for the restoration of additional grassland and an intermittent stream at Sand Creek Preserve.

Looking Ahead

Restoration activities will continue on Sand Creek Preserve. Vegetation indicative of oak savanna habitat was discovered amidst the pines of an old Christmas tree planting. The conifers were cleared and restoration management is currently underway. Pending successful grant applications, habitat restoration will extend the prairie planting over existing degraded habitat and repair historic dredging of an adjacent intermittent stream and pond.

For More Information

Conservation Reserve Program: www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/CRP/

MDNR Landowner Incentive Program: www.michigan.gov/dnr/

Photo:
A volunteer takes a break during a prescribed burn.

