



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Restoring and Enhancing Minnesota's Important Bird Areas in the St. Croix River Valley
Laws of Minnesota 2023 Accomplishment Plan

General Information

Date: 05/15/2025

Project Title: Restoring and Enhancing Minnesota's Important Bird Areas in the St. Croix River Valley

Funds Recommended: \$1,034,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2023, Ch. 40, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd. 5(s)

Appropriation Language: \$1,034,000 the first year is to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with Audubon Minnesota to restore and enhance wildlife habitat in important bird areas and other priority wildlife areas in the St. Croix River Valley. A list of proposed restorations and enhancements must be provided as part of the required accomplishment plan.

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Dale Gentry

Title: Conservation Director

Organization: Audubon Minnesota

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Location Information

County Location(s): Chisago, Pine and Washington.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Metro / Urban

Northern Forest

Activity types:

Enhance

Restore

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Habitat

Forest

Prairie

Narrative**Abstract**

Audubon Minnesota is requesting \$910,000 funds to enhance 440 acres and restore 34 acres of significant wildlife habitat on public and permanently protected private lands along the Saint Croix River valley. Our project and parcel prioritization criteria place an emphasis on areas that fall within Important Bird Areas (IBA) and priority areas identified by the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan within Pine and Washington counties that border the Saint Croix River.

Design and Scope of Work

Audubon Minnesota will advance conservation in eastern Minnesota by Restoring and Enhancing Minnesota's Important Bird Areas (IBA) in the Saint Croix River watershed. This Program will continue to expand the Outdoor Heritage Funds' legacy of restoration and enhancement of Minnesota's natural heritage. Our Program places an emphasis on Minnesota's Important Bird Areas (IBAs) as they are essential to maintaining healthy and diverse bird populations in the state. The Saint Croix River watershed supports over 329 bird species (as many as 172 breeding species) including state-endangered Henslow's Sparrow and species of special concern Red-shouldered Hawk and Louisiana Waterthrush and Audubon stewardship species (ie. species with more than 5% of the global population breeding in Minnesota) like the Golden-winged Warbler, American Woodcock, Veery, and Bobolink among numerous waterfowl, raptors, and game birds. Gray wolves, fisher, and the American badger are among other wildlife found in the region which contains more than 150 species of greatest conservation (SGCN) need which should also benefit from this project.

While enhancing and restoring habitats within IBAs is a primary goal, we recognize that some of the greatest opportunities exist where we can conserve critical habitats in areas where a high percentage of the habitat has been degraded. Much of southern Minnesota has been converted to agricultural production and the urban and suburban character of the Twin Cities Metro region has further transformed the mixed hardwood forests in east-central Minnesota into other habitat types. Research in other regions reveals that migrant landbirds stopover in high concentrations in hardwood forests, particularly those near heavily urbanized areas, highlighting the importance of the habitat around the Twin Cities Metropolitan region. This invites focused conservation of the remaining natural habitats found near converted habitats. This project will seek to restore and enhance some of the best remaining habitats in a region where most of the historic habitats for breeding and migratory bird have been degraded.

We will expand the available habitat for priority bird species through native seed plantings, management of brush and tree species in grasslands, planting trees and enhancing natural regeneration in forests and savannas, and

invasive species control. Projects will be targeted and selected based on a prioritization model that focuses on core habitat, acres of remnant habitat, and habitat conditions. Restoration and enhancement projects will include a site assessment, including an analysis of habitat suitability for priority species and habitat conditions as well as documentation of prescribed habitat management actions (photo points) and recommended follow-up actions for future management.

We will work closely with local staff from the Belwin Conservancy, Minnesota State Forests, and State Parks to identify habitat needs on public and private lands in these key geographies. Audubon will write Habitat Management Action Plans, obtain necessary permits, and complete enhancement and restoration work to create better habitats for species of concern.

These partnership efforts will deliver effective means of enhancing and restoring ecologically significant land for the benefit of birds, wildlife, and people in east-central Minnesota.

How does the plan address habitats that have significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, and/or threatened or endangered species, and list targeted species?

Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan has identified a group of breeding bird species labeled as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). SGCN are species whose populations are rare, declining, or vulnerable to decline and are below levels desirable to ensure their long-term health and stability. All of these species have experienced significant declines, are dependent on vulnerable habitats, and/or have been recognized as priorities by various resource agencies and experts in the field. The purpose of identifying priority species is to be strategic about identifying a small number of species that should be the focus of conservation efforts in the short term to prevent further population declines. Based on our priority species for the Saint Croix River region, there are 49 Species of Greatest Conservation Need that could benefit from this grassland and woodland habitat restoration and enhancement program, such as the Veery, Grasshopper Sparrow, Eastern Whip-poor-will, six species of warbler, three species of flycatcher, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo among others. In addition, there are eight bird species that are listed by the state as endangered, threatened, or special concern including the: Henslow's Sparrow, Red-shouldered Hawk, Lark Sparrow, Peregrine Falcon, Louisiana Waterthrush, Purple Martin, Cerulean Warbler, and Hooded Warbler.

This project will specifically highlight opportunities to restore and enhance habitat for the following SGCN: Henslow's Sparrow, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrow, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-shouldered Hawk, Golden-winged Warbler, American Woodcock, and Wood Thrush.

Describe how the plan uses science-based targeting that leverages or expands corridors and complexes, reduces fragmentation or protects areas identified in the MN County Biological Survey:

In an effort to protect some of the most unique wildlife habitat in Minnesota, our proposal focuses on the three state, and one global, Important Bird Areas bordering the Saint Croix River. Audubon Minnesota and partners have identified 57 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Minnesota through a Technical Committee, comprised of bird experts and conservationists from across the state including the MN Biological Survey. IBAs have been identified in over 170 countries that provide essential habitats for one or more breeding, wintering, and/or migrating bird species. IBAs are a proactive, voluntary, science-based program that works to identify, monitor, and conserve the most essential habitats for birds. In short, these IBAs are the most important areas in which to preserve Minnesota's game and non-game avian legacy. Audubon sees a tremendous opportunity for directing conservation resources to protect habitats within IBAs and surrounding areas. We are also using additional plans and analyses, like Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan, and the Minnesota Biological Survey biodiversity significance status, to further

refine the geographic scope of our efforts to yield the highest conservation return on investment. Minnesota County Biological Survey information and Natural Heritage Information System data along with recommendations in the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan will be crucial to the prioritization of parcels where restoration and enhancement work is undertaken.

In addition to the rigorous process used to designate IBAs, Audubon has developed a Minnesota Blueprint for Bird Conservation, a comprehensive compilation of national, regional, and state bird and habitat conservation plans that address Minnesota bird species and Minnesota landscapes. The Minnesota Blueprint emphasized bird conservation documents developed by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). This Blueprint builds upon existing efforts by identifying the highest priorities in each ecological region and using select Species of Greatest Conservation Need; synthesizing the best proven conservation practices for each species; establishing measurable goals for species' population targets; and identifying key sites for conservation work.

Which two sections of the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan are most applicable to this project?

H1 Protect priority land habitats

LU8 Protect large blocks of forest land

Which two other plans are addressed in this program?

Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025

Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes Region Projects Joint Ventures Plan

Which LSOHC section priorities are addressed in this program?

Metro / Urban

Protect habitat corridors, with emphasis on the Minnesota, Mississippi, and St. Croix rivers (bluff to floodplain)

Northern Forest

Restore forest-based wildlife habitat that has experienced substantial decline in area in recent decades

Outcomes

Programs in metropolitan urbanizing region:

A network of natural land and riparian habitats will connect corridors for wildlife and species in greatest conservation need ~ *Outcomes can be measured by the number of acres impacted and the number of projects Audubon and partners restore or enhance. Habitat Management Action Plans will detail specific restoration or enhancement prescriptions for each project on public lands and permanent conservation easements. The quality of work and level of success of projects on State Forest and State Park lands will be monitored through various DNR monitoring protocols. All of the project work undertaken can be assessed based on the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan and the Upper Mississippi/Great Lakes Join Venture Landbird Conservation Plan.*

Programs in the northern forest region:

Improved availability and improved condition of habitats that have experienced substantial decline ~ *Outcomes can be measured by the number of acres impacted and the number of projects Audubon and partners restore or enhance. Habitat Management Action Plans will detail specific restoration or enhancement*

prescriptions for each project on public lands and permanent conservation easements. The quality of work and level of success of projects on State Forest and State Park lands will be monitored through various DNR monitoring protocols. All of the project work undertaken can be assessed based on the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan and the Upper Mississippi/Great Lakes Joint Venture Landbird Conservation Plan.

Does this program include leveraged funding?

Yes

Explain the leverage:

Leverage is provided from Direct Source Service costs and in-kind match from partners. Audubon is leveraging state funds with private funds contributed to Audubon. These funds are used to offset un-recovered DSS.

Per MS 97A.056, Subd. 24, Please explain whether the request is supplanting or is a substitution for any previous funding that was not from a legacy fund and was used for the same purpose.

LSOHC funding is in addition to other funding sources, and does not supplant that work. Without LSOHC funding, Audubon MN would not have resources to implement enhancement projects, and would have greater challenges in funding personnel salaries associated with this work.

How will you sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended?

Audubon is committed to working with our State and private partners to ensure management recommendations are understood and implemented to the highest degree. Enhancement and restoration that occurs on state-held lands will expand and bolster the habitat work being done on public lands for the benefit of game and non-game bird species and other wildlife. They have very successful stewardship programs that include annual property monitoring, effective records management, investigating potential violations, and defending the land. Likewise, the Belwin Conservancy also monitors its landholdings closely through multiple site visits a year, habitat management prioritization models, and land management. Our enhancement and restoration work will improve habitat conditions for priority species and increase the efficiency of future actions with regard to invasive species and woody species encroachment. Any Outdoor Heritage Funds allocated will expedite and expand the breadth of the enhancement activities on these conserved parcels.

In addition, Audubon will prepare a habitat management action plan for each property, providing ecological management recommendations for the property over time to maintain and manage the land for grassland and wetland species, including focal species and Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2028-2031	Belwin, DNR	Planning Amendments	Maintenance/Management	-
2023-2027	LSOHC, Belwin, DNR	Site recon, Prescription Development and planning	Conduct Site Management	Maintenance

Provide an assessment of how your program celebrates cultural diversity or reaches diverse communities in Minnesota, including reaching low- and moderate-income households:

This work will directly benefit BIPOC communities in some of the counties where Audubon will restore and enhance lands. The proximity of the lower Saint Croix River to the Twin Cities Metropolitan area means that

improved habitats will be accessible for outdoor recreation, hunting, and fishing by the members of the Twin Cities metropolitan counties which have a higher density of BIPOC communities. Further, birds are excellent indicators of environmental health and ecosystem integrity and our forest and grassland restoration and enhancements to benefit birds will also benefit the overall health of the surrounding ecosystem and create a more diverse habitat for both game and non-game wildlife species.

One of the ways we can celebrate their cultural heritage and historic stewardship of the river is by managing the river and the land in alignment with the Native American philosophy of wise stewardship for land that we do not own. In the past, indigenous cultures managed land for game species. Today, indigenous cultures still manage livestock, use prescribed fires for habitat enhancement, and harvest many native plants such as wild rice and wild fruits. Our work will complement those natural resource management activities and help to maximize the clean water benefits, as well as, preserve the cultural importance of the natural landscape for indigenous communities.

Activity Details

Requirements

If funded, this program will meet all applicable criteria set forth in MS 97A.056?

Yes

Will restoration and enhancement work follow best management practices including MS 84.973 Pollinator Habitat Program?

Yes

Is the restoration and enhancement activity on permanently protected land per 97A.056, Subd 13(f), tribal lands, and/or public waters per MS 103G.005, Subd. 15 or on lands to be acquired in this program?

Yes

Where does the activity take place?

State Forests

Permanently Protected Conservation Easements

Other : State Parks

Land Use

Will there be planting of any crop on OHF land purchased or restored in this program, either by the proposer or the end owner of the property, outside of the initial restoration of the land?

Yes

Explain what will be planted and include the maximum percentage of any acquired parcel that would be planted into foodplots by the proposer or the end owner of the property:

We may not use this approach but short-term use of agricultural crops is an accepted best practice for preparing a site for prairie restoration. For example, short-term use of soybeans could be used for restorations in order to control weed seedbeds prior to prairie planting. In some (but certainly not all) cases this necessitates the use of GMO treated products to facilitate herbicide use in order to control weeds present in the seedbank. No neonicotinoid treated seeds will be used.

Timeline

Activity Name	Estimated Completion Date
Complete restoration and enhancement habitat projects. Post-management summary of habitat suitability for targeted species.	June 2027
Conduct habitat restoration and enhancement of both public and permanently protected private lands.	June 2026
Implement a portion of the Habitat Management Action Plans for restoration and enhancement recommendations on private land easements and public lands to benefit targeted bird species.	June 2025

Date of Final Report Submission: 06/25/2028

Availability of Appropriation: Subd. 7. Availability of Appropriation

(a) Money appropriated in this section may not be spent on activities unless they are directly related to and necessary for a specific appropriation and are specified in the accomplishment plan approved by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council. Money appropriated in this section must not be spent on indirect costs or other institutional overhead charges that are not directly related to and necessary for a specific appropriation. Money appropriated to acquire land in fee may be used to restore, enhance, and provide for public use of the land acquired with the appropriation. Public-use facilities must have a minimal impact on habitat in acquired lands.

(b) Money appropriated in this section is available as follows:

- (1) money appropriated for acquiring real property is available until June 30, 2027;
- (2) money appropriated for restoring and enhancing land acquired with an appropriation in this act is available for four years after the acquisition date with a maximum end date of June 30, 2031;
- (3) money appropriated for restoring or enhancing other land is available until June 30, 2028;
- (4) notwithstanding clauses (1) to (3), money appropriated for a project that receives at least 15 percent of its funding from federal funds is available until a date sufficient to match the availability of federal funding to a maximum of six years if the federal funding was confirmed and included in the original approved draft accomplishment plan; and
- (5) money appropriated for other projects is available until the end of the fiscal year in which it is appropriated.

Budget

Budget reallocations up to 10% do not require an amendment to the Accomplishment Plan.

Totals

Item	Funding Request	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$334,000	\$75,000	Audubon	\$409,000
Contracts	\$633,000	-	-	\$633,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-
Travel	\$6,000	-	-	\$6,000
Professional Services	-	-	-	-
Direct Support Services	\$35,000	\$47,900	Audubon	\$82,900
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	\$3,000	-	-	\$3,000
Supplies/Materials	\$23,000	-	-	\$23,000
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,034,000	\$122,900	-	\$1,156,900

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Funding Request	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Conservation Manager	0.17	4.0	\$59,000	\$14,000	Audubon	\$73,000
Conservation Director	0.1	4.0	\$55,000	\$14,000	Audubon	\$69,000
St. Croix Project Manager	0.75	4.0	\$220,000	\$47,000	Audubon	\$267,000

Amount of Request: \$1,034,000

Amount of Leverage: \$122,900

Leverage as a percent of the Request: 11.89%

DSS + Personnel: \$369,000

As a % of the total request: 35.69%

Easement Stewardship: -

As a % of the Easement Acquisition: -

How will this program accommodate the reduced appropriation recommendation from the original proposed requested amount?

We cut out the salary for the grants manager and we reduced the salary requests for the conservation manager. We also reduced the number of acres that will be treated.

Describe and explain leverage source and confirmation of funds:

Leverage is provided from Direct Source Service costs and partner in-kind match. Audubon is also leveraging state funds with private funds contributed to Audubon. These funds are used to offset un-recovered DSS.

Does this project have the ability to be scalable?

Yes

If the project received 50% of the requested funding

Describe how the scaling would affect acres/activities and if not proportionately reduced, why?

This project is scalable; the number of acres could be reduced proportionally. Acres of restoration and enhancement projects would be reduced if the project received 70% of requested funding.

Describe how personnel and DSS expenses would be adjusted and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Based on our experiences with other LSOHC supported projects, personnel and dedicated support staff are important to project success and more difficult to scale down, though possible.

Personnel

Has funding for these positions been requested in the past?

Yes

Contracts

What is included in the contracts line?

The contract line item is directed to enhancement and restoration projects. We will use Minnesota-based contractors for aspects of project work, including heavy equipment work, brush mowing, tree removal in prairies, selective herbicide use for invasive species and site preparation, and seedings.

Travel

Does the amount in the travel line include equipment/vehicle rental?

Yes

Explain the amount in the travel line outside of traditional travel costs of mileage, food, and lodging

Audubon Minnesota staff may rent vehicles for grant-related purposes as needed.

I understand and agree that lodging, meals, and mileage must comply with the current MMB Commissioner Plan:

Yes

Direct Support Services

How did you determine which portions of the Direct Support Services of your shared support services is direct to this program?

DSS was calculated on 10% of all costs except contracts.

Other Equipment/Tools

Give examples of the types of Equipment and Tools that will be purchased?

Native prairie seeds, field gear, field guides, office supplies for fieldwork and file management, smartphone applications related to mapping or plant ID, maps, and plant books.

Federal Funds

Do you anticipate federal funds as a match for this program?

No

Output Tables**Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)**

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Acres
Restore	-	-	-	34	34
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	514	514
Total	-	-	-	548	548

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	\$120,000	\$120,000
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	\$914,000	\$914,000
Total	-	-	-	\$1,034,000	\$1,034,000

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Acres
Restore	34	-	-	-	0	34
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	231	-	-	-	283	514
Total	265	-	-	-	283	548

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Funding
Restore	\$120,000	-	-	-	-	\$120,000
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	\$400,000	-	-	-	\$514,000	\$914,000
Total	\$520,000	-	-	-	\$514,000	\$1,034,000

Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type (Table 5)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat
Restore	-	-	-	\$3,529
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	\$1,778

Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section (Table 6)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest
Restore	\$3,529	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	\$1,731	-	-	-	\$1,816

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

Parcels

Parcel Information

Sign-up Criteria?

No

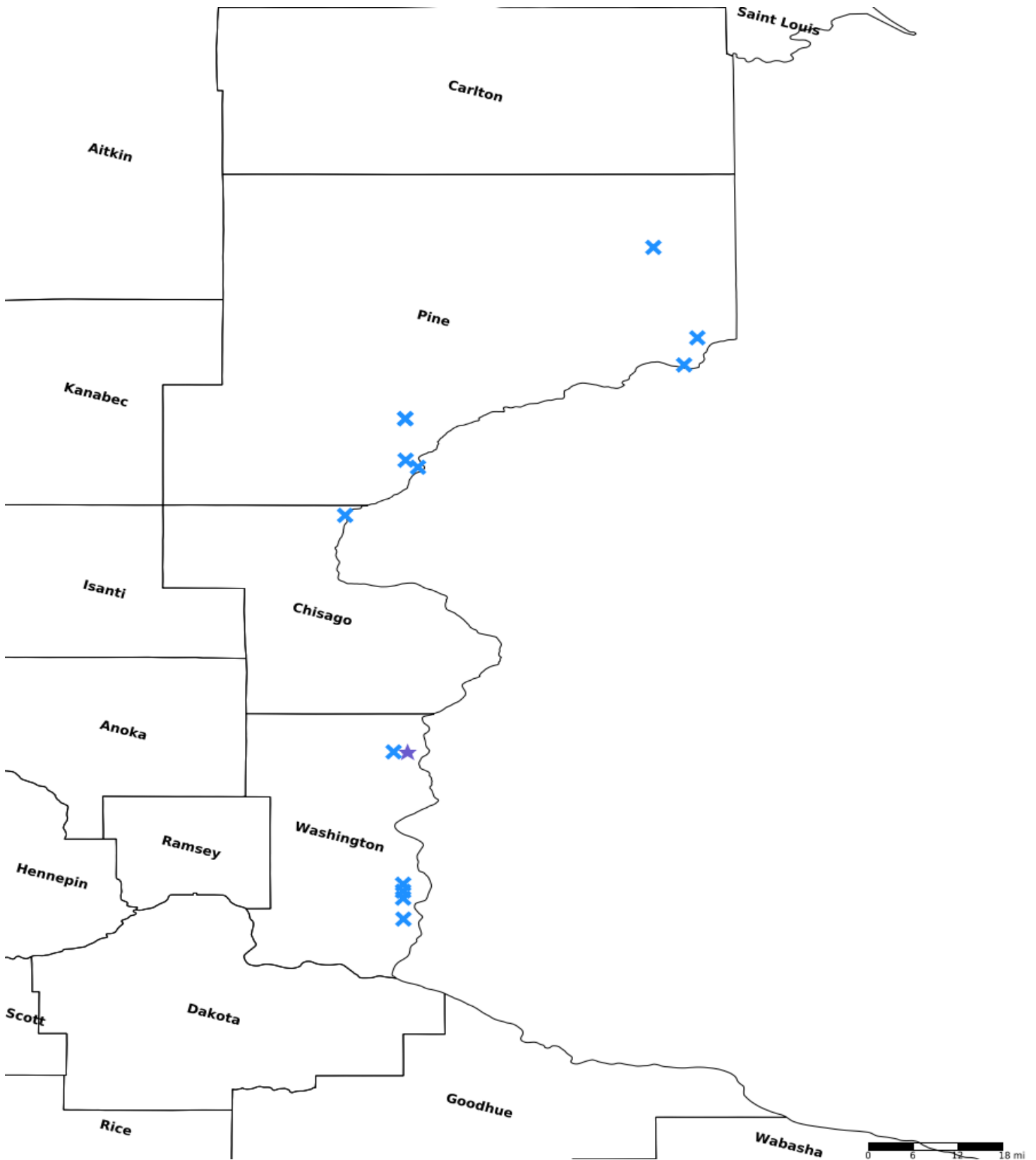
Explain the process used to identify, prioritize, and select the parcels on your list:

Audubon collaborated with MN Department of Natural Resources divisions of forestry and parks and trails and the Belwin Conservancy to identify priority parcels for enhancement and restoration projects. Projects were targeted and selected based on a prioritization model that focuses on core habitat, geography, conservation estate, potential target species suitability, acres of remnant habitat, and current habitat condition. Additional parcels were added as specific prioritization mapping, site visits, and habitat assessments further narrow our focus.

Restore / Enhance Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection	Description
Chengatna SF Woody Invasives	Chisago	03720208	23	\$5,070	Yes	Buckthorn management by CCMI in CSF
MN State forest 1	Pine	04216234	100	\$107,000	Yes	early successional habitat
MN State forest 2	Pine	04116221	25	\$31,600	Yes	forest resiliency and oak release in prep for eab
MN State forest 3	Pine	03920236	60	\$36,000	Yes	manage invasives for juvenile recruitment
MN State forest 4	Pine	04020236	40	\$46,000	Yes	early successional habitat
MN State forest 5	Pine	03819206	20	\$20,000	Yes	forest resiliency in prep for eab
MN State forest 6	Pine	04020236	28	\$28,000	Yes	manage woody invasives, plant native shrubs
Sandstone DNR ABC #1	Pine	04416230	0	\$5,000	Yes	Supporting ABC project to manage storm damaged aspen
Afton 50th Street	Washington	02820234	90	\$157,000	Yes	old field to prairie
Afton Slopes	Washington	02820203	16	\$35,000	Yes	woody invasive removal
Belwin Savanna Hills	Washington	02820210	49	\$44,000	Yes	manage woody invasives, plant native shrubs
Belwin Valley Creek	Washington	02820215	33	\$35,000	Yes	manage woody invasives, plant native shrubs
William O'Brien Savanna	Washington	03220235	36	\$38,000	Yes	woody invasive removal
William O'Brien West	Washington	03220236	34	\$60,000	Yes	restore ag field

Parcel Map



- Protect in Easement
- ▲ Protect in Fee with PILT
- Protect in Fee W/O PILT
- ★ Restore
- ✕ Enhance
- ⊕ Other