



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

A River of Birds in the Sky: Conserving Minnesota's Flyway
Laws of Minnesota 2026 Accomplishment Plan

General Information

Date: 06/08/2026

Project Title: A River of Birds in the Sky: Conserving Minnesota's Flyway

Funds Recommended: \$1,227,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2026, Ch. 126, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd. 5(q)

Appropriation Language: \$1,227,000 the second year is to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with National Audubon Society to restore and enhance priority wildlife habitat along the St. Croix, Minnesota, and Mississippi river valleys.

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Dale Gentry

Title: Director of Conservation

Organization: Audubon Minnesota

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Location Information

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

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Metro / Urban

Northern Forest

Activity types:

Enhance

Restore

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Habitat

Narrative**Abstract**

Audubon Upper Mississippi River is requesting \$1,052,000 to restore 18 acres and enhance 320 acres of significant wildlife habitat on public and permanently protected private lands along the Saint Croix, Minnesota, and Mississippi River valleys. This landscape serves as part of the Mississippi River flyway, which hosts the largest numbers of migratory birds of all the four major flyways in North America. Our project prioritization criteria emphasize areas that fall within Important Bird Areas (IBA) and priority areas identified by the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan in this region.

Design and Scope of Work

Audubon will advance conservation in Minnesota by enhancing Minnesota's Important Bird Areas (IBA) in the Saint Croix River watershed and nearby sections of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers across the 7-county Metro Area. Our work aligns with the Outdoor Heritage Funds' legacy of restoration and enhancement of Minnesota's natural heritage, by emphasizing Minnesota's Important Bird Areas (IBAs), which are essential to maintaining healthy and diverse bird populations in the state. The Saint Croix River watershed supports over 329 bird species (170+ breeding species) including Henslow's Sparrow (state-endangered list), Red-shouldered Hawk, and Louisiana Waterthrush (both species of special concern). The watershed also supports Audubon stewardship species defined as species with more than 5% of the global population breeding in Minnesota such as the Golden-winged Warbler, American Woodcock, Veery, and Bobolink. Last but certainly not least, the area supports numerous waterfowl, raptors, and game birds like Ruffed Grouse and pheasants. Fisher, White-tailed Deer, and the American badger are among other wildlife found in the region which contains more than 150 non-avian species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) that will benefit from this project.

While enhancing habitats within IBAs is a primary goal, we recognize that some of the greatest opportunities exist conserving critical habitat in areas where a high percentage of the habitat has been transformed by human use. For example, recent research reveals that hardwood forests, particularly those near developed areas, are disproportionately important to nocturnally migratory birds who are attracted to artificial light at night. This finding invites focused conservation of the remaining natural habitats found near human communities. This project will enhance some of the best remaining habitats in a region where most of the historic habitats for breeding and migratory birds have been dramatically altered.

We will expand the available habitat for priority bird species through native seed plantings, managing brush and tree species in grasslands, controlling invasive species, planting trees, and enhancing natural regeneration of trees in forests and savannas. Projects will be selected based on a prioritization model focused on habitat quality and connectivity. Enhancement projects will feature a site assessment, analysis of habitat suitability for priority species and habitat conditions, 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, Ramsey County and Saint Paul Parks, Pine County, and MN 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 improved 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 Minnesota.

Explain how the plan addresses habitat protection, restoration, and/or enhancement for fish, game & wildlife, including threatened or endangered species conservation

Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan has identified a group of wildlife species labeled as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). SGCN are rare, declining, or vulnerable to decline and are below levels desirable to ensure their long-term health and stability. In addition to population declines, many 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 analysis, there are 49 avian Species of Greatest Conservation Need that will benefit from this grassland and woodland habitat restoration and enhancement program. A few examples include Grasshopper Sparrow, Veery, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Eastern Towhee, Brown Thrasher, six species of warbler, three species of flycatcher, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo other non-avian wildlife and fish. In addition, this region contains nine bird species that are listed by the state as endangered, threatened, or special concern, and will benefit from our work: Henslow's Sparrow, Red-shouldered Hawk, Lark Sparrow, Peregrine Falcon, Louisiana Waterthrush, Acadian Flycatcher, Purple Martin, Cerulean Warbler, and Hooded Warbler.

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

For example, habitat availability for shrubland species, such as the Eastern Towhee, Brown Thrasher, and Golden-winged Warbler, is ever changing. As patches of young forests and shrubland mature into forests or are cleared for agriculture or development, these species have seen corresponding declines in populations. We can enhance shrubland bird habitat while maintaining a resilient balance of forest, savanna, and prairie habitats, through deliberate softening and feathering of appropriate forest edges. Irregular thinning of a forest edge, planting of native shrubs, and continued cyclical mowing of old shrubland habitat can help to maintain a buffer between open lands and forest that serves as functional habitat for shrubland birds.

What are the elements of this plan that are critical from a timing perspective?

A landmark 2019 study showed North American bird populations have declined by nearly one-third; a loss of three billion birds since 1970. While many factors are driving these declines, the loss and degradation of habitat is the most significant cause. Grassland birds and forest birds that prefer young or old forests are among the bird populations with the steepest declines.

Grassland habitats, even when protected, are in danger of becoming overgrown by woody species and invaded by non-native cool-season grasses (ie. smooth brome) when there is a lack of disturbance. The same is true for woody invasives in forests. Over time, enhancement and restoration of these lands in need of disturbance become more challenging. This project presents an opportunity to enhance critical habitats in areas crucial to Minnesota's biodiversity.

Describe how the plan expands habitat corridors or complexes and/or addresses habitat fragmentation:

In an effort to protect some of the most important wildlife habitat in Minnesota, our proposal focuses on the five state, and one global, Important Bird Areas found along the Saint Croix, Minnesota, and Mississippi Rivers as they pass through the Metro Area. Audubon and project 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 identifies, monitors, and conserves the most essential and connected habitats for birds. In short, these IBAs are among the most important areas to direct conservation resources in order to preserve Minnesota's game and non-game avian legacy. Audubon additionally utilizes 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, Natural Heritage Information System data, and recommendations in the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan are crucial to prioritizing parcels where enhancement work is undertaken.

Which top 2 Conservation Plans referenced in MS97A.056, subd. 3a are most applicable to this project?

Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025

Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes Region Projects Joint Ventures Plan

Explain how this plan will uniquely address habitat resilience to climate change and its anticipated effects on game, fish & wildlife species utilizing the protected or restored/enhanced habitat this proposal targets.

Recommendations for climate smart forestry are similar to bird friendly forestry; therefore, management for birds creates and strengthens climate resilient landscapes. This project would support the removal of invasive species, improve forest diversity and structure, and address forest health concerns related to insect, disease, and climate-driven stressors. This strategy improves the quality and resilience of a diversity of habitats that birds rely on. As Minnesota's weather patterns continues to change, it is important to assess the species composition of the landscape and determine if climate adapted species may be a good fit for planting. Landscapes managed for birds, utilizing the most current avian and climate science, are generally healthier and more resilient to climate change.

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 Joint 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.*

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 Upper Mississippi River would not have resources to implement habitat 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 working with our partners to ensure management recommendations are understood and implemented to the highest degree. In some cases, our enhancements (e.g. brush management) will facilitate the implementation of different and better management strategies (e.g. prescribed fire) that are not available under current vegetation conditions. Enhancement that occurs on public lands will expand and bolster the habitat work being done for the benefit of game and non-game bird species. Each public partner has successful stewardship programs that include annual property monitoring, effective records management, processes for investigating potential violations, and managing 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 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 focal grassland and forest species.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2030-2035	Belwin, DNR, Ramsey Co.	Site recon, prescription development, planning and bidding	Implement Maintenance/Management	Continued site recon and management
2026-2029	LSOHC, Belwin, DNR, Ramsey Co.	Site recon, prescription development, planning and bidding	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:

In the past, indigenous cultures managed all the lands we now call Minnesota. We seek to recognize and celebrate their cultural heritage by managing the land with similar objectives (ie. holistic ecosystem health) and methods (ie. restoring natural disturbance regimes) to the best of our ability and understanding. Today, indigenous cultures are still connected to the land and manage livestock, use prescribed fire for habitat enhancement, and harvest many native plants such as wild rice, maple sap, and many wild fruits and medicines. Our work will celebrate and complement those natural resource management activities and help to maximize the clean water and healthy land benefits, as well as preserve the cultural importance of the natural landscape, and native species, for indigenous communities.

Furthermore, 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, Mississippi, and Minnesota Rivers to the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area means that improved habitats with healthier communities of wildlife 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 people. Further, birds are excellent indicators of environmental health and ecosystem integrity. Our forest and grassland enhancements designed to benefit birds will also improve the overall health of the surrounding ecosystem and create a more diverse habitat for both game and non-game wildlife species.

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

County/Municipal

SNA

WMA

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?

No

Will insecticides or fungicides (including neonicotinoid and fungicide treated seed) be used within any activities of this program either in the process of restoration or use as food plots?

No

Timeline

Activity Name	Estimated Completion Date
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 2027
Complete restoration and enhancement habitat projects. Post-management summary of habitat suitability for targeted species.	June 2030
Conduct habitat restoration and enhancement of both public and permanently protected private lands.	June 2029

Date of Final Report Submission: 11/01/2030

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 for fee title acquisition of land 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, 2030;
- (2) money appropriated for restoring and enhancing land acquired with an appropriation in this section is available for four years after the acquisition date with a maximum end date of June 30, 2034;
- (3) money appropriated for restoring or enhancing other land is available until June 30, 2031;
- (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	\$370,000	\$91,000	Audubon donors, USFS Bird Friendly Maple Grant	\$461,000
Contracts	\$736,000	-	-	\$736,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-
Travel	\$6,500	-	-	\$6,500
Professional Services	-	-	-	-
Direct Support Services	\$54,500	\$17,100	Unrecovered ICR	\$71,600
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	\$60,000	-	-	\$60,000
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,227,000	\$108,100	-	\$1,335,100

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Funding Request	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Grant Administrator	0.03	4.0	\$18,000	\$16,000	Audubon donors	\$34,000
Conservation Manager	0.14	4.0	\$78,000	-	-	\$78,000
Conservation Director	0.09	4.0	\$59,000	\$21,000	USFS Bird Friendly Maple Grant	\$80,000
Forest Ecologist	0.7	4.0	\$215,000	\$54,000	USFS Bird Friendly Maple Grant	\$269,000

Amount of Request: \$1,227,000

Amount of Leverage: \$108,100

Leverage as a percent of the Request: 8.81%

DSS + Personnel: \$424,500

As a % of the total request: 34.6%

Easement Stewardship: -

As a % of the Easement Acquisition: -

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

We reduced the salaries for the Conservation Director and Conservation Manager and reduced the acres and associated expenses for contracts, supplies and travel proportional to the percentage reduced.

Detail leverage sources and confirmation of funds:

Leverage is provided from Direct Source Service costs. Audubon is also leveraging state funds with private funds contributed to Audubon. These funds are used to offset un-recovered DSS. We are also leveraging a US Forest Service grant to implement the Bird Friendly Maple syrup program in Minnesota.

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 50% 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 and CCMI 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

All the travel costs are for mileage, food and lodging for habitat projects, and partner and staff meetings.

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?

Our Direct Support Services is based on Audubon's federally negotiated indirect rate of 24.66%. In this proposal, we are requesting reimbursement of 10% of eligible costs from LSOHC and matching 14.66%. The indirect cost rate only applies to the first \$25,000 of the Contracts line item. Please see attachment for documentation.

Federal Funds

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

Yes

Are the funds confirmed?

Yes

Is Confirmation Document attached?

Yes, on file

Cash : \$75,000

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

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Acres
Restore	-	-	-	18	18
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	375	375
Total	-	-	-	393	393

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	\$1,152,000	\$1,152,000
Total	-	-	-	\$1,227,000	\$1,227,000

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Acres
Restore	18	-	-	-	-	18
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	275	-	-	-	100	375
Total	293	-	-	-	100	393

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Funding
Restore	\$75,000	-	-	-	-	\$75,000
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	\$740,000	-	-	-	\$412,000	\$1,152,000
Total	\$815,000	-	-	-	\$412,000	\$1,227,000

Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type (Table 5)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat
Restore	-	-	-	\$4,166
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	\$3,072

Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section (Table 6)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest
Restore	\$4,166	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	\$2,690	-	-	-	\$4,120

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

Parcels

Parcel Information

Sign-up Criteria?

No

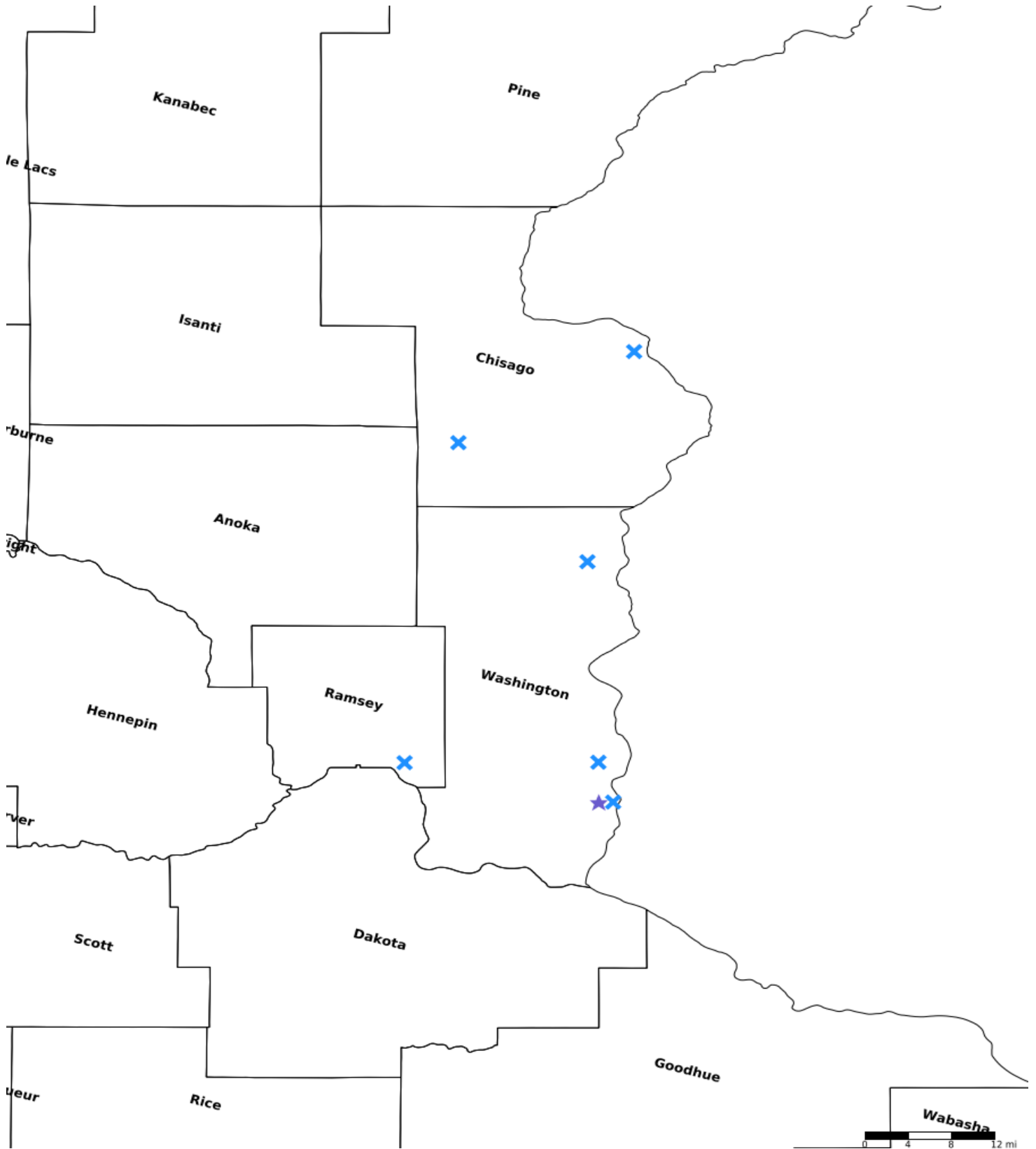
Explain the process used to identify, prioritize, and select the parcels on your list:

Audubon collaborated with MN Department of Natural Resources divisions of forestry and parks and trails, the Belwin Conservancy, and Ramsey County and City of St. Paul 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
Carlos Avery	Chisago	03421233	26	\$50,000	Yes	Woody invasive removal and chemical treatment, brush saw, hand removal and some mowing
Wild River Forests	Chisago	03519217	18	\$30,000	Yes	Fuels management of dead and down trees and brush. Site prep for fire and future tree planting.
Battle Creek Bluffs	Ramsey	02822210	65	\$120,000	Yes	Woody invasives cutting/treatment and follow up foliar application, majority handwork by contractor
Afton Prairie Enhancement	Washington	02820235	37	\$75,000	Yes	Woody invasives cutting/treatment and follow up foliar application, majority handwork by contractor
Afton Prairie Restoration	Washington	02820234	58	\$100,000	Yes	Cedar/brush removal. Foxglove treatment. Boom spray. Seed
Belwin Ed Forest	Washington	02820210	47	\$90,000	Yes	Woody invasives cutting/treatment and follow up foliar application, majority handwork by contractor
William O'Brien State Park	Washington	03220235	22	\$25,000	Yes	Woody invasives cutting and follow up foliar treatment. Initial work likely done by forestry mower.

Parcel Map



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