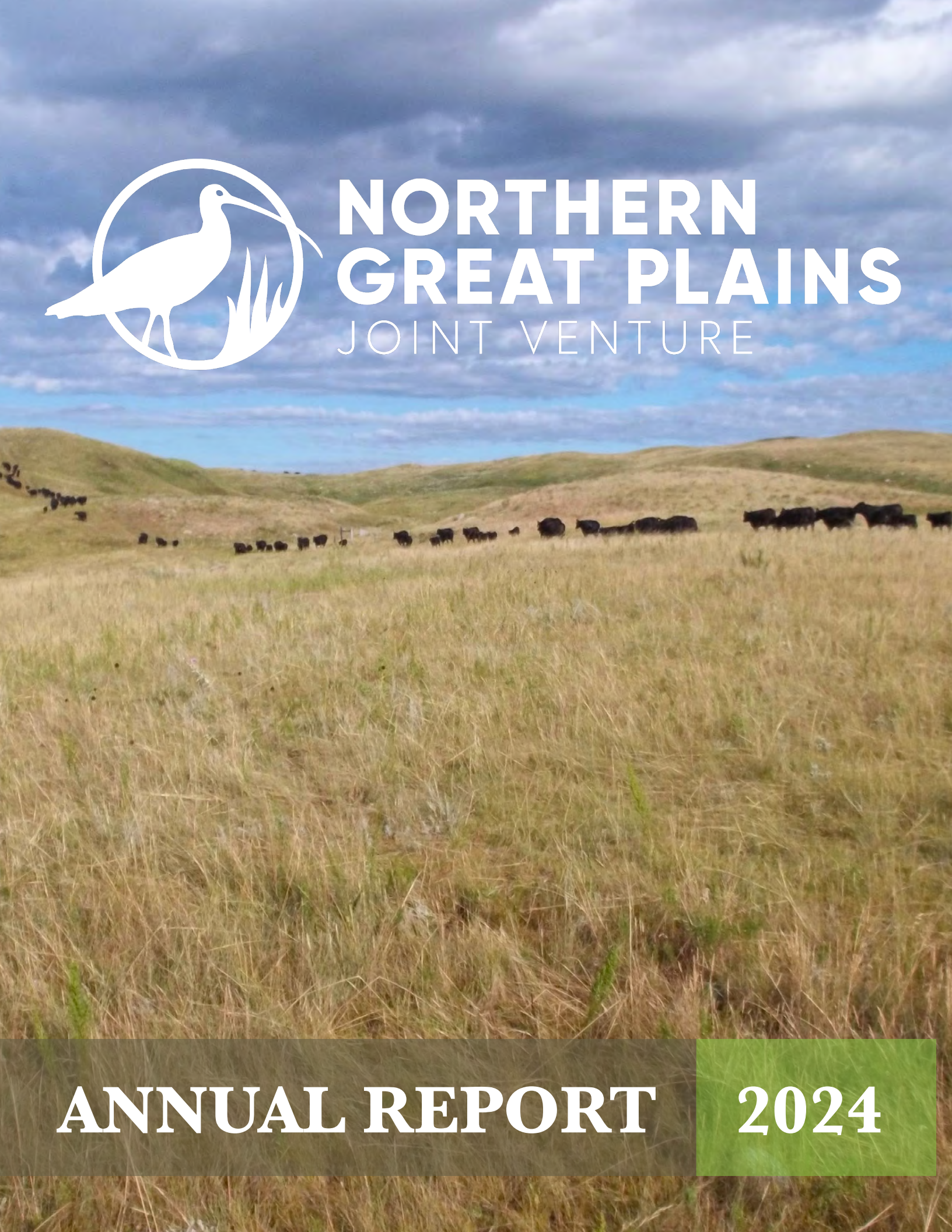

NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS JOINT VENTURE

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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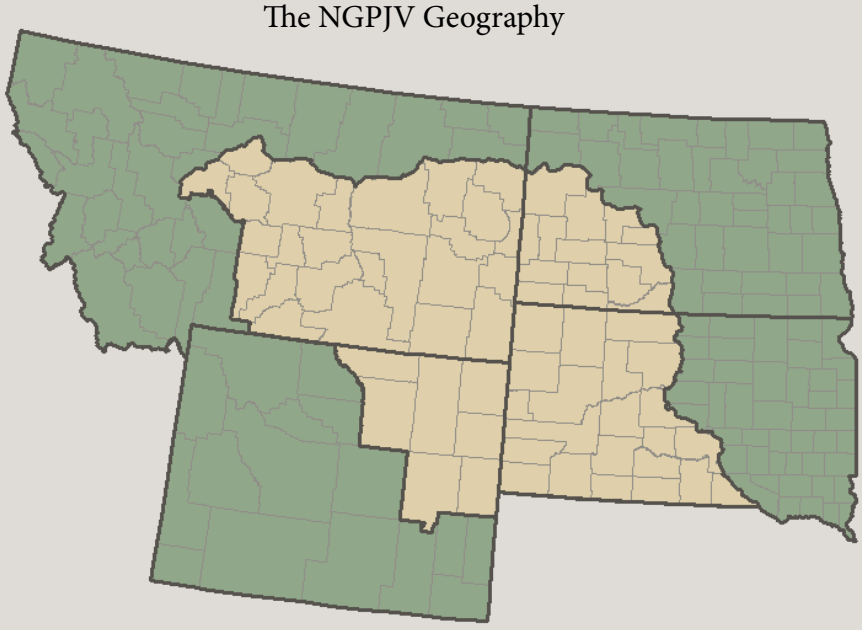
The NGPJV Geography



Recommended Citation: Wightman, C., L. Baril, K. Erdman, E. Fairbank, and T. Scherr. 2025. 2024 Annual Report of the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture. A publication of the Northern Great Plans Joint Venture.

Photo Credit: Bob Martinka (Baird's Sparrow)

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

At the NGPJV we love to celebrate our partners. And wow—2024 gave us a lot to celebrate! First up is the 1.3 million acres of grassland and wetland conservation action delivered by partners this year. This is a three-fold increase over 2023! This report summarizes this unparalleled achievement and how it benefits wildlife, agricultural producers, and rural communities. Examples of conservation stewardship actions include voluntary no-till agreements, whole ranch rangeland enhancement projects, and payments for reseeding cropland to grassland. None of this would be possible without dedicated, knowledgeable people working directly with private landowners and managers.

Across the region, partners support over 50 positions that provide direct technical assistance and leadership for local conservation action. In this report, we feature the impact of one biologist who provided partners with hands-on training in low-tech, process-based mesic restoration on private land in Johnson County, Wyoming. One month after installation, disaster struck. The 170,000+ acre House Draw Fire destroyed the restoration structures and surrounding sagebrush grasslands. The biologist convened her network and completed emergency repairs to facilitate landscape recovery, demonstrating the critical connections among people, place, and local communities.

NGPJV staff support the amazing work of our partners through communications, access to science, and networking to catalyze conservation. We led four Private Lands Biologist forums in 2024, connecting 144 attendees from more than 30 organizations. Based on feedback from those forums, the NGPJV has initiated a quarterly webinar series, bringing technical training to partners. Our science integration specialists are busy bringing research results and GIS tools to strengthen partner proposals and inform NRCS and other program delivery. The NGPJV leverages the expertise in our Technical Committee to support new, applied social and ecological science and continues to be at the forefront of effective conservation decision making. To carry the message on grasslands beyond our partnership, NGPJV Management Board members traveled to Washington DC in March to share our work with elected officials and federal agency leadership. Closer to home, we are sharing regional stories, program information, and staffing updates with our growing network through the NGPJV's website, quarterly e-newsletters, and Facebook channels.

The strength of the NGPJV is with our Management Board, a coalition of dynamic leaders from across the region. These leaders will be working with NGPJV staff to expand the reach, scope, and impact of our work in 2025. This Annual Report highlights key achievements of the NGPJV partnership in 2024. We are grateful for the ongoing and new support from our partners and excited about what we can achieve together in 2025.

Best wishes for a prosperous New Year!
Catherine Wightman, Coordinator

NGPJV

ACRONYMS

ABC	American Bird Conservancy
ACES	Agricultural Community Enhancement & Sustainability
AUM	Animal Unit Month
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
BNGA	Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance
CGR	Central Grasslands Roadmap
CPP	Conservation Partners Program
DOI	Department of Interior
DU	Ducks Unlimited
EMRA	Eastern Montana Regenerative Agriculture
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
FY*	Fiscal Year (October 1-September 30)
IWJV	Intermountain West Joint Venture
JV	Joint Venture
MFWP	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
NDGF	North Dakota Game and Fish
NFWF	National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
NGP	Northern Great Plains
NGPJV	Northern Great Plains Joint Venture
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NWTF	National Wild Turkey Federation
PF	Pheasants Forever
PFW	Partners for Fish and Wildlife
PPJV	Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
RCPP	Regional Conservation Partnership Program
RSA	Ranchers Stewardship Alliance
SGI	Sage Grouse Initiative
SDGFP	South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
SDGC	South Dakota Grassland Coalition
SDGI	South Dakota Grasslands Initiative
TIP	Targeted Implementation Plan
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
USFS	United States Forest Service
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
WWF	World Wildlife Fund
WGF	Wyoming Game and Fish

* Throughout this report, we use both calendar year and fiscal year due to the different reporting practices of the partnership.

The NGPJV Management Board is comprised of individuals representing 20 partner organizations throughout the NGP.

CONSERVATION DESIGN & DELIVERY

Science Integration

In late summer 2023, the NGPJV received funding to support a new science integration specialist position for southeastern and central Montana. This position was filled in January 2024 and works closely with the NGPJV's South Dakota science integration specialist. These positions help bridge the gap between science and on-the-ground conservation by connecting land managers to relevant research, tools, and programs. As more efforts are continually developed to highlight the significance of grassland ecosystems at scale, communicating and integrating these data at the local level is increasingly important.

In 2024 both science integration specialists provided GIS support to NGPJV partners to help inform landowner workshops, workgroup efforts, and grant proposals. Larger, regional initiatives were applied locally, including the CGR Assessment Map, WWF's Plowprint Report, and the Sagebrush Conservation Design.

In Montana, the science integration specialist assisted partners with developing proposals for NRCS-funded programs. This included providing writing assistance and aiding in the development of outcome measures for two RCPPs and multiple TIPs—Montana's targeted, proposal-driven method of distributing EQIP funds. To help streamline Migratory Bird Wetland Program funding, the science integration specialist coordinated with the IWJV, MFWP, and the Montana Natural Heritage Program to develop a prioritization method for the state's projects outside of the Prairie Pothole Region. The science integration specialist also provided coordination and leadership through the Montana Grassland Partnership as the chair of the Conifer Encroachment Team with the goal of supporting collaborative, landscape level conservation.

Science Integration Specialists can:

- Collaborate on project prioritization and development
- Connect projects to larger, regional initiatives like the CGR
- Assist with outcome reporting
- Summarize new science and facilitate usage of new tools
- Support peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and workshops

In South Dakota, in collaboration with DU and the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts, the science integration specialist began exploring the human dimensions of conservation, including the perceived outcomes of landowner participation in selected grazing-related EQIP practices. The results from this pilot study, expected in 2025, will inform recommendations to enhance EQIP and other voluntary, working lands conservation programs in South Dakota. To encourage strengthening relationships and cross-agency collaboration throughout the state, the science integration specialist continued convening partners through Private Lands Biologist Forum events (see pages 6-7).

The NGPJV team meets regularly with the science teams from other JVs to share tools and collaborate on science products. Additionally, they engage with scientists from USFWS HAPET (Habitat and Population Evaluation Team) and other partners to enhance spatial prioritization tools and products. NGPJV science integration specialist positions are funded through generous support from Montana and South Dakota NRCS.

Catalyzing Conservation Networks

Coordinating Funding Proposals

NGPJV played a crucial role in enhancing the competitiveness and effectiveness of funding proposals by actively coordinating efforts among our partners. By hosting grant coordination calls, we facilitated open communication and collaboration, ensuring that all partners were informed about upcoming funding opportunities. We took the initiative to connect partners with one another, fostering synergy and encouraging the sharing of resources and expertise. Additionally, we provided vital scientific data and information to support the development of strong proposals, empowering our partners to present well-rounded and impactful applications. This collaborative approach not only strengthened individual proposals but also contributed to a more unified and strategic effort in securing funding for critical projects. NGPJV staff helped coordinate proposals under the following programs:

- NFWF's NGP Program
- NFWF's CPP
- NRCS's RCPP

Photo Credit: Sue FitzGerald

Sponsored Workshops & Forums

To help catalyze conservation, the NGPJV sponsored five events and hosted two state-specific Private Lands Biologist forums. In April, the NGPJV held a forum in Lewistown, Montana, with nearly 60 representatives from 18 organizations. In October, the NGPJV hosted the second South Dakota forum as three regional meetings held across the state, engaging 86 participants from 23 organizations. At participants' request, NGPJV will continue hosting these in-person meetings at least once every other year.

These forums provide meaningful relationship-building experiences for both new and seasoned professionals. These events have also helped NGPJV staff identify more ways to support those working to conserve grasslands in the NGP, such as the new webinar series for regional biologists and field staff (see pages 24-25 for more details).

These forums were made possible with staff support from WWF, TNC, PPJV, DU, SDGI, SDGFP, and a NFWF grant awarded to the NGPJV.

Private Lands Biologist Forums

4
FORUMS

144
ATTENDEES

31
ORGANIZATIONS

Participants engaged in:

- Project planning activities that encouraged them to consider real-world landowner scenarios, learn about the various conservation programs, and identify collaboration opportunities.
- Discussions around what agencies and partners can do to better support individuals and a state-based conservation network.
- Landowner panels featuring producers who talked about the challenges of ranching and their experiences working with private lands biologists.

"Thank you for hosting this! As a relatively new technical assistance provider this forum was very helpful!"

NGPJV-Supported Events & Workshops

Our mission is to retain, enhance, restore, and protect grassland, sagebrush-steppe, wetland, and riparian ecosystems, with an emphasis on sustaining increasing populations of migratory and resident birds while supporting working lands and communities that sustain these habitats. To further this goal, the NGPJV sponsored five workshops and events that align with our mission. For example, in January 2024 we supported a succession-planning workshop attended by 40 landowners and partners organized by the South Dakota Perkins County Conservation District. Succession planning is essential to maintaining a culture of ranching that is both profitable and sustainable in the NGP.

Other sponsored events include the South Dakota Grasslands Summit organized by SDGI in March 2024. The Summit brought together 200 partners, individuals, landowners, and land managers to focus on the future of grasslands and the sustainability of rural communities that depend on them. We also supported a workshop hosted by EMRA, which was attended by 120 participants, most of whom were producers. The workshop focused on showcasing how regenerative agriculture benefits the land for both current and future generations of ranchers. Supporting locally-led efforts like these benefits rural communities, the grasslands that are the economic engines of these communities, and the wildlife that depend on healthy, intact grasslands.

Perkins County Conservation District Succession Planning Workshop

Winnett ACES Team Building Workshop

Harding County Conservation District Conservation Tour

SDGI South Dakota Grasslands Summit

EMRA's Summer Regenerative Ag Workshop

Building Capacity

Connecting land stewards with conservation programs takes dedicated, knowledgeable staff. Agencies and organizations throughout the NGP are investing in people to support conservation action and to work locally with individual landowners and decision makers. The NGPJV partnership helps expand capacity for conservation by cost-sharing on key staff positions in priority areas. In FY2024, the NGPJV supported the following positions:

- Winnett ACES Conservation Programs Manager
- Northeastern Wyoming Coordinating Wildlife Biologist with PF
- SDGI Director with the SDGC
- South Dakota Private Lands Biologist with ABC

In North Dakota, the NGPJV is providing matching contributions for the Meadowlark Initiative, which is delivering on-the-ground grasslands conservation in the state through a NRCS RCPP grant and significant investment from NDGF. The NGPJV also provided matching funds for a North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition grant to enhance capacity and communications for grasslands.

Figure 1 represents field capacity supported by conservation partners overlaid with the CGR's Assessment Map. Staff are stationed throughout the geography, with greater capacity concentrated near population centers and in areas with active landowner-led coalitions like the Winnett ACES.

These landowner-led partnerships have cultivated locally-focused staff to support their region's producers. By living and working in these communities, local staff are better able to build and maintain relationships with producers, account for

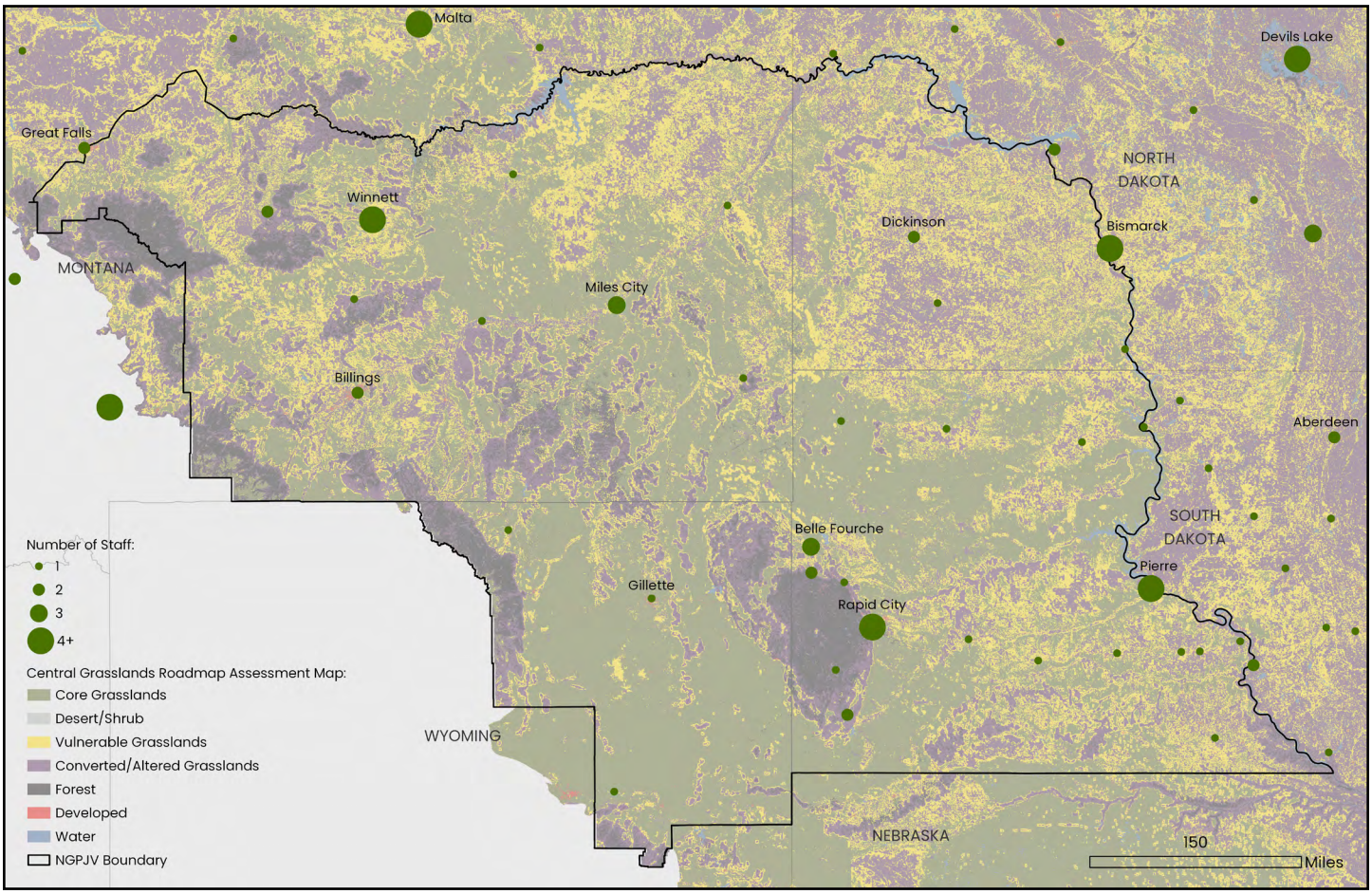


Figure 1. Map of the conservation capacity footprint in the NGP as of 2024. Partners represented include ABC, Audubon, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, BNGA, DU, MFWP, NWTF, NDGF, NGPJV, PF, RSA, SDGFP, SDGC, SDGI, SGI, TNC, USFWS PFW, Winnett ACES, WGF, and WWF.

on-the-ground complexities, and remove barriers that often delay or prevent effective conservation. One example of how local staff are contributing to on-the-ground conservation comes to us from northeastern Wyoming.

Case Study: Mesic Restoration in Northeastern Wyoming

The NGPJV supports a coordinating wildlife biologist position based out of northeastern Wyoming and hosted by PF. The biologist, in cooperation with Tomichi Creek Ecosystems Services, coordinated a free, low-tech mesic restoration workshop in September 2023. The 31 workshop participants gained hands-on experience restoring a seven-acre area along a one-mile stretch of mesic meadow habitat at Falxa Land Company Inc. in Johnson County, Wyoming. In addition to providing training in low-tech mesic restoration, the goals of the project were to increase soil water infiltration, herbaceous plant cover, invertebrate diversity, and forage for wildlife and livestock, and to decrease shrub encroachment.

The Falxa Land Company is located within the WGF Buffalo Sage Grouse Core Management Area and was designated an Important Bird Area by Audubon Rockies in 2018. While mesic meadows represent a small portion of the landscape, they are disproportionately important to birds, other wildlife, and livestock. Much of the area's big game, birds, pollinators, bats, and amphibians depend on these microhabitats for all or part of their life cycle.

From July 2023 through July 2024, a combination of volunteers and contracted laborers built 42 structures, including wicker weirs, erosion-control structures known as Zeedyks, and one-rock dams using local and natural materials. In August 2024, the lightening-caused House Draw Fire burned 174,547 acres of prairie and ranchland in northeastern Wyoming, including the restoration site. In November 2024, volunteers (supported by the coordinating wildlife biologist) repaired all 13 of the fire-damaged wicker weirs and added three one-rock dams.

This work brought together diverse organizations and people around a shared goal—to restore and enhance mesic habitat for the benefit of wildlife, livestock, and people. The skills participants learned can be shared with their colleagues and applied to other areas. The swift action following the damage caused by the House Draw Fire is a good example of the value provided by local staff who are better positioned to respond to these types of on-the-ground complexities.

The restoration project was funded in partnership with NGPJV, PF, USFWS PFW, Clear Creek Conservation District, Sheridan Community Land Trust, JL & Sons Logging, and Home Depot.

Volunteers during the September 2023 low-tech mesic restoration workshop at Falxa Land Company in Wyoming. Photo Credit: DJ Dean.

Before the House Draw Fire (left) and after the House Draw Fire but prior to repair (right). Photo Credits: Linette Sutphin.

4 Types of Conservation Action

Persistence/Retention is the process of keeping working intact grasslands agriculturally functional through means other than direct habitat management or protection through lease or easement acquisition. This includes working directly with operators through technical assistance programs or ranch estate planning to ensure agricultural operations remain economically successful.

Practices in 2024 included technical assistance in exchange for a 10-year no-conversion agreement and annual payments to retain grass for 10+ years.

Restoration is the process of reestablishing land cover and vegetation to a desired condition or seral stage on lands that have been intentionally converted to uses other than its natural state. This also includes conservation actions on lands that have been altered by natural disasters (e.g., wildfire, flood, hurricane).

Practices in 2024 included reseeding cropland to predominately native grasses and forbs, and mesic restoration.

Enhancement is the process of managing lands that have been degraded or damaged with the objective of returning land cover and vegetation to a desired condition or seral stage. This also includes maintaining/managing working lands habitat to keep it in its current state through grass-based agricultural practices.

Practices in 2024 included building livestock water infrastructure and fencing to support sustainable grazing management, eastern redcedar and Rocky Mountain juniper control, and annual invasive species control.

Protection is the process of reserving real property through the voluntary, incentive-based encumbrance of specific private land property rights (e.g., residential development, wetland drainage, grassland tillage) for the preservation of natural resources and/or specific ecological values. Protected lands occur across the ownership spectrum (e.g., federal, state provincial, private, corporate).

Practices in 2024 included conservation easements and fee title acquisition.

1.3 Million Reasons to Celebrate!

Tracking Conservation Action

Wow, what a year! We are thrilled to share that in 2024 partners across the NGP successfully implemented conservation action on more than 1.3 million acres of grassland and wetland habitat—a three-fold increase over the previous year!

This enormous achievement benefits wildlife, agricultural producers, and rural communities and could not have been accomplished without collaboration, dedicated biologists and habitat managers, and most of all, the Indigenous communities, private land owners, and producers who have stewarded NGP's grasslands for generations.

Since 2016, the partnership has implemented conservation action on a total of 2.75 million acres (Figure 2). The majority of conservation actions were enhancement projects (75%) while most of the remaining acres (23%) were retention projects (Figure 3).

This success has been years in the making as large-scale projects have been completed, the utilization of new and expanding funding sources (e.g., NFWF NGP, Inflation Reduction Act, and RCPP funds), and the growth of community-led efforts like the Winnett ACES.

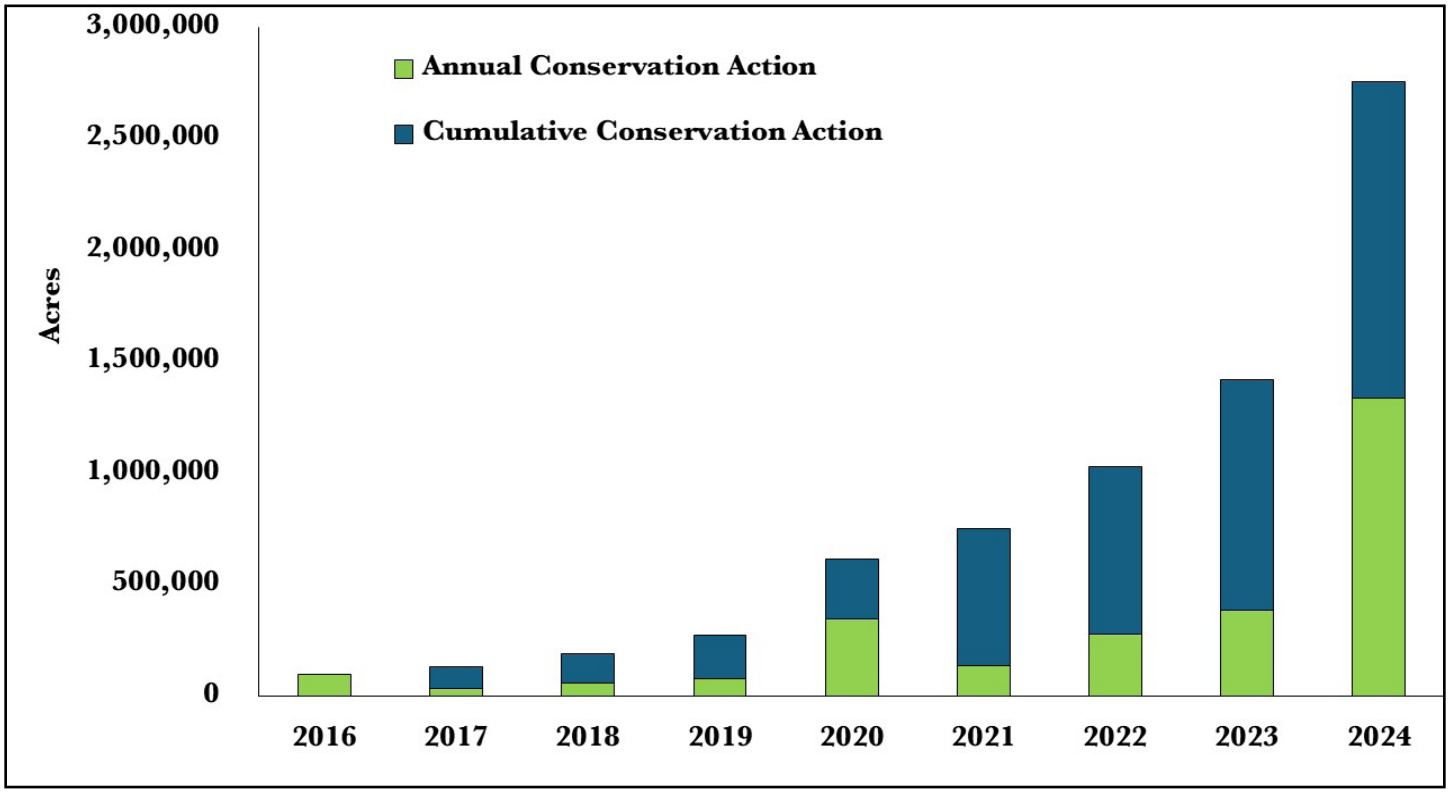


Figure 2. Annual and cumulative number of acres that have been retained, enhanced, restored, or protected (i.e., conservation actions) as reported by the JV partnership from 2016 through FY2024.

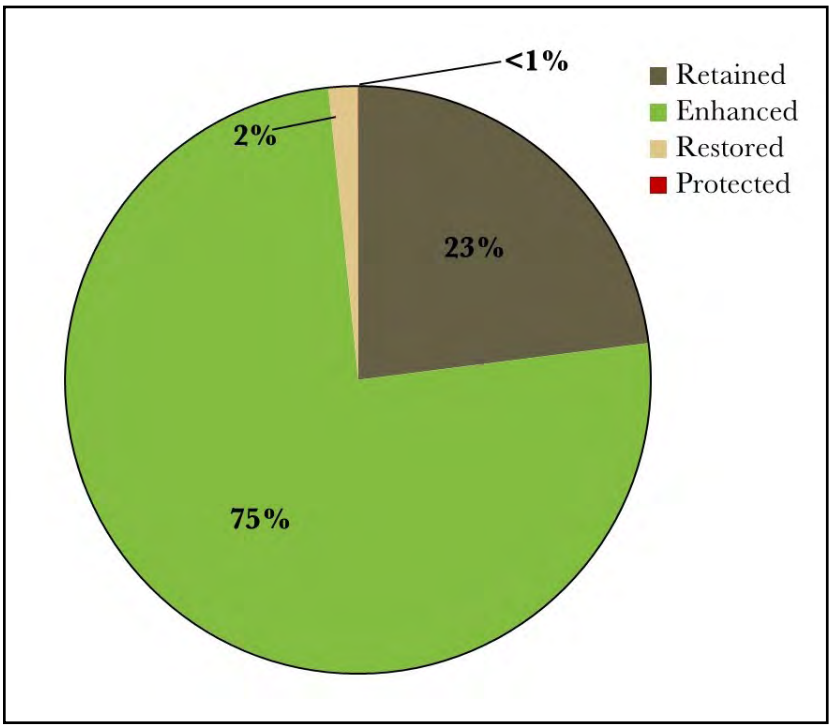


Figure 3. Percentage of acres retained, enhanced, restored, or protected by the JV partnership in 2024 (i.e., wetlands and uplands).

Exceeding Our Goals

Our habitat objective for the NGP, as outlined in our 2022 Bird Conservation Objectives, is to deliver 0.9 to 2.4 million acres of grassland retention, enhancement, restoration, and protection to support population objectives for the five most imperiled grassland bird species by 2026. The partnership has surpassed the upper ten-year objective (2.4 million acres) by more than 344,000 acres and achieved this two years ahead of schedule!

What This Means for People, Grassland Birds, and Land Health

Establishing direct links between conservation initiatives and specific outcomes can be challenging, time-consuming, and costly. Despite these difficulties, it is critical to achieving our vision for grasslands across the NGP. While the number of acres retained, enhanced, restored, and protected serves as one measure of conservation success, it is far from the sole indicator of effectiveness. The influence of these conserved acres on local economies, biodiversity, and ecosystem functionality also constitutes a vital metric of success. We developed five metrics, all derived from acres conserved, that fall into one of these three categories: economics, biodiversity, and ecosystem functionality.

We use three metrics to estimate the economic value of conservation actions in 2024: pasture rental rates, AUMs, and pounds of forage (Figure 4). An AUM represents the amount of forage required for a 1,000-pound cow with a calf to graze for one month. The conservation of more than 1.3 million acres in 2024 is equivalent to 3.8 million pounds of forage, which can support over 360,000 AUMs on working lands in the region. Over a nine-year period, the rangelands conserved by our partners have an economic value exceeding $45.6 million, as measured by pasture rental rates, with approximately half of this value accrued in 2024.

These conserved acres provide habitat for an estimated 914,000+ individuals of the five most imperiled grassland bird species: Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Thick-billed Longspur, and Lark Bunting. Many other grassland-dependent birds and wildlife also benefit from these conservation efforts, including economically significant species such as deer, elk, pronghorn, and upland game birds, which contribute to local economies by visiting and local hunters.

Finally, we assessed the potential of these conserved acres to capture carbon dioxide. Carbon capture involves the sequestration and storage of atmospheric carbon dioxide in geological formations, soils, aboveground vegetation, and in aquatic ecosystems. Native grasslands are effective carbon sinks because the majority of their carbon is stored underground in their extensive root systems. Native grasslands are therefore often more resilient to disturbances like fire and drought.

Based on the number of conserved acres reported by the partnership in 2024, we estimate a carbon capture potential of 18 million metric tons (MT CO_2). This figure is equivalent to the fuel used to drive 4.2 million gasoline-powered passenger vehicles for one year according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator.

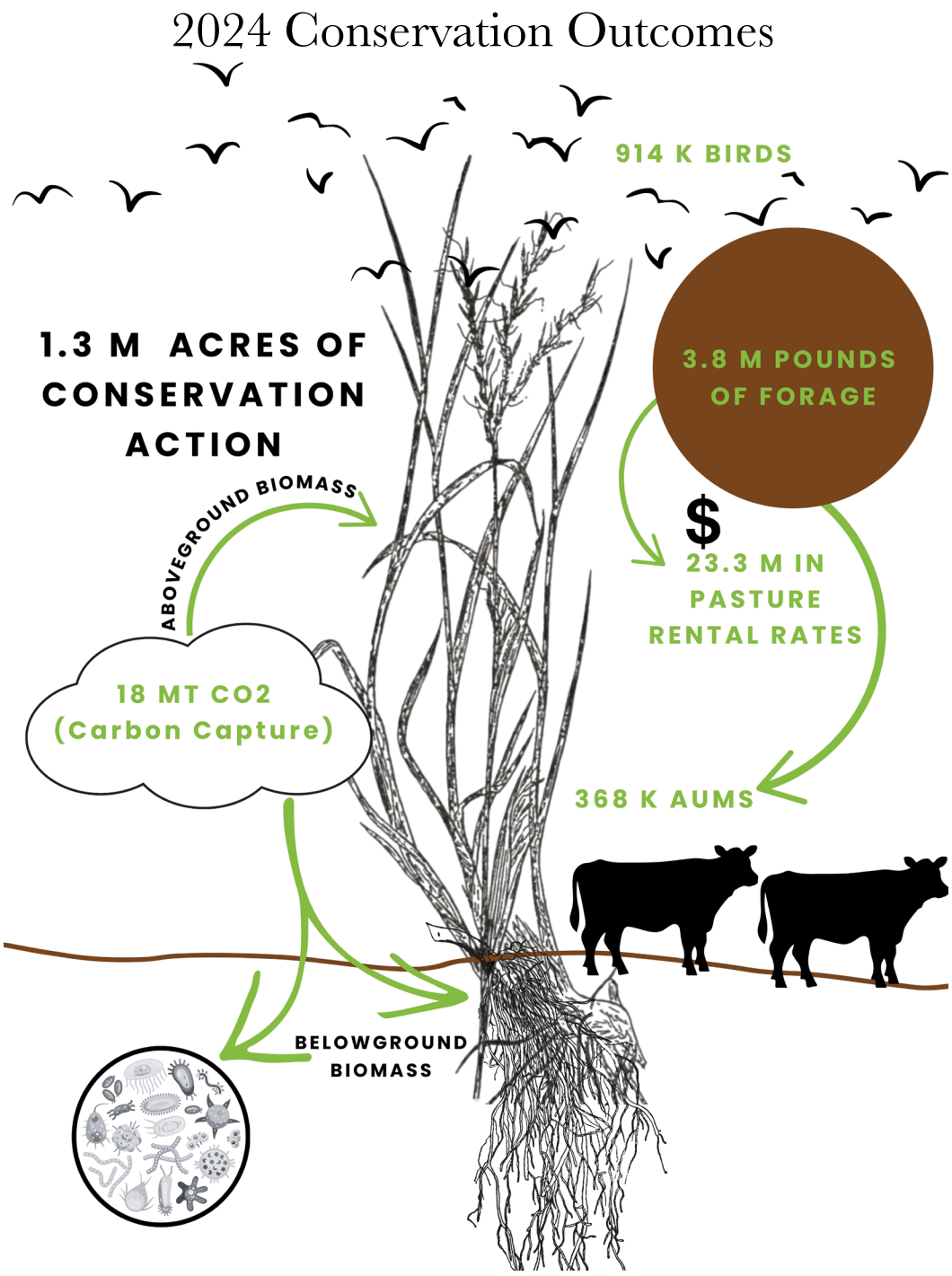


Figure 4. Estimated conservation outcomes for 2024.

Cautionary Optimism

While celebrating wins like these is important, it is equally as important to acknowledge that our work is far from over. According to WWF's Plowprint report, the NGP is still losing grasslands at an alarming rate. The report states that in the NGP "480,000 acres—an area 2x the size of New York City—were converted in 2022." While the authors note that this figure is lower than the 10-year average of ~ 630,000 acres per year, this loss is unsustainable if we are to maintain grasslands and the birds and other wildlife that depend on them. The way forward is to leverage the power of the partnership to amplify the scale and scope of on-the-ground conservation.

What is N-GRIP?

The NGPJV's Northern Grassland Restoration Incentive Program, or N-GRIP, is designed to complement the various programs offered by our partners. N-GRIP consolidates funding sources into a streamlined program that works across jurisdictions with the goal of restoring, enhancing, and retaining grasslands in the NGP.

N-GRIP focuses on assisting landowners with the management of intact grassland and wetland habitat as well as restoring—and then managing—habitats that have been converted to other uses. Projects are typically located in priority areas for one or more declining grassland bird species.

Common conservation practices include reseeding cropland to native grasslands, developing infrastructure to help transition cropland or idle ground to grazed pasture, applying grazing management practices that help enhance productivity and diversity of working rangelands, and restoration of mesic areas.

State of N-GRIP

Since its inception in 2019, 30 producers have enrolled more than 61,000 acres in N-GRIP (Figure 5). An additional 25,000 acres are obligated for future conservation action. While the vast majority of work has been implemented in grassland habitat, N-GRIP has also facilitated small-scale restoration projects on 82 acres of mesic habitat. Conservation projects have largely enhanced existing grasslands (96%) as opposed to restoring grasslands.

N-GRIP actions in FY24 included native grass re-seeding on marginal croplands, building livestock water infrastructure and fencing to support sustainable grazing management, and low-tech process-based mesic restoration. Many N-GRIP projects were accomplished in collaboration with one or more conservation partners.

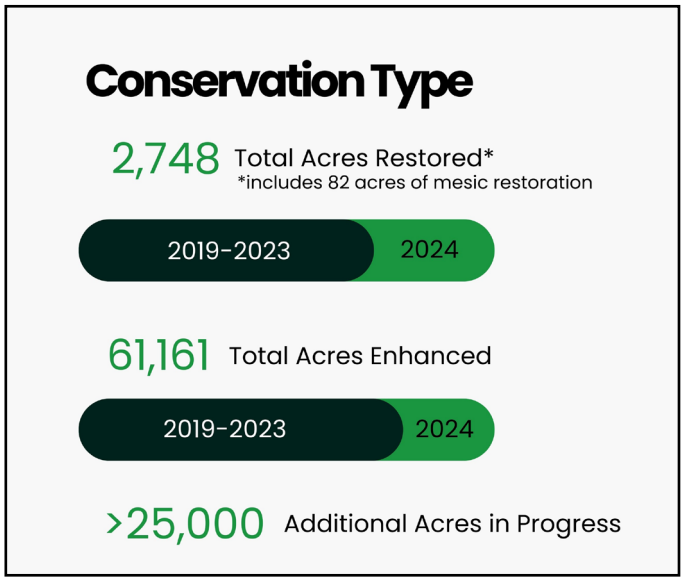


Figure 5. Number of total acres enrolled in N-GRIP. Bars represent percentage of total acres restored (top) or enhanced (bottom) since N-GRIP's inception in 2019 through 2024.

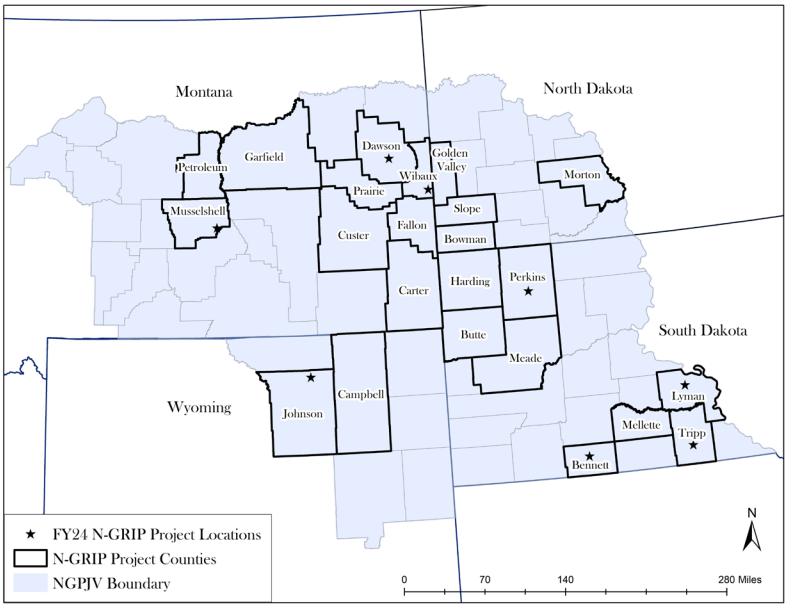


Figure 6. Map of N-GRIP projects by county from 2019 to date.

SCIENCE, RESEARCH & MONITORING

Introducing a Powerful New Tool for Bird Conservation and Habitat Management

by Christopher Kilner, Ecologist & Data Scientist, formerly with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

The Great Plains Population & Trend Simulator is an innovative, web-based tool developed to support ecological data analysis, specifically focused on bird species population modeling and habitat management. The tool was designed with the aim of providing conservation professionals with an accessible, user-friendly platform to model and predict bird species abundance and population trends across the Great Plains, a critical region for many at-risk grassland species. The tool allows users to forecast bird population changes in response to different land-use practices and environmental factors, making it a valuable resource for guiding evidence-based conservation planning.

Who Is the Tool For?

The Great Plains Population & Trend Simulator is designed for a diverse group of end-users, including conservation planners, ecologists, land managers, and other stakeholders involved in habitat management within the Great Plains. It is particularly beneficial for professionals working with grassland bird species, such as those from Bird Conservancy of the Rockies and various NFWF partners. By integrating data-driven predictions and spatial analyses, the tool empowers users to make more informed decisions about conservation strategies, habitat restoration, and land-use planning.

What Can the Tool Deliver?

At its core, the Great Plains Population & Trend Simulator enables users to model and visualize bird species abundance trends over time, based on a variety of ecological and land management factors. The application generates both tabular and spatial (raster) outputs, allowing users to examine species-specific trends, estimate bird population abundance, and visualize how these populations change in response to different environmental conditions. One of the standout features of the tool is its ability to run multiple scenarios—users can customize inputs such as road density, land use, and environmental parameters to see how different management actions might affect bird species.

Photo Credit: Bob Martinka (Western Meadowlark)

The application provides users with credible intervals around population estimates, ensuring that conservation actions are based on robust, scientifically-sound data. Additionally, the tool allows for the comparison of multiple scenarios side-by-side, providing a clear and actionable framework for evaluating how changes in land management could impact species of interest. The outputs are fully

downloadable, including maps, graphs, and data, making it easy for users to integrate these results into broader conservation plans or reports.

How Can This Tool Be Applied to Conservation?

The Great Plains Population & Trend Simulator serves as an important resource for conservation planning in the NGP by providing data-driven insights into how different land management actions can influence bird populations. Conservationists can use the tool to help prioritize areas for habitat restoration or management, focusing efforts on regions that will provide the greatest benefit to bird populations. For instance, land managers can use the tool to explore how habitat improvements, such as grassland restoration or changes in road density, might enhance populations of species like Sprague's Pipit, Thick-billed Longspur, and other priority grassland birds.

This tool not only supports better conservation outcomes but also allows users to explore future scenarios through 2050, making it possible to anticipate the impacts of large-scale land-use changes on bird populations. As such, it offers a strategic advantage in planning long-term conservation initiatives that can adapt to evolving environmental conditions.

With its combination of ecological modeling, scenario comparison, and user-friendly interface, the Great Plains Population & Trend Simulator represents a significant addition to the toolset available for bird conservation planning. It is universally accessible via any modern web browser, making it a readily available resource for professionals across the region.

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies and their partners remain committed to updating and refining the tool, ensuring that it continues to meet the evolving needs of the conservation community. Users can expect major updates and new versions of the tool in the coming months, with additional functionality including the ability to download the tool to your own computer and the inclusion of dynamic case studies. The Great Plains Population & Trend Simulator exemplifies how cutting-edge technology can be applied to solve real-world conservation challenges, helping ensure the long-term survival of grassland bird species across the Great Plains. (Note: The tool is currently in beta testing and will be made publicly available once it is fully operational.)

Science in Progress

The NGPJV collaborates with our partners to address science and monitoring needs throughout the region. Here, we highlight three projects currently in progress.

Monitoring Grassland Bird Response to Native and Non-native Restoration in Eastern Montana

Grassland loss in the NGP threatens both declining songbirds and the ranching community. More than 51 million acres of grasslands have been converted to cropland, with ongoing losses. Approximately 77% of this ecoregion is privately owned, making partnerships with landowners critical for conservation.

Restoring unsuitable farmland to native grassland is crucial but often costly. Revegetation efforts are hindered by high seed costs and income loss for ranchers during establishment. Cost-share programs vary widely and may not provide sufficient support. With many programs not offering enough financial support to combat the rising costs of native seed and loss of income for multiple years while the seed mix establishes, more information is needed on the effectiveness of different reseeding practices and time since treatment impacts on vegetation and grassland bird response. The NGPJV partnered with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies to address the following questions:

1. Which methods yield the best results for native and non-native grassland establishment?

2. How does vegetation and bird response change over time following restoration?

This information will help landowners and conservationists make more informed decisions and improve the success of grassland restoration efforts.

Progress Report: Last summer, staff with the Intermountain Bird Observatory at Boise State University surveyed birds at 157 point count stations. They recorded 1,756 individuals of 50 species. Observatory staff proofed the data for accuracy and are now analyzing the entire Integrated Monitoring in Bird Conservation Regions dataset. Staff expect to have information on density, occupancy, and population estimates by spring of 2025. These results will be made available on the Rocky Mountain Avian Data Center website once finalized.

Bird Response to Wet Meadow Restoration

Passive restoration of wet meadows and mesic areas within managed rangelands is gaining popularity with land managers because it is an inexpensive and effective way to retain water on the landscape. The benefits of this project include decreased soil erosion, improved water quality and quantity, and establishment of wet meadow vegetation. It is hypothesized that these ecosystem benefits will also translate into improved habitat for grassland songbirds. This work is designed to quantify songbird density and abundance in areas of wet meadow restoration activities in comparison with reference sites and baseline songbird monitoring data. Results will inform range management to improve conditions for priority bird species and help to communicate the value of wet meadow restoration to a diverse audience. This project is in collaboration with TNC (SD), WWF, MFWP, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, and NGPJV.

Informing Multi-scale Strategic Habitat Conservation for Priority Grassland Birds in the Northern Great Plains

This study seeks to address information gaps on the distribution and breeding activity of grassland birds, focusing on Chestnut-collared and Thick-billed Longspurs, in a grassland landscape dominated by native prairie and altered grassland (defined as native prairie interseeded with alfalfa and/or other introduced species) pastures. While the species co-exist, Thick-billed and Chestnut-collared Longspurs differ in their breeding habitat preferences. The Thick-billed Longspur is unique among grassland passerines as it prefers sparse vegetation or bare cover. Conversely, Chestnut-collared Longspurs prefer taller and denser vegetation than Thick-billed Longspurs.

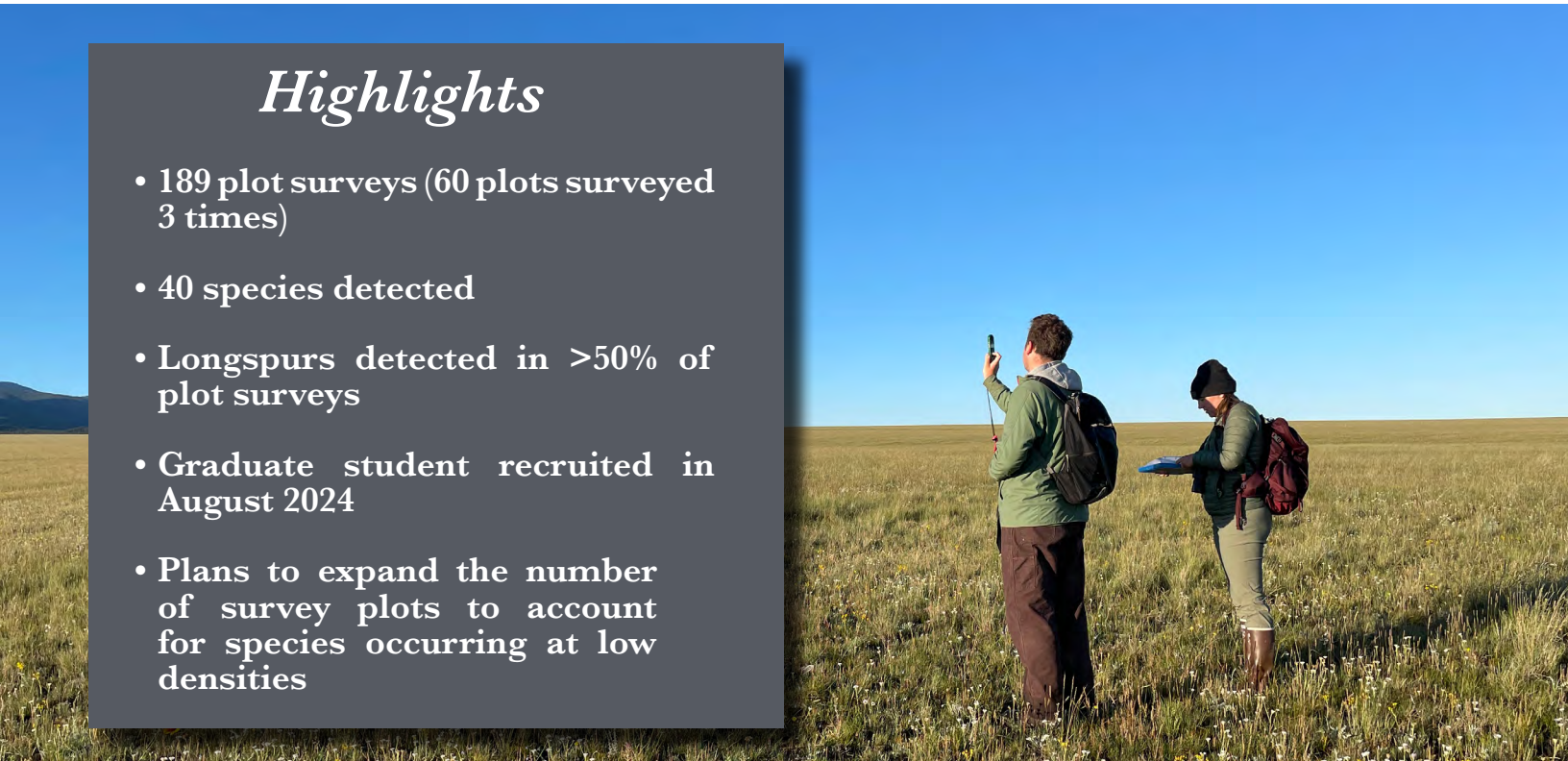
This study has two main objectives. The first objective is to identify the demographic factors limiting the two longspur populations (e.g., adult density, nest density, nest success) in both native and altered grasslands. The second objective is to explore how interactions among the suite of grassland songbirds and landscape characteristics (i.e., native prairie, altered grasslands, % plowed cropland, and wetlands) influence the songbird community at multiple spatial scales. This project is a collaboration between the USFWS, NGPJV, and the University of Montana.

Thick-billed Longspur (Photo Credit: Bob Martinka).

Chestnut-collared Longspur (Photo Credit: Bob Martinka).

Highlights

- **189 plot surveys (60 plots surveyed 3 times)**
- **40 species detected**
- **Longspurs detected in >50% of plot surveys**
- **Graduate student recruited in August 2024**
- **Plans to expand the number of survey plots to account for species occurring at low densities**



CONSERVATION POLICY

Grassland Conservation at the Capital

by Alison Holloran, Vice President and Executive Director, Audubon Rockies

Planning and executing a "fly-in" visit to Washington DC can be intimidating! The logistical aspects of such an event can become complicated by legislator's schedules, partners' schedules, and even the weather, but speaking with our collective representatives is an opportunity we should all seize. The primary purpose of a fly-in trip to the nation's capital is to meet with legislators and policymakers about issues that are important at the local level. Every year, hundreds of organizations, both for-profit and non-profit, meet with their congressional representatives, White House officials, and federal departments and agencies to discuss and advocate for the issues that matter to them.

Over the winter months, the NGPJV Management Board discussed the value and opportunity that a trip to Washington would offer, with Board members advocating for continued support and funding for the NGPJV among the top priorities. In coordination with other JVs and scheduled partner meetings, Catherine Wightman (NGPJV Coordinator), Tammy VerCauteren (Executive Director, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies), and I began planning the March 2024 adventure to the capital, and our goals associated with our time in Washington. The goals for the trip were straightforward:

1. Advocate for continued support for the NGPJV by articulating our work in the region, and second, relay the critical partnerships the JV is part of (i.e., JV8 Conservation Initiative, CGR, NRCS outreach, private landowner groups and coalitions).

2. Provide recommendations and articulate regional support for Farm Bill policies that benefit producers in the NGP who are stewarding the grasslands.

3. Connect with partners to further collaborate both in DC and at home.

4. Support partners and policy that forward the NGPJV mission and goals.

To accomplish our goals, we met with regional legislators Senator Thune's (R-South Dakota) and Senator Tester's (D-Montana) staff to reinforce the role the NGPJV plays in the region and express support for critical Farm Bill programs that benefit

producers. As a Board member, I requested that funding be continued. In addition to meeting with members of Congress, we also met with agency leaders within the DOI, as well as specific partner agencies such as USFWS and NRCS. During those meetings we discussed our work, the many partnerships the NGPJV supports, and how we can be better partners in the NGP. In addition, we attended several joint/group JV-wide meetings, some with staff from the DOI to better understand how we can improve our collective conservation efforts. Finally, during the early morning and evening hours the JV and partner communities came together in more social atmosphere to trade stories, build relationships, and enjoy one another's company.

By the end of our two days spent in the capital, we all left feeling slightly exhausted from many meetings but also invigorated by the positive reception and feedback we received. The partnerships and level of work being accomplished not only by the NGPJV but by many other JVs, private landowners, and other organizations, are impressive. Our trip helped elevate the visibility of our work—coordination of the on the ground efforts, research, and partner-building. Old partnerships were strengthened and new opportunities emerged, leading to productive conversations, ensuring that not only is the work of the NGPJV appreciated, but also demonstrating how it fits into the larger picture of conserving our native grasslands. Although it seems like just yesterday that we were standing on the steps of the Capitol, consideration of another migration back to Washington has already begun.

HUMAN DIMENSIONS

Unpacking The Human Dimensions Of North America's Central Grasslands

by Callie Berman[1], Drew Bennett[1], and Jeremy Pittman[2]
A publication of the Whitney MacMillan Private Lands Stewardship Program [1]Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources, University of Wyoming, [2]School of Planning, University of Waterloo

Grasslands historically dominated much of North America yet today are one of the most threatened ecosystems on the planet. Despite an established natural sciences knowledge base regarding the importance of grasslands for supporting high levels of biodiversity and maintaining key ecological functions, research also shows that human activities continue to degrade grasslands at an accelerating rate. Although human actions drive many threats to the grasslands, social sciences for investigating the human dimensions of conservation pathways for the biome have received considerably less attention than the ecological and natural sciences. Therefore, sustainable use of the grasslands requires systems of management which attempt to reconcile social, ecological, and economic dimensions.

This study examined the social dynamics underlying grassland conservation efforts to identify enhanced conservation approaches in North America's Central Grasslands. We solicited expert perspectives from 29 diverse stakeholders representing the eight sectors identified by the CGR (Table 1). Through a series of online workshops and a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats analyses, we mapped stakeholder connections and identified barriers to desired grassland outcomes.

Through this research, we uncovered four key themes. First, siloed organizational structures often lead to cross-purpose policies and decision-making, hindering effective conservation efforts. Second, relationship-building proves crucial for successful conservation, particularly when engaging with Tribal nations and diverse landowner types. Third, conservation strategies must connect with non-livestock producers and non-traditional landowners to ensure comprehensive approaches. Finally, conservation efforts must account for the varied local complexities across the grasslands.

While collaborative processes are increasing, significant challenges remain in developing and funding long-term relationship-building capacity. Stakeholder participants emphasized the importance of moving beyond project-based targets to understand diverse perspectives and interests.

Table 1. Stakeholder representation for the workshop from each of the eight CGR stakeholder sectors.

STAKEHOLDER SECTOR	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Industry Partners	3
State & Provincial Agencies	2
Federal Agencies	4
Foundations & Funders	3
Landowners & Agriculture Producers	2
Tribes & Tribal Members	4
Academia & Researchers	4
NGOs & Conservation Organizations	7

4 Key Themes

SILOED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES & THE NEED FOR INTEGRATED APPROACHES

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

CONNECTING WITH NON-LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS AND DIVERSE LANDOWNERS

ACCOUNTING FOR ON-THE-GROUND COMPLEXITIES

They highlighted the need for more integrated approaches that bridge siloed agency structures and foster cross-sector collaboration. Participants identified the CGR as a valuable platform for stakeholder connection and a starting point for discussing conservation ideas, though they raised concerns about funding and local implementation.

The study underscored the importance of meaningful Tribal engagement and the need to expand conservation efforts beyond traditional livestock producers to include diverse landowner types. Stakeholders also stressed the necessity of flexible, locally-adapted conservation strategies that account for on-the-ground complexities.

The challenge in devising conservation approaches appropriate for local realities, in large part, is due to a lack of frameworks and metrics which can direct funding appropriately to diverse on-the-ground dynamics. Looking forward, we identify two key areas for future study: developing frameworks to assess co-benefits between rural community health and grassland ecological integrity, and examining household-level decision-making factors in land-use changes.

This research highlights the critical role of social science in addressing the complexities of grassland conservation. By engaging with the diverse human interactions across the landscape, social science can contribute to frameworks and metrics which quantify the value and conservation benefits derived from social relationships and relationship-building. By understanding and leveraging social dynamics, conservation practitioners can design more inclusive, effective, and resilient efforts in the face of complex social-ecological challenges. The findings provide a foundation for conservation professionals to develop strategies that align with the diverse needs and perspectives of grassland stakeholders.

Support for this research was provided by the Knobloch Family Foundation and the NGPJV. Want to learn more? Read the full report here!

COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH & EDUCATION

Communications Channels

Our website, quarterly e-newsletter, and Facebook page continue to serve as NGPJV's primary communications tools. With the addition of a full-time communications specialist in February, we have added a webinar series, producer profiles, and additional capacity for supporting the communications efforts of the partnership.

Nearly 400 people subscribe to our quarterly e-newsletter. Our target audience is comprised of field staff and managers at conservation organizations and public agencies who work with private landowners. Since its inception in spring of 2022, subscribership has remained relatively steady but increased slightly throughout 2024 (Figure 7).

On average, 47% of recipients opened the e-newsletter from 2022 through 2024. In 2024, 41% of recipients opened the e-newsletter. Click rate (i.e., the percentage of recipients who clicked at least one link in the e-newsletter) averaged 17% since 2022 and 13% in 2024. Although open rates vary by industry, a "good" open rate ranges between 15% and 25% while a "good" click rate ranges between 1% and 5%. These metrics show that those who receive our newsletter are engaging with content well above the industry average. As an additional means of engagement, we post a curated subset of newsletter stories to our website.

391
NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS

347
FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS

Lastly, our Facebook page provides a means of sharing relevant information more immediately than our e-newsletter. In addition to job postings, we also feature partner stories and events that may interest our audience. One of our goals for 2025 is to develop a strategic social media plan that complements our other communications channels.

Webinar Series

During the Private Lands Biologist forums (see pages 6-7), participants expressed the need for additional learning opportunities. To address this demand we began a quarterly webinar series guided by the interests of conservation field staff working across the NGP.

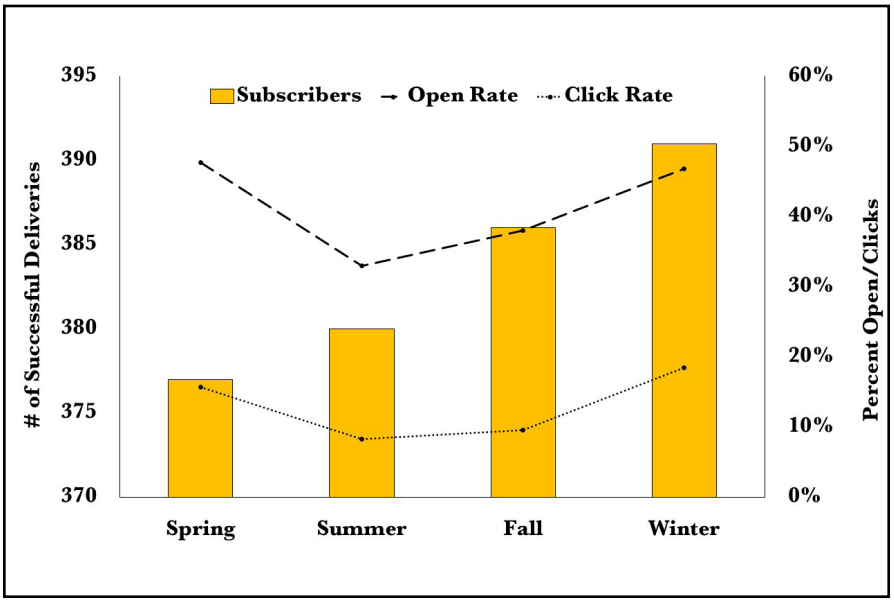


Figure 7. Newsletter engagement metrics for 2024.

Audience-driven topics include, among others:

- Habitat Management Basics
- New Regional Science and Tools
- Social Science Themes

The webinar series kicked off in July with Grazing 101. More than 80 people attended and 40 people watched the video on YouTube. Our second webinar—Soil Health—was also successful with 40 people attending the event. We plan to continue this series while improving the format based on surveys and other feedback from participants.

Partner-led Stories

- Prairie to Plate Philosophy Drives Bird-Friendly Management at North Dakota's Paul Ranch by Anthony Hauck, Communications Manager, Audubon Conservation Ranching.
- Dakota Grasslands—Where Good Things Grow by the Where Good Things Grow team.
- Using Fire to Manage Grasslands by Gigi Otten and Christina Stone, USFWS.
- Range Improvements Benefit Livestock and Wildlife Near Gillette, Wyoming by Christina Schmidt, Education and Information Specialist, WGF, and Todd Caltrider, WGF Habitat Extension Biologist.
- Unpacking the Human Dimensions of North America's Central Grasslands by Callie Berman (UW), Drew Bennett (UW), and Jeremy Pittman (University of Waterloo).

Photo Credit: Anthony Hauck

NGPJV-led Stories

- The Mahlstedt Ranch Inc.: Building Resilience Through Diversity by Lisa Baril, Communications Specialist.
- NGPJV Hosts Private Lands Biologist Forum in Lewistown, Montana by Erin Fairbank, Conservation Programs Coordinator.
- Science Integration: Bridging the Gap Between Science and On-the-Ground Conservation by Tayler Scherr, Science Integration Specialist.

The NGPJV is always looking for ways to support and elevate our partners' communications efforts. If you have a collaboration opportunity or story you'd like to share, please get in touch!

Photo Credit: USFWS

MANAGEMENT BOARD MEMBER REFLECTION

The Power of Partnerships

by Kyle Tackett, Assistant State Conservationist-Partnerships, MT-NRCS

My career with NRCS in Montana started in 2007 as the District Conservationist in the Dillon Field Office in Beaverhead County. In that position I was lucky to have the opportunity to work with some of the best partners and landowners in conserving Arctic grayling and restoring the habitat on which they depend. Through that experience, I learned firsthand the power of partnerships, how to utilize science to direct conservation investments, and the importance of communicating outcomes to diverse audiences. Fast-forward to today, and those very same ingredients for success are why the NGPJV is such an important partner for the NRCS.

Since 2019, NRCS in Montana has been delivering the EQIP in a focused, partner-centric approach called Montana Focused Conservation (MFC). This approach relies on identifying priorities at the local level, using science to inform the development of TIPs, and communicating the conservation and social outcomes. Through two financial agreements with the NGPJV, Montana NRCS has been able to invest in building staff capacity at the JV that benefits NRCS employees and the grasslands resource.

Increased NGPJV staff capacity, supported by NRCS, focuses on the transfer of technical information to the field and connects local field staff and producer groups with the development of new social, economic, and ecological science. This transfer of knowledge is key to bridging the gap between science and implementation. As an agency, we are excited to help the NGPJV grow their services for the benefit of the partnership as a whole.

We are also enthusiastic about working with the NGPJV on amplifying conservation communications. I am a member of the Communications Committee, and believe strongly in the significant role communications play in conservation. Communications are a fundamental conduit for connecting the public to the link between agriculture and wildlife.

Montana NRCS is hopeful about the future of conservation in the NGP and proud to partner with the NGPJV to support resilient grasslands, working lands, and strong communities.

The NGPJV Management Board is comprised of individuals representing 20 partner organizations throughout the NGP.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

A Year of Progress and Promising Pathways for Conservation

The year 2024 witnessed significant strides in advancing conservation efforts across the NGP. Notably, our partners achieved a remarkable feat by securing over $100 million through the NRCS RCPP program, a testament to their dedication and impactful work.

The NGPJV itself received a substantial boost, securing over $1 million in new and amended grant funding. These funds will be instrumental in expanding our science integration capacity, fostering collaboration through workshops and forums, and enhancing science coordination and communication efforts.

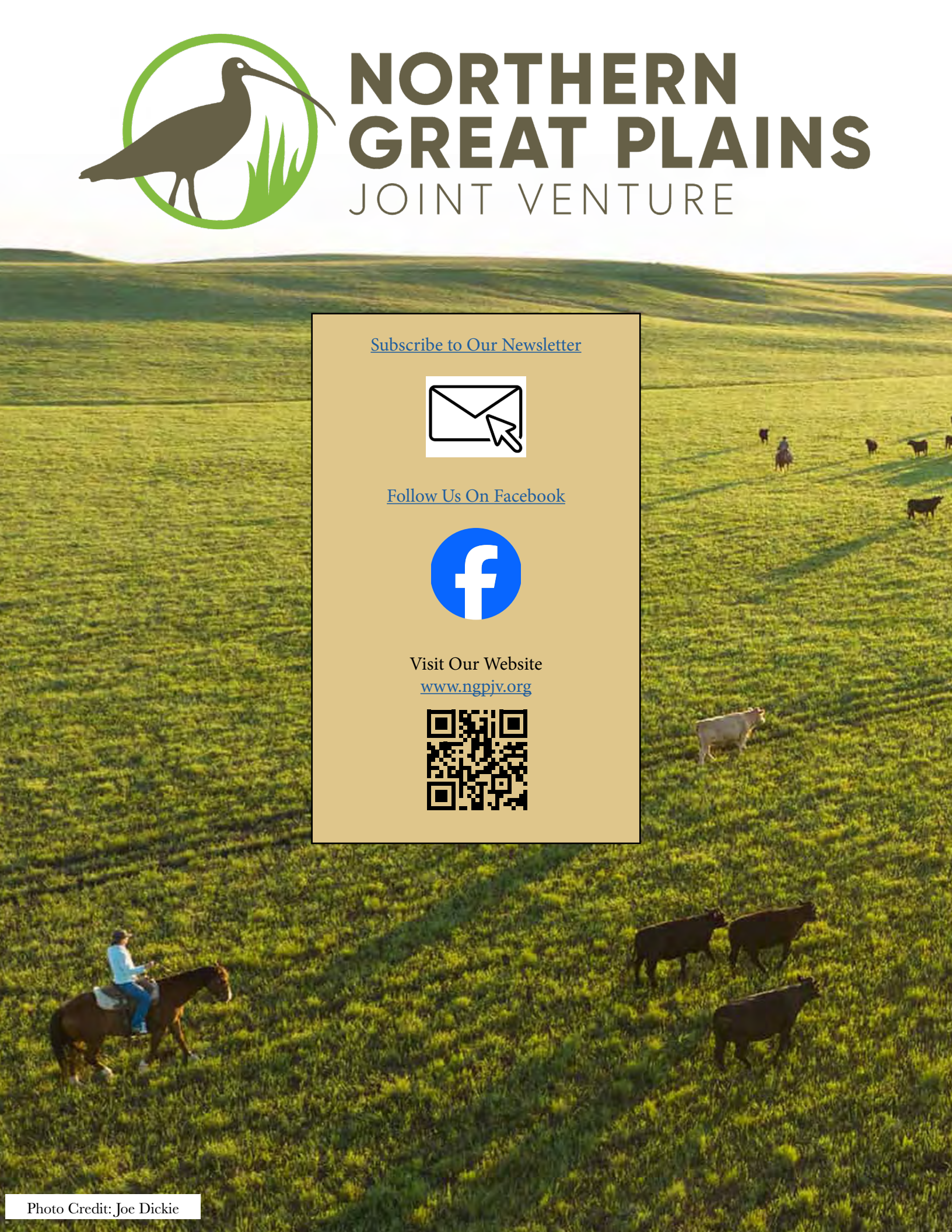
As we embark on 2025, the Management Board and staff will focus on several key priorities:

- Diversifying Perspectives: We will actively seek out and incorporate diverse voices into NGPJV Management Board discussions to ensure a more inclusive and informed decision-making process.
- Addressing Conservation Bottlenecks: A strategic capacity gap analysis will be conducted in Montana, including a facilitated partner workshop, to identify and address critical obstacles to successful conservation program delivery.
- Championing Grassland Retention: We will develop a unified and impactful message advocating for grassland retention and engage key influencers to amplify this message effectively.
- Guiding Policy Decisions: We will closely monitor changes in federal funding and agricultural policy and proactively provide science-based insights to decision-makers to inform the implementation of new or revised policies.
- Fostering Collaboration: We will host a state-wide private lands biologist forum in South Dakota and other states as requested by partners, facilitating knowledge exchange and collaborative efforts.
- Prioritizing Conservation Targets: We will refine the JV8 Business Plan metrics by translating them into specific, measurable, and achievable conservation targets (acres, actions, locations) within the NGP. This will enhance the strategic implementation of our work and better inform allocation of new and existing resources.
- Catalyzing Conservation Action: We will continue to bring science to local conservation decisions and connect partners at the regional and local level to leverage resources and expand our collective impact.

Partnerships are at the heart of the NGPJV. Many thanks to our partners whose spirit of collaboration and dedication to grasslands conservation made the achievements highlighted in this report possible. We are doing more together!

NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS JOINT VENTURE

NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS JOINT VENTURE



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