



NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

JOINT VENTURE

ANNUAL REPORT

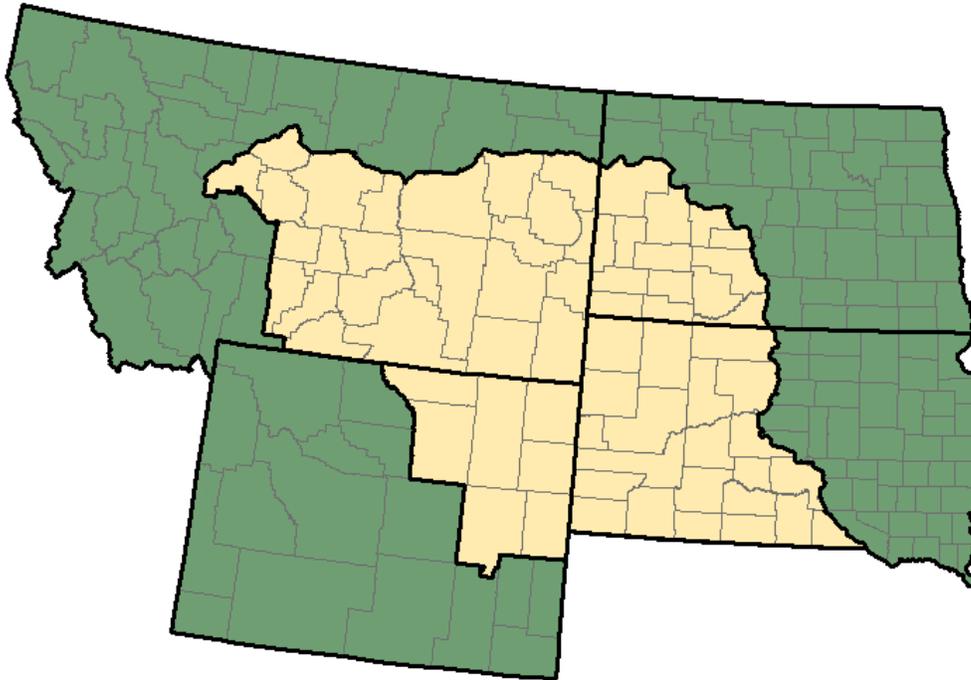
2025

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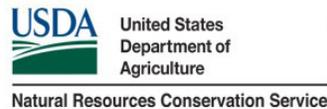
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Northern Great Plains Joint Venture Geography



The NGPJV Management Board is comprised of individuals representing 20 partner organizations throughout the Northern Great Plains.



WHERE ARE WE NOW?



As our planet starts yet another journey around the sun, I've been doing some reflecting. Change was undeniably a defining characteristic of 2025. But so was resilience—resilience in colleagues and friends, in conservation organizations and agencies, and in our work together. The power of the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV) collaborative remains strong. I invite you to read the Partner Features in this report for examples of collective and resilient action from the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative, Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance, and Central Grasslands Roadmap—all conservation leaders in the region. Collectively, NGPJV partners conserved 936,988 acres of grasslands making tangible progress toward slowing the loss of grassland resources. Al Eiden, Pheasants Forever and NGPJV Management Board Member, shared highlights from the NGPJV visit to Washington D.C., emphasizing the importance of showing up with a unified message. And Ken McDonald, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and an NGPJV Management Board Member, reflected on how partnerships are indispensable for achieving lasting conservation success. We truly are more resilient together.

Another example of building resilience is the NGPJV's emphasis on innovation and scaling our collective work. In 2025, we facilitated conversations around building capacity and removing systemic barriers that are restricting our ability to conserve grasslands at meaningful scales. We also hosted conversations around what rural community resilience means to conservation, with an eye towards better connecting the needs of our rancher-stewards of the grasslands and conservation investments.

The resilience of 2025 will carry forward into 2026. This coming year, we look forward to the International Year of Rangeland and Pastoralists with a focus on grasslands communications. The [Central Grasslands Roadmap](#) will be hosting a multi-national summit and the [JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative](#) will be translating biome-wide conservation goals for local implementation. NGPJV partners will be leading and engaging in these motivational and impactful efforts. I am honored and humbled to be working with strong leaders on the NGPJV Management Board and talented partners from around the Northern Great Plains.

Onward to another year of innovation and collective action!

Catherine Wightman, Coordinator



Partner Feature: South Dakota Grasslands Initiative

by Laura Kahler, Director, South Dakota Grasslands Initiative

The South Dakota Grasslands Initiative (SDGI) was launched in 2023 by the South Dakota Grassland Coalition and its partners to support grassland conservation, rural economies, and healthy communities. The initiative is a collaborative network of organizations, agencies, and individuals working together to protect and promote South Dakota's grasslands.

SDGI's goals include building stronger connections between grassland producers and conservation programs, enhancing communication among stakeholders, expanding public awareness of grasslands, sharing research to support sustainability, and educating decision-makers to sustain grasslands. SDGI emphasizes collaboration and communication to strengthen conservation efforts. In 2025, the initiative expanded to 63 partner entities and 522 individuals on its email list.

SDGI's four workgroups played a pivotal role in advancing its goals. Workgroups focus on connecting producers, improving communication, and promoting education and conservation strategies. NGPJV staff participate in three workgroups.

Grasslands Outreach Workgroup

This workgroup aims to elevate public perception of South Dakota's native grasslands as a national treasure and foster personal connections to grasslands by showcasing the economic, ecological, and recreational opportunities that intact, native grasslands provide for people, wildlife, and the environment. Key activities in 2025 included:

- Completing a communications plan, which helped the group define their focus and identify key messages.
- Partnering with the Grasslands Triple Crown bike races to educate participants about



Party on the Prairie. Credit: Laura Kahler

grasslands through event booths, race website content, and promotional videos (see pages 10, 29-30).

- Launching the "46.9 for the Grasslands" campaign as part of South Dakota's America's 250th Celebration, encouraging residents to explore 46.9 miles of grasslands in honor of the state's 46.9 million acres of grasslands 250 years ago.
- Developing a video to promote the campaign and the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.

Grassland Conservation Strategy Workgroup

This workgroup aims to educate decision-makers and support programs that sustain grasslands. Key activities included:

- Monthly meetings to discuss state and federal developments related to grasslands, such as the American Prairie Conservation Act and the North American Grasslands Conservation Act.
- Organizing two "Party on the Prairie" events near Rapid City and Sioux Falls to connect community leaders, congressional staff, and legislators with grassland conservation efforts. Nearly 100 people attended these events.
- Planning a forum for the 2026 Grasslands Summit to explore the idea of a Conservation Fund in South Dakota.

Connecting Grassland Producers & Programs Workgroup

This workgroup focuses on connecting producers with conservation programs. Key activities included:

- Collaborating on a social science research effort to understand barriers to participation in conservation programs. Although initial funding ended before interviews could be conducted, the team developed an interview instrument and recruited participants for future research.
- Supporting the Dakota Conservation Network as a hub for producers to access conservation information.
- Developing a handout for agricultural lenders to help them understand how conservation programs can benefit their customers.
- Leading discussions at the Private Lands Biologist Forum to share insights on connecting with producers.

By building partnerships, enhancing communication, and leveraging the expertise of its workgroups, SDGI has made strides toward achieving its goals. Our accomplishments underscore the importance of continued support from partners and funders to sustain these efforts and ensure the long-term health and vitality of South Dakota's grasslands.



CONSERVATION DESIGN & DELIVERY

Science Integration

Evaluating the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in Western South Dakota

In collaboration with the South Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts, Ducks Unlimited (DU), and South Dakota State University, the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV) implemented a pilot study in western South Dakota to better understand perceived outcomes associated with rancher participation in grazing-related EQIP practices.

Twelve ranchers in two counties were interviewed by conservation district staff, all of whom had completed at least one grazing-related EQIP practice since 2021. Of those ranchers interviewed, we found that most perceived positive ecological and social outcomes, including:

- ✓ Improvements in grazing season length and forage quality
- ✓ Improvement in wildlife populations
- ✓ Increased trust and communication with NRCS staff
- ✓ An improved understanding of grasslands and grassland programs

Interviewed ranchers feel moderately confident about their operations' ability to deal with weather extremes, generational succession, future income, and change in general. Importantly, ranchers stated they still seek additional cost-share programs and education and outreach to support their operations. All respondents said they were likely to continue the

Science Integration Specialists help bridge the gap between science and on-the-ground conservation by making it easier for land managers to apply (or integrate) the wide range of research, tools, and programs available to them.

practices in their EQIP contract, even after contract expiration. However, most were less likely to enroll in a new conservation program, likely due to perceived application challenges.

This pilot study is an example of how producer input can be collected to inform conservation programs and opportunities, though the results from this study are not generalizable given the nature of the study design. The NGPJV will continue data collection in additional counties in 2026. Additional data over time can inform whether perceptions differ across counties or demographic groups, how perceptions change over time, and how perceptions impact conservation practice implementation.

NGPJV Staff Host Science Integration Workshop

The Montana Association of Conservation Districts held their annual convention from November 18-20 in Billings, Montana. NGPJV science integration specialists, with help from the Winnett Agricultural Community Enhancement and Sustainability (ACES) conservation technician, hosted a workshop demonstrating what science integration is and how tools and data can be used by land managers to help with management decisions.

Twenty-six attendees from 15 conservation districts, as well as three partner organizations and agencies participated in the workshop. Workshop participants learned about science integration before



Credit: Tayler Scherr

going over examples of how data and tools, such as the Rangeland Analysis Platform, the Central Grasslands Roadmap assessment map, and the University of Nebraska—Lincoln Drought Monitor, have been used by partners to help inform management decisions.

Of those who responded to a follow-up survey, most participants felt they were more comfortable integrating science into their day-to-day work after the workshop. Encouraging participants to reach out to their local science integration specialist after the workshop was one of the primary goals and survey respondents stated they felt more comfortable reaching out to a science integration specialist for help accessing data and tools after the workshop.

NGPJV Web Tool: New Features for Visualizing Conservation Opportunities

The NGPJV developed a spatial planning web tool to help landowners and conservation practitioners better understand and visualize conservation opportunities and challenges in the Northern Great Plains. Our web tool focuses on spatial data that may not be easily accessible elsewhere, including priority species ranges, priority areas for conservation, and local project data.

Just this year, we updated the tool to include NRCS practice payments applied in Federal Fiscal Years (FY) 2016-2023 and a range overlay of the

NGPJV's 26 priority bird species. The web tool has also moved! While still on our website, the web tool can now be found in [Web Tools](#) under the [Resources](#) tab. We've also included an updated list of additional spatial planning tools developed by our partners that landowners and conservation practitioners may find useful.

Catalyzing Conservation Networks

Coordinating Funding Proposals

The NGPJV continued to play a pivotal role in strengthening the competitiveness and effectiveness of funding proposals by actively coordinating efforts across our partnership. By hosting grant coordination calls, we fostered open communication and collaboration, ensuring all partners were informed about upcoming funding opportunities. We also helped connect organizations with complementary strengths, encouraging resource sharing, synergy, and the exchange of expertise.

In addition, we provided essential scientific data and background information to support the development of strong, well-rounded proposals. This collaborative approach not only improved individual applications but also advanced a more unified and strategic effort to secure funding for high-priority projects.

NGPJV staff supported proposal coordination under multiple programs. Notably, of the 16 partner organizations participating in the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) Northern Great Plains Program 2025 grant coordination call, 12 were awarded funding, resulting in more than \$11 million invested in grassland and sagebrush conservation (Table 1). Congratulations to our partners!

Supported Workshops & Events

The NGPJV provides financial support for partner organizations to host learning opportunities for local producers, networking and training events for regional biologists and conservation professionals, and grassland recreational activities with outreach potential. In FY25, the NGPJV supported seven workshops and events in the region.

- Montana Watershed Coordination Council Symposium

- Grasslands Triple Crown Cycling Series (South Dakota)
- South Dakota Grassland Coalition Annual Meeting
- Montana Association of Conservation Districts Annual Convention
- Eastern Montana Regenerative Agriculture Level-Up Workshop
- Low-tech Mesic Restoration Workshops (Montana)
- Black Hills Fly Fishers Riparian Restoration Series (South Dakota)

On the following page, we highlight two of these exciting new partnerships.

Table 1. Summary of NFWF Northern Great Plains 2025 grants awarded across the Northern Great Plains partnership.

| Organization | Grant Title | Funding Awarded |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| American Bird Conservancy | Building Capacity to Improve Habitat for Grassland and Sagebrush Birds (MT, ND, SD, WY) | \$259,800 |
| Bird Conservancy of the Rockies | Integrating Land Stewardship and Monitoring for Early-successional Grassland Birds (MT, NE, SD, WY) | \$1,229,800 |
| Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance | Native Producers Restoring and Conserving Grasslands (MT) | \$840,900 |
| Ducks Unlimited | Innovative Working Lands Partnership for Wildlife and People in the Dakota Grasslands (ND, SD) | \$200,000 |
| North Dakota Natural Resources Trust | North Dakota Grassland Management, Land Restoration, and Biological Carbon Capture Program | \$479,700 |
| Northern Great Plains Joint Venture | Growing Community Capacity and Collaborative Action in the Sagebrush-Grasslands (MT, ND, SD, WY) | \$685,000 |
| Pheasants Forever | Expanding Grassland and Wildlife Corridor Improvement Efforts (MT) | \$1,400,000 |
| Ranchers Stewardship Alliance | Collaborating with Ranching Communities to Protect Grasslands in North-Central Montana | \$524,900 |
| South Dakota Grassland Coalition | Expanding Community-based Partnerships with Landowners to Support High Priority Grasslands (SD) | \$1,500,000 |
| The Nature Conservancy | Growing Grassland Protection Through Conservation Easements (MT, NE, SD) | \$2,200,000 |
| World Wildlife Fund | Phase III: Restoring Native Grassland and Expanding Regenerative Grazing (MT, ND, NE, SD) | \$1,976,700 |
| Wyoming Game and Fish Department | House Draw Fire Sagebrush Restoration | \$257,500 |

Black Hills Fly Fishers Riparian Restoration Series

Founded in 1981, the Black Hills Fly Fishers (BHFF) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization located in the Black Hills of South Dakota. BHFF works to conserve and restore riparian and stream habitat for the benefit of fisheries.

This June, BHFF organized many partners, including the NGPJV, other conservation organizations, sportsmen's clubs, and a local brewery, to launch the Riparian Restoration Series. The series included two expert speakers and two field days, engaging approximately 245 community members, leaders, producers, and policymakers in low-tech process-based restoration techniques and water quality and quantity concerns. The BHFF will continue the Riparian Restoration Series with additional speakers and a film and storytelling session in 2026.

Grasslands Triple Crown Cycling Series

The NGPJV in cooperation with the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative (SDGI) sponsored the inaugural Grasslands Triple Crown Cycling Series in western South Dakota. The event drew 239 cyclists from 11 states. Each of the three events included a segment that passed through a U.S. Forest Service National Grassland: Fort Pierre, Grand River, and Buffalo Gap (see pages 29-30 for more details).



Credit: Laura Kahler

South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum

On October 1st and 2nd, the NGPJV and many partners hosted the third South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum as a statewide event. Attendees included 85 conservation professionals, representing at least 18 different organizations. An additional 27 federal conservation professionals could not attend due to the government shutdown.

Over two days, attendees participated in technical sessions, regional breakouts, round tables, and a land-owner panel. New this year, two conservation professionals were recognized for their contributions to private lands conservation in the state. Cassie Auxt, regional biologist with Ducks Unlimited, received the Peer of the Year award for her dedication to building community and bettering conservation. Anthony Bly, soils field specialist with South Dakota State University Extension, received the Private Lands Pillar award in recognition of his support and continuous contributions to private lands conservation in South Dakota. Congratulations to you both!

Credit: Lisa Baril



In a post-forum survey, attendees indicated that they found the 2025 South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum to be valuable, with the landowner panel and round tables ranked as favorite activities. Of those respondents who attended past South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum events, all indicated that connections made at previous events resulted in additional conservation projects and/or outreach activities.

The NGPJV is excited to host South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum regional meetings in 2026. 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 Northern Great Plains.

Sustaining Montana's Grasslands: A Workshop on Conservation Capacity, Monitoring, and Reporting

In an effort to advance the conservation of grasslands in eastern and central Montana, the NGPJV, in partnership with the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and with support from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, hosted a two-day workshop in Lewistown, Montana last spring. The workshop brought together 36 conservation partners representing 23 organizations and agencies committed to grassland conservation in the region.

The workshop's primary goal was to find alignment on the gaps and bottlenecks hindering effective conservation efforts and to create a strategic, coordinated approach to leveraging resources. The conversations were particularly timely (and challenging!) given the recent reductions in federal workforce and funding that began in early 2025, which have shifted the focus for many partners from growth to maintaining existing staff.

Key Outcomes

- ✓ **Developed Diagnostic Tools to Empower Action:** The development of new, actionable diagnostic resources, including a [supply chain graphic](#) and a [status assessment](#) designed to serve regional conservation

organizations now and into the future by facilitating conversations that will lead to action.

- ✓ **Pinpointed Critical Bottlenecks for Strategic Solutions:** Identified bottlenecks in grassland conservation in five key areas: Grassland Protection; Grassland Restoration, Enhancement, and Retention; Community and County Resilience; Sectors of Capacity; and Types of Positions and Needs.
- ✓ **Mobilized Leadership and Resources for Capacity Building:** High-level, solutions-oriented discussions united organizations and agencies to clarify roles, marshal resources, and capitalize on their unique strengths—laying the groundwork for a stronger, more coordinated conservation network.
- ✓ **Welcomed Broad Perspectives for Deeper Collaboration:** By inviting a broader set of voices into these conversations, we enriched strategic discussions and expanded perspectives, ensuring more inclusive and innovative approaches to conservation challenges.
- ✓ **Pioneered Progress with Innovative Platforms:** Thanks to a unique invitation from WWF, the NGPJV is participating in the LandScale pilot platform, which promises to unite diverse tracking methods and streamline progress measurement across eastern and central Montana. This initiative is poised to set new standards for monitoring and reporting conservation outcomes.
- ✓ **Expanded Technical Expertise Across the Region:** At the invitation of the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, the NGPJV hosted a hands-on workshop on technical planning tools at their annual meeting, directly benefiting 26 Conservation District representatives and professionals. This effort not only expanded access to vital resources but also fostered ongoing collaborations through follow-up technical support (see pages 7-8).
- ✓ **Strengthened Partnerships and Targeted Actions:** NGPJV staff continue

to help support the Montana Grasslands Partnership steering committee and work groups by offering GIS mapping expertise and targeted grant funding, directly advancing high-priority initiatives. Spatial layers from the workshop materials have been used for the development of project prioritization maps, incorporation of layers into the NGPJV's web tool, and development of additional products (e.g., an EQIP funding layer).

- ✓ **Charted the Future with a Comprehensive Systems Map:** Together with partners, we developed a dynamic [systems map](#) that illuminates key drivers, emerging initiatives, and strategic opportunities for expanding collaborative conservation across the region. This map, along with valuable workshop feedback, will guide priority-setting and capacity-building efforts for 2026 and beyond.

Building Capacity

Positions Supported

Connecting land stewards with conservation programs takes dedicated, knowledgeable staff. Agencies and organizations throughout the Northern Great Plains 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 FY2025, the NGPJV supported the following positions:

- Winnett ACES Conservation Programs Manager
- Northeastern Wyoming Coordinating Wildlife Biologist with Pheasants Forever
- SDGI Director with the South Dakota Grassland Coalition
- South Dakota Private Lands Biologist with American Bird Conservancy

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 an NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program grant and significant investment from North Dakota Game and Fish. The NGPJV committed matching funds for a The Nature Conservancy grant to protect grasslands in western South Dakota through conservation easement.

Grassroots Decisions: How Rural Communities Shape the Fate of Northern Great Plains Grasslands

Most grasslands in the Northern Great Plains are privately owned, which means their persistence largely depends on decisions made by local landowners. These decisions are influenced by many factors, including access to essential services like health care, schools, and markets. Access to these resources, or lack thereof, helps shape rural culture and local economies.

To gain a deeper understanding of how social and economic factors affect decisions related to the persistence of grasslands, the NGPJV hosted a workshop in Rapid City, South Dakota in September. The workshop's purpose was to identify the drivers behind landowners' choices regarding grass-based agriculture and to explore ways to better connect conservation initiatives with community well-being. Participants began by envisioning the desired future condition (by 2040) for grassland conservation and associated rural communities.

Desired Future Conditions

In 2040, grass-based economies are sustainable, the loss of grasslands and associated biodiversity has been reversed, and rural and Indigenous communities and ranchers are actively engaged in conservation. Responsible and adaptive management of small and large-scale grasslands is expanding, while communities attract younger generations and foster a strong sense of place. Champions at local, state, and federal levels support grassland conservation.

Achieving the Vision

Participants organized fundamental objectives for achieving this vision into three categories—economies, culture, and land. The area where these categories overlap is the focus for building resilient and sustainable grasslands.

Participants brainstormed around what is needed to achieve the desired future conditions. Actions included guiding principles or ways of conduct, such as respecting Tribal sovereignty and seeking a variety of perspectives, policy considerations, and education and outreach needs. Participants also identified potential management actions under the categories of land, economies, and culture. Information needs and metrics for tracking success were also discussed.

Community-led, Science-supported

As a pilot initiative, a group of community members and business leaders will be assembled to provide their perspective on desired future conditions, community well-being, and actions needed to get there. Building on the input from that group, engagement will continue with community leaders throughout other regions of the Northern Great Plains, using an adaptive strategy that evolves in response to ongoing feedback. Simultaneously, the NGPJV will work with partners to coalesce available science related to community resilience so future efforts can be targeted in places where we are likely to learn the most. Collaboratively, rural communities and NGPJV may choose specific actions to implement, while partners may also initiate projects based on these priorities. Furthermore, the objectives and detailed action steps will be incorporated into the upcoming NGPJV Strategic and 5-year Action Plan revisions.



Partner Feature: Engagement with Native Nations— Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance 2025 Tour

by *Renae Schmitt (Grasslands Specialist) and Tiara Walks (Outreach & Engagement Program Officer), Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance*

In September 2025, Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) team members, Merissa Dominguez (Program Director), Antonio ‘Tony’ Morsette (Land Conservation Program Officer), Renae Schmitt (Grasslands Specialist), and Tiara Walks (Outreach & Engagement Program Officer) took part in a four-day tour of Tribes in South Dakota and North Dakota. The BNGA team visited Tribal departments, NRCS personnel, and Native-led NGOs on the Oglala Sioux, Rosebud Sioux, Cheyenne River Sioux, and Standing Rock Sioux Reservations. The purpose of the tour was to build and strengthen new and pre-existing relationships, inform Tribes about BNGA’s programs and current funding opportunities, and learn about Tribal partners’ projects, plans, and current needs.

The BNGA team began its tour with a visit to Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) in Porcupine, South Dakota, on the Oglala Sioux Reservation. TVCDC is a Native-led non-profit that empowers Lakota youth and families to improve the health, culture, and environment of their communities through the healing and strengthening of cultural identity. BNGA had the opportunity to speak with several TVCDC staff and visit their future buffalo pasture, tour their facilities, and learn about their food sovereignty, language, and cultural programs.

The next day BNGA continued to Mission, South Dakota, where Shaun Grassel (BNGA CEO) joined the team. The team met with the director Matt Tucker of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Game, Fish and Parks Department (RSTGFP). Matt discussed the Department’s wildlife surveys, use of drone technology, hunting regulation issues, and updates on their buffalo management plan. He shared that RSTGFP

collaborated with the Oglala Sioux Parks and Recreation Authority to survey and manage elk populations that live on both the Oglala and Rosebud Sioux Reservations. He also shared that RSTGFP faced obstacles in recruiting and retaining staff and the steps RSTGFP has taken to expand pasture for the Department’s buffalo herd. The BNGA team was able to visit RSTGFP’s new facility and future buffalo pasture west of Mission, South Dakota.

Afterward, the team traveled to White River, South Dakota, to meet with NRCS Tribal Liaison Mary Scott for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe (RST). Mary discussed how NRCS and FSA worked with the RST and Tribal producers and discussed Tribal land leasing policies.

The third day of the tour took BNGA to Eagle Butte, South Dakota, where the team was joined by Sunshine Claymore (BNGA Youth Engagement Specialist). BNGA first visited the Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP) and met Julie Garreau, Wakinyan Chief, and



BNGA team members toured the Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP) beehives, gardens, and orchards. The CRYP harvests and bottles honey from their hives and sells it with other canned goods in their on-site gift shop in Eagle Butte, South Dakota. (Photo courtesy of Renae Schmitt).

Dalton Fischer. CRYP is dedicated to giving their Lakota youth and families access to the culturally relevant, enriching, and enduring opportunities we need to build stronger, healthier communities and a more vibrant future together. CRYP staff spoke of the youth programs and gave tours of on-site gardens, beehives, orchards, kitchen, gym, and learning and art spaces. BNGA learned about land that CRYP acquired near Mathó Pahá (Bear Butte) and the youth program activities they have at this site and elsewhere in the Black Hills.

This visit was followed by a trip to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (CRST) Prairie Management Program where the team met with program director Mike Claymore and technician Derrick Marrow. Mike gave updates on the program's black-footed ferret recovery efforts. He also shared their program's needs including GIS software and map data, staff, and more community outreach. BNGA offered to assist with developing social media content for a future black-footed ferret release.

BNGA finished the day in Eagle Butte with a visit to the CRST Tribal Historical Preservation Office (THPO) and met with its director Steve Vance. Steve discussed the history of the Tribe and the land and cultural preservation activities of THPO. BNGA also learned about the impacts of current federal funding cutbacks and how this further limited THPO's activities.



Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (SRST) Game and Fish Department gave the BNGA team a tour of the SRST buffalo pasture. BNGA was able to see the new addition to the herd, a white buffalo bull that was gift to the SRST from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. (photo courtesy of Renae Schmitt).



Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) showed the BNGA team the future home of the TVCDC buffalo herd. The nearly 40,000 acre pasture is located north of Porcupine, SD. (Photo courtesy of Tiara Walks).

On the final day, the BNGA team traveled to Fort Yates, North Dakota, to visit personnel of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (SRST). BNGA met with Bruz Van Dusen, NRCS Tribal Liaison for Standing Rock (Sioux County), and Cynthia Monteau and Craig Eaglesfield of SRST Department of Land Management. There, BNGA learned more about leasing policies of SRST and about collaborative work of the NRCS and SRST Land Management.

BNGA ended the day with the SRST Game and Fish Department. Personnel discussed their black-footed ferret program, plans to expand the Department's buffalo herd, and need to update their buffalo management plan. BNGA was able to visit the buffalo herd and see the white buffalo bull that was gifted to SRST from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. The Department also added buffalo to the herd from the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold.

BNGA continued visiting with departments and NGOs of these Tribes based on connections made during this September tour. Merissa and Renae returned to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation two weeks later to assist SRST Game and Fish with the release of black-footed ferrets. In October, Merissa and Shaun returned to the Rosebud Sioux Reservation and met with RST Tribal Land Enterprise and Sicangu Co. They further discussed the land leasing policies of the RST and learned about the Tribe's farming enterprise. Merissa, Renae, and Tiara returned to the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation for Prairie Management's black-footed ferret release. Afterward, they were able to visit Wozu in Cannonball, North Dakota. Wozu is a

Native-led NGO that works on cultural, food, and social regeneration on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. Wozu CEO Dave Archambault gave the BNGA team a full tour of Wozu's facilities, gardens, and buffalo pasture, and discussed their food sovereignty and cultural programs.

BNGA learned that on some Reservations there are several buffalo herds managed by different NGOs and Tribal departments. Herd expansion is a common need but lack of funding for land and fencing slows or deters expansion. BNGA also learned that leasing policies for Tribal trust and allotted lands varied between Tribes. The Tribal departments

shared other common needs such as more funding for staff, more community outreach, and training in and access to ArcGIS Pro.

These visits offered valuable insight into ongoing projects, future plans, and the priorities of these Tribes. By spending time in conversation with partners, the trip helped strengthen relationships and deepen BNGA's understanding of how to best support Tribal Nations' visions for their conservation goals. The connections made during this trip will continue to inform and shape collaborative efforts moving forward.





Credit: Tayler Scherr

Tracking Conservation Action

In 2025 partners across the Northern Great Plains successfully implemented conservation action on nearly one million acres of grassland and wetland habitat!

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 Northern Great Plains' grasslands for generations.

Since 2016, the partnership has implemented conservation action on a total of 3.7 million acres (Figure 1). The majority of conservation actions in 2025 were enhancement projects (65%) while most of the remaining acres (24%) were retention projects (Figure 2).

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 grass-

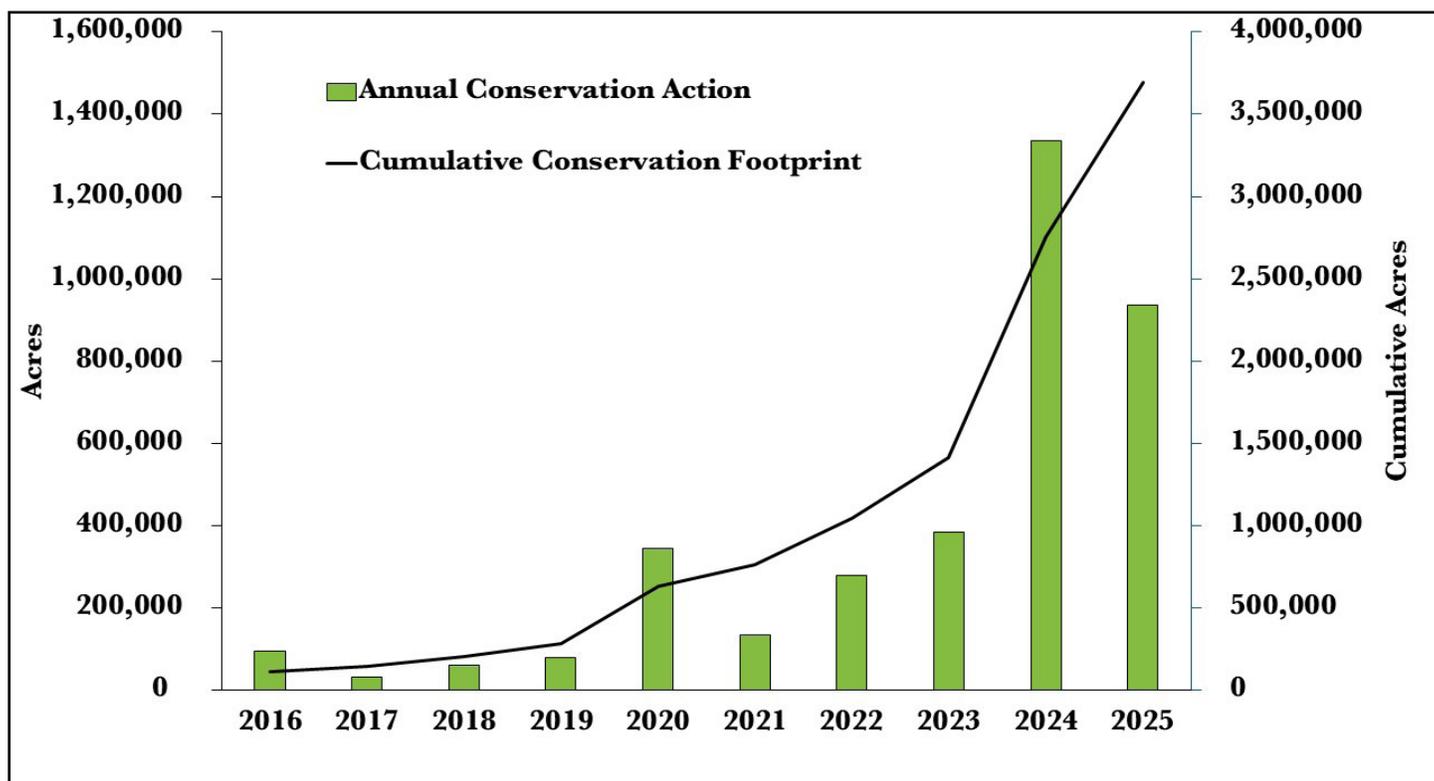


Figure 1. Annual and cumulative number of acres that have been retained, enhanced, restored, or protected (i.e., conservation actions) as reported by the JV partnership from 2016 through FY2025.

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 2025 included technical assistance and/or rental payments to maintain grass for 10+ years.

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.

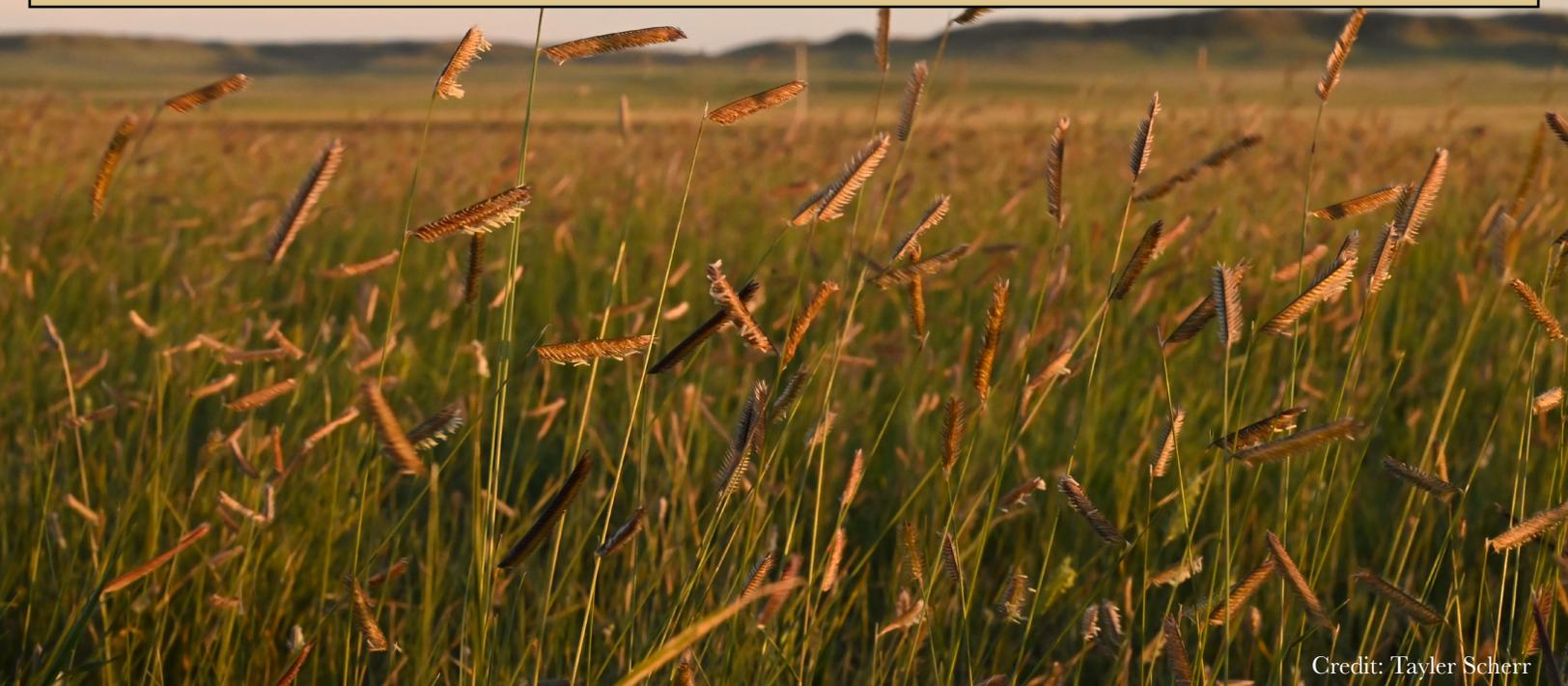
Practices in 2025 included grazing infrastructure such as pipeline and fence, conifer encroachment work, and annual invasive species management.

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 2025 included reseeding cropland to predominately native grasses and forbs, and mesic restoration.

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 2025 included long-term and permanent conservation easements and fee title acquisitions.



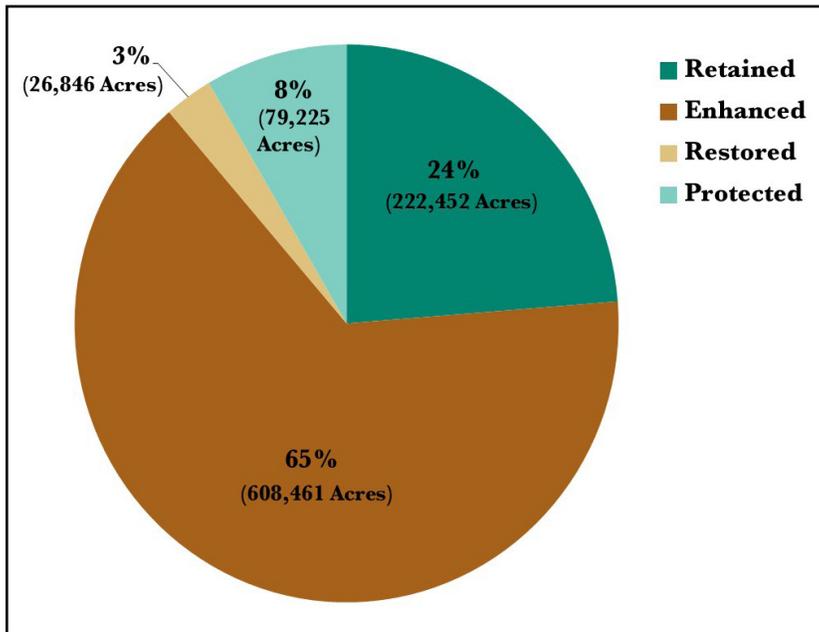


Figure 2. Percentage of acres retained, enhanced, restored, or protected by the JV partnership in 2025 (includes both wetlands and uplands).

lands across the Northern Great Plains. 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 are also metrics of success. We developed five metrics, all derived from acres conserved, that fall into one of these three categories: economics, biodiversity, and ecosystem functionality.

Economic Outcomes

We use three metrics to estimate the economic value of conservation actions in 2025: pasture rental rates, animal unit months (AUMs), and pounds of forage (Figure 3). 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 nearly a million acres in 2025 is equivalent to 2.1 million pounds of forage, which can support 258,000 AUMs on working lands in the region. Over a ten-year period, the rangelands conserved by our partners have an economic value exceeding \$62 million, as measured by pasture rental rates, with more than half of this value (64%) accrued in the last two years (\$16.4 million in 2025).

Biodiversity Outcomes

In 2025, these conserved acres provide habitat for an estimated 637,000 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.

Ecosystem Functionality Outcomes

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 2025, we estimate a carbon capture potential of 17.6 million metric tons (MMT CO₂). This figure is equivalent to the fuel used to drive 4.1 million gasoline-powered passenger vehicles for one year according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator.

The Road Ahead

While celebrating the achievements of the partnership, it is equally as important to acknowledge that our work is far from over. According to WWF's 2024 Plowprint report, the Northern Great Plains is still losing grasslands at an alarming rate. The report states that in the Northern Great Plains "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.

2025 Conservation Outcomes

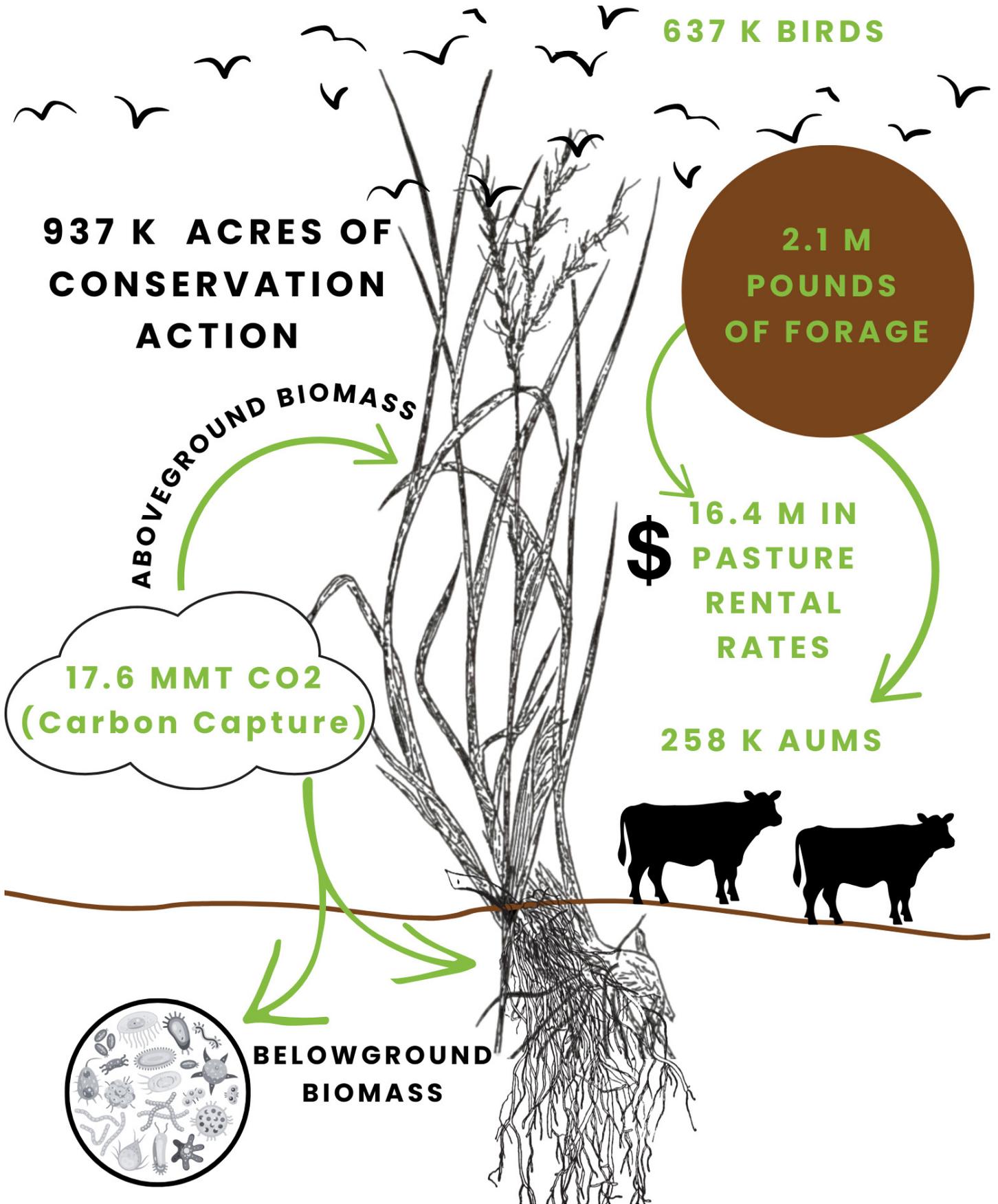


Figure 3. Estimated conservation outcomes for FY2025. Total acres conserved in the NGPJV geography include data provided by American Bird Conservancy; Audubon Great Plains; Bird Conservancy of the Rockies; Ducks Unlimited; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; North Dakota Natural Resources Trust; North Dakota Game and Fish; Northern Great Plains Joint Venture N-GRIP; Pheasants Forever (Montana & Wyoming chapters); South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks; Wyoming Clear Creek Conservation District; Wyoming Game and Fish; World Wildlife Fund; and USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife. Thank you to all our partners for your contribution!

NORTHERN GRASSLAND RESTORATION INCENTIVE PROGRAM

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 Northern Great Plains.

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 reseeded 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, 41 producers have enrolled more than 72,000 acres in N-GRIP (Figure 4). An additional 20,000 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 (95%) as opposed to restoring grasslands.

N-GRIP actions in FY25 included grazing infrastructure (e.g., fencing and water) and aerial sagebrush seeding after the House Draw Fire in Wyoming. Many N-GRIP projects were accomplished in collaboration with one or more conservation partners and occurred in multiple locations (Figure 5).

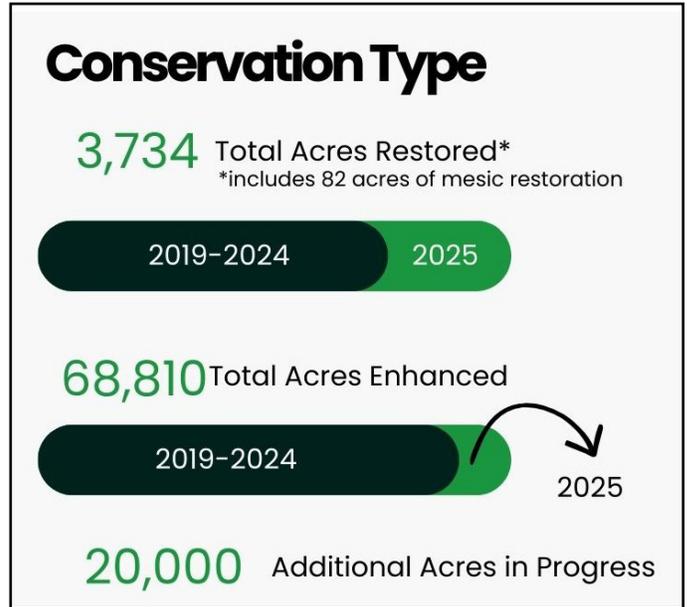


Figure 4. Number of total acres enrolled in N-GRIP. Bar lengths represent the proportion of total acres restored (top) or enhanced (bottom) from 2019 to 2024 versus 2025.

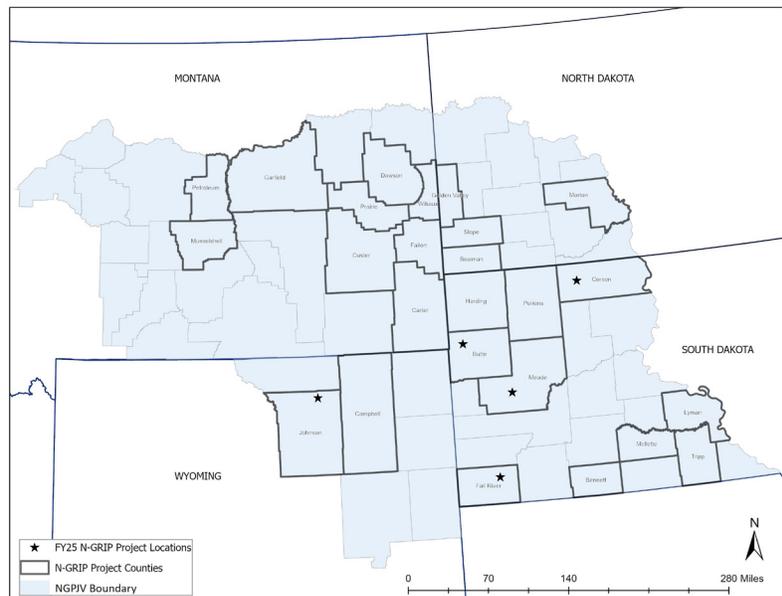


Figure 5. Map of N-GRIP projects by county from 2019 through 2025.

SCIENCE, RESEARCH & MONITORING

Understanding the Northern Great Plains: A New Look at People and Nature

by Katherine Graham (Research Social Scientist) and Kaylan Kemink (Director of Conservation Science and Planning), Ducks Unlimited, Great Plains Region

The Northern Great Plains are home to wide-open grasslands, diverse wildlife, and vibrant rural communities. But managing and protecting these landscapes isn't just about the land and animals—it's about the people, too. A new project led by Ducks Unlimited's Conservation Science and Planning Team in the Great Plains Region, and supported by the NGPJV, aims to understand ecological and social characteristics of the Northern Great Plains.

Why Study Both People and Nature?

Successful conservation depends on understanding both the social and ecological characteristics of a system. For example, biophysical factors and costs, the engagement and capacity of community members, as well as local cultures, economies, and government policies, all play a role in how land is used and conserved. Further, if we understand the capacities and needs of communities, we can design programs that not only protect grasslands and the services they provide but also have widespread social outcomes (e.g., connections, resources) associated with well-being.

What Will the Project Do?

This project uses a science-based approach to measure, understand, and organize the social and ecological characteristics of the Northern Great Plains. Our team is gathering information from 2012 to 2022, utilizing publicly available data sources, including the U.S. agricultural census, climate reports, soil surveys, and community studies. Using these data, we will identify social-ecological patterns (or archetypes), which will allow us to group counties with similar social and ecological features. This will help



us determine where certain archetypes exist and how they have changed over time. Through this process, we will also determine if any information is missing, which will help guide future research.

How Will This Help?

The results will give local managers and decision-makers focused on community resilience outcomes a clearer picture of where to direct conservation efforts. By understanding social-ecological patterns, we can target programs where they're needed most or are most likely to succeed. The results will also serve as a baseline to compare against when evaluating how well programs are working. The findings will be shared in an easy-to-read report, a peer-reviewed publication, and a webinar, ensuring that everyone, from policymakers to local residents, has access. This project is an important step in ensuring that the Northern Great Plains remain healthy and thriving for both people and wildlife, now and in the future.



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

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?

Progress Report: During the 2023 and 2024 field seasons, staff with the Intermountain Bird Observatory at Boise State University conducted 233 surveys in reseeded fields and 131 surveys in planted crop fields. A total of 3,235 individuals representing 63 species were observed at reseeded sites, while 1,880 individuals representing 50 species were observed at planted cropland sites.

Certain grassland bird species preferred reseeded sites over planted cropland sites. In particular, Bobolink and Grasshopper Sparrow had greater densities at reseeded sites than planted crop fields. Restoring crop fields to grass likely provided the necessary characteristics and habitat structure these species prefer, providing both habitat for grassland birds and forage for operations.

To continue to improve upon this study, additional survey years would help to balance out sample sites and tease apart inter-annual variation. While the work associated with the NGPJV grant has been completed, research will continue with funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Results from this work are available on the Rocky Mountain Avian Data Center [website](#).



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

by Lauren Hatch, Graduate Student, University of Montana

One key knowledge gap in the study of grassland birds in the Northern Great Plains is identifying and quantifying limiting factors (i.e., factors that hinder productivity and population growth). This information is crucial to understanding grassland bird population dynamics and responses to management strategies in the region. Two species with few data on limiting factors are Chestnut-collared and Thick-

billed Longspur—two declining species identified as top-priority by NGPJV. This study seeks to address information gaps on limiting factors in longspur populations through two objectives.

Objective 1 fills knowledge gaps regarding invasive grass encroachment and grassland fragmentation as limiting factors in longspur populations by investigating longspur demographics (adult density, nest density, nest success) across a mosaic of native prairie and altered grassland (defined as native prairie interseeded with introduced species). Objective 2 fills significant gaps in understanding grassland bird community dynamics (species richness and/or abundance).

We will explore how interactions among the suite of grassland songbirds and landscape attributes influence the songbird community at multiple spatial scales. These results will help inform how different habitats affect individual species and the suite of grassland songbirds at various spatial scales, providing information on how potential restoration activities may influence other species within the suite of grassland birds. This project is a collaboration between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NGPJV, and the University of Montana with support from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The first field season for this project wrapped up in late-July 2025. University of Montana staff conducted 149 plot surveys (surveying plots 3 times) collecting bird abundance, nest, and vegetation across public and private land in central Montana. They detected 4,299 individual birds across 46 species within the sampling plots and found 155 active nests across 15 species. Vegetation surveys resulted in the identification of 114 plant species, 89 of which were

native and 25 of which were non-native. Surveys targeting vegetation structure were also conducted. A second field season will commence in the summer of 2026 to continue this research.

LandScale: Building Sustainability in North American Grasslands

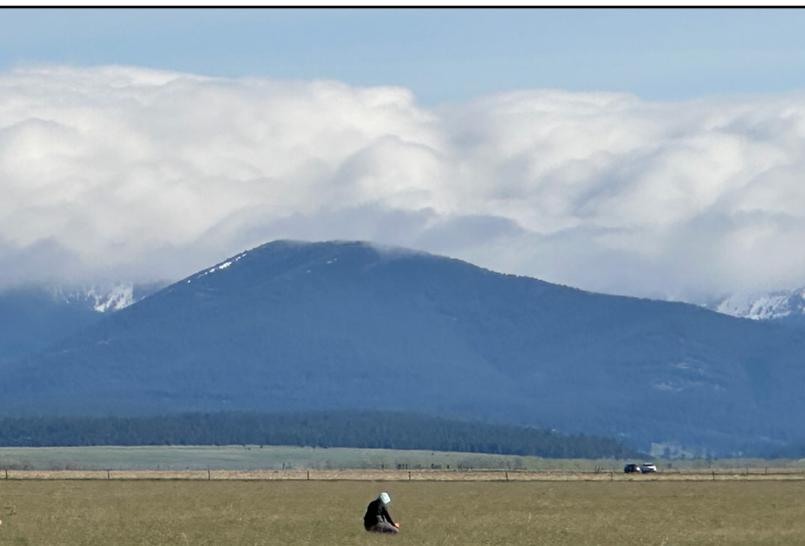
by Kim Ballare, Science Specialist, World Wildlife Fund—U.S. Great Plains Program

This project is focused on facilitating collaboration in the Northern Great Plains by bringing together different groups like ranchers, NGOs, Native Nations, governments, and businesses to work together on landscape scale conservation in the central and eastern Montana grasslands. Our goal is to tackle important challenges like keeping grasslands intact, supporting local livelihoods, and conserving wildlife across 63 million acres in Montana's Northern Great Plains.

To do this, we are using an online conservation assessment tool called LandScale. This system helps aggregate landscape-level data, assess conservation impact across a landscape, build trust between partners, and attract investment in conservation and livelihoods. We are working with a local steering committee that contributes a wide variety of grassland and range-land expertise. The committee is currently working on deciding the most important metrics to showcase collective impact and gathering appropriate data.

Organizations represented on this committee are: Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Montana Watershed Coordination Council; NGPJV; Pheasants Forever; Ranchers Stewardship Alliance; The Nature Conservancy; USDA—NRCS; Winnett ACES; and WWF.

We welcome participation in this project from other organizations that work in the Montana Great Plains—to learn more and get involved please contact Kim Ballare at WWF, Kimberly.ballare@wwfus.org.



Partner Feature: How the Central Grasslands Bird Working Group is Advancing Grassland Bird Recovery with Innovative Mapping



by Chris Latimer (Research Director), Qing Zhao (Research Scientist), Brandt Ryder (Chief Conservation Scientist) with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies and Barry Robinson (Landbird Biologist, Canadian Wildlife Service), and John Carlson (Northern Great Plains Initiative Director, The Nature Conservancy)

Grassland birds are among the most steeply declining suite of landbirds, with some species having lost 70-90% of their historic populations. Each year, millions of acres of habitat is lost or degraded due to agricultural conversion, woody plant encroachment, and drought.

To proactively stabilize and recover grassland bird populations over the next two decades, the Central Grasslands Roadmap and Central Grasslands Bird Working Group are advancing strategic planning efforts to conserve intact grassland cores and restore degraded habitats.

To fill this need, our multi-disciplinary team is developing data products and tools designed to improve planning and coordination of conservation efforts across the biome. The first step of that iterative process was the development of integrated bird data products (e.g., density, population growth, and contribution to population growth) that will serve as the foundation for grassland opportunity maps (or spatial prioritizations) to inform strategic and targeted delivery across the biome.

A comprehensive set of multi-species maps has been created to illustrate modeled estimates of population density (Figure 6) and population growth rates (Figure 7) for key groups of grassland bird species. The maps deliver spatially detailed predictions and associated uncertainty estimates for combined population density or growth rates, presented at a fine 1 km by 1 km resolution across the central Great Plains.

These maps are the result of a broad, multi-disciplinary collaboration, integrating count data from nine major sources collected across both breeding and non-breeding seasons. Datasets such as the Integrated

Monitoring in Bird Conservation Regions, Breeding Bird Survey, and eBird were brought together to provide the most accurate and up-to-date insights available.

Currently, the mapped predictions reflect averaged population data for combined species across the years 2003 to 2023. Plans are underway to release annual data products for individual species maps, including maps of present-day spatial prioritizations, with these expanded offerings expected in the first quarter of 2026.

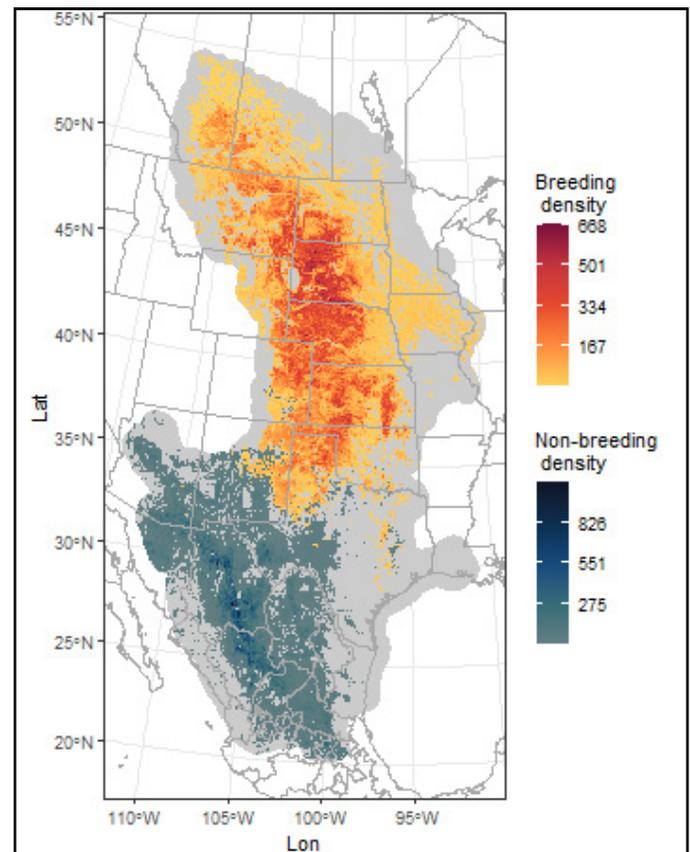


Figure 6. Aggregate population density map for six at-risk grassland songbirds: Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Thick-billed Longspur, Lark Bunting, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Sprague's Pipit. Credit: Bird Conservancy of the Rockies.

These maps are intended to support strategic conservation planning at regional and biome-wide scales, and can also be integrated with locally-relevant data to assess differences or changes in population performance across space. When paired with local knowledge and contextual information, these maps can be especially valuable tools for stakeholder engagement and communication, helping partners interpret patterns and inform decision-making.

Availability

Maps will be accessible through a [OneDrive link](#)¹ owned and managed by WWF. Each species suite will have a separate folder that contains GeoTiffs of two mapped predictions (one for density, one for population growth rate) along with mapped prediction uncertainty (4 maps per species grouping). Plans are underway to integrate these maps and associated data products into a user-friendly web interface with expanded features and functionality, expected in late 2026 or early 2027.

How to Use The Maps

These maps can be used to examine spatial patterns of population performance, assess the impact of current conservation delivery, and engage potential stakeholders. Some specific examples include: comparing population performance metrics between different planning regions, or examining correlations between past environmental conditions and grassland bird population outcomes. The NGPJV Technical Committee will use these models, in conjunction with other available data, to update their Bird Conservation Objectives in 2026.

How These Maps Differ from Other Data Products

These maps integrate data from the three largest monitoring datasets in North America, allowing for greater precision and accuracy. They also move beyond density only, providing spatially explicit data on population growth. And finally, they offer a dynamic view of population performance metrics between years as opposed to snapshots in time and therefore provide unprecedented spatial and temporal resolution.

¹ Contact Chris Latimer (chris.latimer@birdconservancy.org) or Brandt Ryder (brandt.ryder@birdconservancy.org) for more information or for help accessing the files.

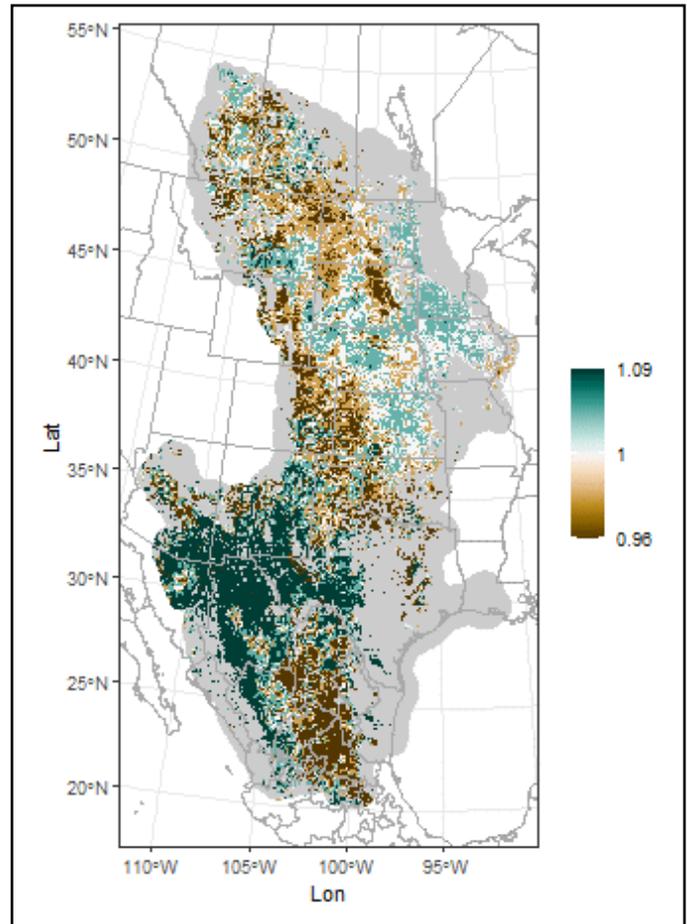


Figure 7. Aggregate population growth rate map for six at-risk grassland songbirds: Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Thick-billed Longspur, Lark Bunting, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Sprague's Pipit. Credit: Bird Conservancy of the Rockies.

What's Next?

Phases II through IV of the project outline a systematic approach to advancing conservation planning for grassland birds. Phase II will integrate current agricultural and woody plant encroachment risks with forecasted bird population responses to pinpoint strategic conservation opportunities. This phase will also introduce additional socio-ecological data layers and develop future projection models to explore scenarios of grassland loss and restoration, helping set restoration targets for bird population recovery. Phase III will build on these analyses, creating an interactive web-based decision-support tool that incorporates population forecasts and spatial prioritizations, with continued input from key end-users to refine its functionality. Finally, Phase IV will focus on communicating, training, and gathering feedback on the tool, making regional adjustments as needed to optimize conservation planning and delivery.

CONSERVATION POLICY

Partner Feature: Reflections from Capitol Hill

by Al Eiden, West Region Director, Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever

Last May, I had the opportunity to participate in my first Joint Venture (JV) Capitol Hill fly-in visit as a board member for the NGPJV. Initially, I was unsure what to expect from this experience. However, the NGPJV comprises a remarkable group of partners, all committed to the shared goal of preserving grasslands across the landscape. Being part of such a motivated and unified effort made me genuinely enthusiastic to take part in this unique opportunity.

As we began planning our Capitol Hill visit, I was impressed by the range of partners the JV had brought together to conserve and restore grasslands.

Our group included representatives from conservation organizations like Pheasants Forever (myself), Audubon (Alison Holloran), and Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (Shaun Grassel) as well as private landowners and ranchers like Sal Roseland from South Dakota, who represented the agriculture industry. The energy sector was also present, represented by Josh Demorrett from ConocoPhillips. Leading and guiding our efforts was Catherine Wightman, NGPJV's dedicated leader.

Together we had a diverse set of perspectives and experiences that we felt would bring a powerful and unified voice to our elected officials. However, it was important for us to determine precisely what key messages we wanted to convey and which leaders we needed to reach. To prepare, we held several planning meetings and scheduled our fly-in to take place after the change in administration. This timing provided us with a unique opportunity to engage with new leadership and reestablish connections with senators and representatives from the states within our JV. Through these collaborative meetings, our group developed clear goals as well as essential messages to support each of our objectives. Our goals were to:

1. Inform new administrative leaders and elected officials about the work of our JV, explaining how our efforts connect to broader JV initiatives. Emphasize the importance of healthy grasslands for both the economy and wildlife, and highlight the diverse range of stakeholders—such as conservation organizations, landowners, Tribal coalitions, and industry partners—actively engaged in our partnerships.



2. Advocate for continued support of the NGPJV and all JVs, stressing the critical role these partnerships play in promoting rural economies, voluntary conservation, and meaningful connections between conservation and industries in rural areas, especially agriculture and energy.
3. Champion ongoing support for the Farm Bill and its conservation programs that directly benefit grasslands, including the Conservation Reserve Program, EQIP, and others.
4. Encourage future engagement with elected officials and partners throughout the year, such as organizing field tours to demonstrate the value and impact of the JV partnership in action.

With our goals in place, Catherine and others went to work scheduling meetings with congressional representatives, White House officials, and federal agency leadership. We were able to meet with several congressional representatives including Senator Thune (Senate Majority Leader—SD), Senator Rounds (SD), and Representative Johnson (SD) as well as staff for Senator Hoeven (ND) and Senator Daines (MT).

We also had the opportunity to meet with several key NRCS leaders, including new NRCS Chief Aubrey Bettencourt, NRCS Agricultural Conservation

Easement Program leadership (Danielle Balduff and Ken Kriese), and NRCS Working Lands For Wildlife program leadership (Martin Lowenfish and Astrid Martinez). Members of our group also had other opportunities, including meetings with Bureau of Land Management (Active Director Jon Raby), Office of Management and Budget examiner Caroline Murphy, and a large meeting with several staff with NFWF.

After four days in Washington, we agreed the fly-in was successful. The group felt strong congressional support for grassland conservation, recognition of ranchers' stewardship, and awareness of the value of conservation partnerships like ours. As one attendee noted, "We didn't just tell legislators that the JV was a partnership—the partnership showed up," allowing us to demonstrate collaboration directly.

Reflecting on my first JV Hill visit, the greatest impact was direct dialogue with key policymakers about both challenges and opportunities for grasslands. Diverse partnerships—including industry, communities, and organizations—can help policy deliver broad benefits for citizens, rural areas, and wildlife. I look forward to representing NGPJV at future fly-ins.



COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH & EDUCATION

Communications Channels

Our website, quarterly e-newsletter, and Facebook page continue to serve as the NGPJV's primary communications channels. Subscriptions to our quarterly e-newsletter continue to grow. Approximately 530 readers subscribe. This is a 36% increase over 2024. As an additional means of engagement, we post a curated subset of e-newsletter stories to our website.

We are continuously looking for ways to provide timely, engaging, and practical content for our readers. Our newsletters include:

- ✓ Announcements for upcoming webinars, workshops, and other events
- ✓ Alerts about new science tools and resources
- ✓ Spotlights on successful conservation projects
- ✓ Job postings from organizations across the Northern Great Plains

Our Facebook page provides a means of sharing partner success stories, announcements, and other content of interest to our followers more immediately than our e-newsletter.

Print Communications

In addition to digital communications, we also designed print media for the annual Capitol Hill visit for both the NGPJV and the Association of Joint Venture Management Boards in collaboration with the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, new science integration rack cards that help partners understand what science integration is and how the NGPJV can provide assistance, and other products for partner organizations like the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative (SDGI).

Webinar Series

Our webinar series for conservation professionals continues to be popular. The four webinars in 2025



530
NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS



386
FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS

attracted 191 live participants and an additional 232 views on our YouTube channel. The four webinar topics were:

- An Introduction to Using the Rangeland Analysis Platform
- Ventenata: Small Grass, Big Problem
- Communicating About Woody Encroachment
- Managing Annual Invasive Grasses in Rangelands

Thank you to all who presented during 2025! Register for upcoming webinars on our [website](#).

Grasslands Triple Crown

The NGPJV and SDGI sponsored the inaugural year of the Grasslands Triple Crown cycling series in western South Dakota. The series was made up of three events, each of which included a segment that passed through a USFS National Grassland. This multi-partner campaign opportunity allowed us to reach a new audience: recreationists. The three events attracted nearly 250 cyclists from 11 states.

According to a survey of almost 2,220 people in the U.S. specifically addressing participants' awareness and perceptions of grasslands as well as their willingness to support grassland conservation, researchers found that most people know very little about



Credit: Michelle Maupin Barrett for the Fort Pierre Tourism & Promotion Council.

grasslands and why they are important, but that once participants learned about grasslands, they were supportive of grassland conservation efforts. The goal of this communications campaign was to create awareness around the importance of grasslands for people, wildlife, and rural communities.

To further this goal, we engaged the audience through a new webpage about why grasslands matter, threats to grasslands, and how people can easily engage with grasslands conservation. The webpage, designed by NGPJV staff, was hosted by the Grasslands Triple Crown event website and will eventually become part of SDGI's website.

Each participant also received a SWAG bag that included a native seed packet generously donated by Bayer, an informational brochure on the importance of grasslands designed by the USDA-NRCS, and a pocket guide to prairie birds published by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies. Additionally, cyclists received race t-shirts with the SDGI and NGPJV logo, which will help increase brand awareness.

The events also included an informational booth hosted by partner staff from the USFS, NRCS, American Bird Conservancy, and Corson County (South Dakota) Conservation District staff. This gave us an opportunity to increase engagement with event participants and their families on the day of the event.

Lastly, NGPJV staff created a [short video](#). This video was designed to captivate outdoor enthusiasts—

especially cyclists who cherish adventure and the natural world. The film highlights the breathtaking beauty found in South Dakota's grasslands, while also emphasizing their importance as a vital and threatened ecosystem. Through stunning visuals and dynamic cycling footage, the video encourages viewers to deepen their appreciation for these landscapes, recognize their ecological and economic value, and feel inspired to support conservation efforts that protect grasslands and the rural communities and wildlife that depend on them.

JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative

The JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative announced the official launch of its newly redesigned website, now live at JV8.org. The JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative is a long-term collaborative effort by eight Migratory Bird Joint Ventures (JVs) working together to implement grassland conservation from Mexico to Canada. Visit JV8.org to learn more.



Upcoming National and International Communications Campaigns

In 2026 there are two major grasslands campaigns: [The International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists \(IYRP\)](#) and the America's Grasslands campaign under the Volgenau Climate Initiative, which is still under development.

The IYRP was declared by the United Nations to "shine a light on the vital role [rangelands] and [associated] communities play in food security, ecosystem preservation, climate resilience, and cultural heritage." The NGPJV will draw from the key messages in the IYRP's communications plan to create greater awareness and appreciation for the role grasslands and grass-based economies play in the Northern Great Plains. Examples include, N-GRIP human interest stories and a story map featuring the regenerative practices of ranchers throughout the Central Grasslands Biome and how those practices provide essential habitat for grasslands birds..



MANAGEMENT BOARD MEMBER REFLECTION

The Power of State Partnerships (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks)

by Ken McDonald, Wildlife Division Administrator, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

A colleague once remarked, “There are partners, and there are friends. Partners are the organizations and individuals who want to work with you and bring resources to the table to achieve common conservation objectives. Friends just want your money. We have a lot of friends, but we are most successful when we have a lot of partners.”

This insight underscores the critical distinction between forming genuine, resource-sharing partnerships and maintaining relationships that are primarily transactional. It is through true partnerships that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) has seen the greatest success in advancing conservation efforts.

MFWP is charged with managing Montana’s diverse fish and wildlife populations. This responsibility is fundamentally tied to ensuring that there is sufficient healthy habitat for wildlife to thrive. Given that about two-thirds of Montana is privately owned, establishing partnerships with private landowners is essential for maintaining the state’s diverse and abundant wildlife.

Achieving this goal is only possible through collaborative efforts with a wide variety of partners focused on conserving, restoring, and enhancing key habitats. In addition to private landowners, MFWP engages diverse entities, including other governmental agencies (e.g., U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation), conservation organizations (e.g., Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Audubon), and agricultural associations (e.g., Montana Grazing Lands Coalition, Montana Cattlemen's Association).

Each partner brings unique resources and expertise, making successful projects possible only through joint efforts.

Such partnerships often begin with agency staff building relationships with landowners, which, over time, develop into trust. This trust is the foundation for successful conservation projects, which can then grow in scale and involve an increasing number of partners, ultimately contributing to landscape-scale conservation.

Through participation in the NGPJV (as a board member and partner) MFWP gains access to the expertise, knowledge, and sometimes resources of a diverse array of partners working on grassland conservation within the landscape. In return, MFWP shares valuable information, expertise, and resources regarding successful conservation strategies implemented in Montana, benefiting the broader partnership network.

In the field of conservation, while it is beneficial to have friends, genuine partners—those who collaborate and contribute resources to shared objectives—are truly indispensable for achieving long-term conservation success. It’s great to have friends, but it’s even better to have partners. Check out the following page for an example of how we're partnering with multiple organizations for wetland conservation in Montana.



The Power of Partnerships: Mapping Wetlands in Montana

The NGPJV collaborated with MFWP, the Intermountain West Joint Venture, and Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) to develop a new process for prioritizing wetland habitat projects outside of the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) in Montana. The PPR was excluded from this process, as there is an existing model in place that prioritizes projects within that region of Montana. The goal was to develop a similar streamlined process for projects outside of the PPR.

All partners involved provided input on a list of priority wetland-associated avian species across the

state and shared the list with the MFWP Wetland Protection Advisory Council. MNHP then used their existing process for developing biodiversity layers to create a cumulative biodiversity layer to help identify areas with the habitat potential to support higher numbers of wetland-associated species. For more information on the methodology MNHP used, visit [here](#).

As of summer 2025, the Wetland Protection Advisory Council approved the use of the new process and future project applications may be streamlined using the prioritization map. For more information on the streamlined process, please contact Heather Harris (heharris@mt.gov).

FWP PRIORITY WETLAND HABITAT

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks aims to help partners efficiently advance wetland conservation projects. An existing model within the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) uses waterfowl data to target wetland restoration and enhancement projects, setting a precedent for success. To streamline the application process, the Intermountain West (IWJV) and Northern Great Plains Joint Ventures (NGPJV) collaborated to create a statewide habitat-focused map for this use.

Priority map

We selected 40 priority bird species based on species lists from the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV), PPJV, and Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV). Using data from the Montana Natural Heritage Program, we analyzed species distributions and habitat needs. Habitat suitability models for individual species informed a cumulative biodiversity layer for use in wetland habitat prioritization decisions. In this map, darker green colors indicates better habitat for more bird species.

The PPJV region was excluded due to its unique landscape and existing prioritization system, allowing more accurate estimates within the NGPJV and IWJV regions.

Wetland habitat suitability

Intermountain West Joint Venture Northern Great Plains Joint Venture

Wetland-associated species

- American Avocet
- American Bittern
- American White Pelican
- American Wigeon
- Black Tern
- Black-necked Stilt
- Blue-winged Teal
- Canvasback
- Cinnamon Teal
- Clark's Grebe
- Common Loon
- Eared Grebe
- Franklin's Gull
- Gadwall
- Great Blue Heron
- Green-winged Teal
- Horned Grebe
- Lesser Scaup
- Long-billed Curlew
- Mallard
- Marbled Godwit
- Northern Pintail
- Northern Shoveler
- Pied-billed Grebe
- Piping Plover
- Red-necked Phalarope
- Redhead
- Ring-necked Duck
- Sandhill Crane
- Semipalmated Sandpiper
- Sora
- Spotted Sandpiper
- Virginia Rail
- Western Grebe
- Western Sandpiper
- White-faced Ibis
- Willet
- Wilson's Phalarope
- Yellow Rail

For more information about this mapping effort, contact Teagan Hayes (teagan.hayes@iwjv.org) or Andrew Olsen (andrew.olsen@iwjv.org).



NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

JOINT VENTURE

