

Winona Bird Club members  
Richie Swanson, president  
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4-10-2021

Winona City Council & Mayor  
Winona City Manager & Sustainability Office  
Winona Park & Recreation Department  
John Latsch Memorial Board  
207 Lafayette Street  
Winona MN 55987

Dear Friends,

We'd like to share information about Prairie Island Park and its exceptional biodiversity. We believe Prairie Island needs a conservation designation (e.g. a nature preserve). It needs a natural inventory and a natural resource plan to balance recreational access. We've already communicated some concerns with Park & Rec, the Sustainability Office and Pam Eyden. We appreciate everyone's willingness to communicate with us and the terrific job the city has done during the Pandemic.

The city's dog park and adjacent acreage are located on the site of the last remnant of sand prairie in Winona.<sup>1</sup> The State of Minnesota has lost 99% of its native prairie<sup>2</sup> and considers sand prairie at high risk of extinction.<sup>3</sup> Disappearing plants such as Sullivant's Milkweed and Plains Wild Indigo once grew on Prairie Island's prairie.<sup>4</sup> A Winona State study identified 150+ native prairie plants at Prairie Island, 1989.<sup>5</sup>

American woodcocks once tended ground nests on the sand prairie. They

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<sup>1</sup> Natural Communities and Rare Species of Winona County, Minnesota. Minnesota County Biological Survey, Minnesota County Biological Survey Map Series 11 (1996) Winona County, Minnesota. <https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/maps/winona.pdf>. Palmquist, David. Retired Naturalist, Whitewater State Park. Prairie Island flowers. Message to Richie Swanson. Feb. 8, 2021. Email.

<sup>2</sup> Minnesota DNR 2016. Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025. Division of Ecological and Water Resources, Minnesota DNR. p 31.

<sup>3</sup> Minnesota DNR. Native Plant Community (NPC) Conservation Status Ranks—Global and State. Mar. 17 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Palmquist, David. Retired Naturalist, Whitewater State Park. Prairie Island flowers. Message to R. Swanson. Feb. 8, 2021. Email.

<sup>5</sup> Winona State University Spring 1989. Minnesota State University System. The Vascular Plants of Winona County Minnesota: Prairie Island. Botany Publications.

abundantly performed their sensational sky-dances there.<sup>6</sup> Aldo Leopold championed the sky-dances in *Sand County Almanac*, writing, “I must be sure that, come April, there be no dearth of dancers in the sunset sky.”<sup>7</sup>

Not long ago a Prairie Island camper could witness a teeming skyscape during summer twilights above the spillway. Black terns dive-bombed for minnows, and uncountable nighthawks, swallows, swifts and bats swooped for insects. The activity seethed all across the river.<sup>8</sup> Now Winona’s skies are virtually empty summer evenings. Even great blue herons diminished greatly last summer, apparently abandoning a local rookery.<sup>9</sup>

The journal *Science* reported in 2019 that North America has lost one-third of its birdlife in the last 50 years.<sup>10</sup> “More than half of our grassland birds have disappeared, 717 million in all,” said the New York Times, citing the study. “Forests have lost one billion birds.”<sup>11</sup> Prairie Island—situated on the Mississippi River Flyway—can help mitigate this loss.

E-Bird—a database of bird sightings created by Cornell Lab of Ornithology—offers a preliminary look at Prairie Island’s birdlife. It has park records for 16 of the 34 species<sup>12</sup> that Minnesota legally lists as birds in danger of state extinction, that have grown “extremely uncommon” or in need of “highly specific habitat requirements.”<sup>13</sup> A 1993 bird study of Pools 4-8 found the highest average of species at upland-forest points at Prairie Island. It also found just about as many total species at Prairie Island as at Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge.<sup>14</sup>

Prairie Island’s floodplain forest and the woods in the old deer park location, when protected, can benefit disappearing wildlife such as the federally threatened long-nosed bat, which roosts in large, old trees and bear offspring in forests near water

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<sup>6</sup> Swanson, R. Personal observations 1980s.

<sup>7</sup> Leopold, Aldo. *Sand County Almanac*. Oxford University Press paperback 1968. p 34.

<sup>8</sup> R. Swanson. Personal observations at spillway began 7-4-1977.

<sup>9</sup> Froehly, Jennifer. Winona District Wildlife Biologist, Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. Biological Memo: Winona District 2020 Spring Heron Rookery Checks.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, Kenneth V. et al. Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science* Oct. 4 2019. Vol. 366, Issue 6461, pp 120-124.

<sup>11</sup> Zimmer, Carl. Birds Are Vanishing From North America. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/science/bird-populations-america-canada.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Carlyle, Kathleen. Retired Biologist, United States Fish & Wildlife Service. Message to Richie Swanson. Feb. 11, 2021. Email.

<sup>13</sup> [https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/natural\\_resources/ets/endlist.pdf](https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/ets/endlist.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Schumacher, C. 1993. Point count monitoring of migratory birds on Pools 4-8 of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, Winona MN. p 6.

sources.<sup>15</sup> E-bird has recorded the state-listed red-shouldered hawk and cerulean warbler at Prairie Island,<sup>16</sup> both dependent upon floodplain forest, which improves the river's ability to remove toxins, excessive nutrients (e.g. fertilizer) and sediments. Both the floodplain's trees and the deep roots of prairie plants sequester carbon.<sup>17</sup>

The state-endangered Blanchard's Cricket Frog uses marshes throughout Prairie Island Park and its surroundings, including the small pond behind the dog park.<sup>18</sup> It and the lesser scaup (bluebill) illustrate the need to protect the park's wetlands. The scaup forages at Prairie Island spring and fall. During winter the species faces diminished food resources in the Hypoxia Zone (dead zone) off the Mississippi's mouth. Nitrate and other pollution also decrease its food as it migrates upriver.<sup>19</sup> It finds breeding sites--ponds and marshes--severely degraded in the Far North, dried up due to climate change.<sup>20</sup> The lesser scaup faces habitat degradation throughout its entire range. Yet John Latsch's gift provides wetlands that can help it and the Cricket Frog remain in the nature we leave to future generations.

During the 1980s trash dumps and off-road vehicles marred Prairie Island. Winona's bird club led cleanups and worked with the city to eliminate motorized traffic in habitat. The club spearheaded the creation of a self-guided nature trail and a K-6 curriculum for Prairie Island.<sup>21</sup> In 1986 the club, city and John Latsch Memorial Board set aside part of Prairie Island for environmental education, including *six acres of restored prairie*.<sup>22</sup>

Now we're troubled by the near total loss of prairie, a decline in education use and

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/rsg/profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AMACC01150>.

<sup>16</sup> Carlyle, Kathleen. Retired Biologist, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Message to R. Swanson. Feb. 11, 2021. Email.

<sup>17</sup> Guyon, L., J. Sloan, R. Van Essen, and M. Corcoran July 2016. Floodplain Forests and Water Quality in the Upper Mississippi River System. Report to the Audubon Society. Natural Great Rivers Research and Education Center, Lewis and Clark Community College. Schwarz, Judith D. March 4, 2011. Soil as Carbon Storehouse: A New Weapon in Climate Fight? Yale Environment 360. Shaw, Tina. June 27, 2011. Iowa: the Power of Prairies. Open Spaces. United States Fish and Wildlife Service Home Page.

<sup>18</sup> Blanchard's Cricket records. Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center. Message to R. Swanson. Feb. 19 2021. Email. Prairie Island. Allen Blake Sheldon, wildlife photographer. Message to R. Swanson. Jan. 27 2021. Email. (A.B. Sheldon has photographed frog at the pond). MN DNR Nongame Wildlife Program. Phone communication with R. Swanson. Feb. 9 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Anteau, M.J., Afton A.D. July 2004. Nutrient Reserves of Lesser Scaup (*Aythya Affinis*) During Spring Migration in the Mississippi Flyway: A Test of the Spring Condition Hypothesis. *The Auk*.

<sup>20</sup> Ross, Beth et al. Climate effects of climate, predation, and density dependence on Greater and Lesser Scaup population dynamics. Sept. 2015. *Ecological Applications* (25) 6: 1606-1671.

<sup>21</sup> Palmquist, Kathy and Dave. Minutes Winona Bird Club 3-3-21. Message to R. Swanson. March 4, 2021. Email.

<sup>22</sup> Environmental Education Committee, Hiawatha Valley Audubon Club. Prairie Island Environmental Education Curriculum Guide. Oct. 1991. p. iv.

the lack of a management plan. They enable today's younger generations to accept what biologists call a "shifted baseline." The empty sky and a *prairie park without a prairie* become the new normal. Yet the 2018 Winona Comprehensive Parks, Open Space & Recreation System Plan can ensure that there be "no dearth" of conservation efforts at Prairie Island. The plan designates Prairie Island Park as a "natural park" and calls for cost-share programs to help enhance "native plant communities" and "wildlife diversity."<sup>23</sup>

Three organizations have expressed interest in helping. The Winona District of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge has said it can potentially assist the city in developing a habitat plan for Prairie Island. (This would *not* be a comprehensive management cooperation like the Aghaming agreement between U.S.F.W.S. and the city.)<sup>24</sup> The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Partners program has said it can potentially provide technical and financial assistance for habitat restoration and enhancement after the Winona District helps create a habitat plan.<sup>25</sup> Minnesota Land Trust has said it might become a natural resource partner to the City of Winona and help it access funds from the Environmental Natural Resources Trust Fund, Conservation Legacy Partners and other natural resource programs.<sup>26</sup> Minnesota Land Trust has also indicated it could potentially support Winona with management and planning for its natural parks as it has done in Duluth.<sup>27</sup> (M.L.T. helped create the Duluth Natural Areas Program, which permanently protects city-owned acreage of high environmental value and ensures its use as a human sanctuary e.g. Magney-Snively Natural Area).<sup>28</sup>

We the undersigned encourage the city to:

- Restore the rare sand prairie at Prairie Island, including the tree-dumping location.
- Create permanent natural protection of all remaining natural habitat at Prairie Island Park, including the old deer park site.
- Remove exotic and invasive plants, restore all habitats.
- Promote and celebrate the park's natural legacy as expertly and enthusiastically as it promotes tourism and recreation.

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<sup>23</sup> 2018 Winona Comprehensive Parks, Open Space & Recreation System Plan, p. 149-156.

<sup>24</sup> Stefanski, Mary. Winona District Manager. Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge. Message to R. Swanson. Email. Jan. 27 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Myerchin, Sheldon. Minnesota State Coordinator. U.S.F.W.S. Partners. Phone communication with R. Swanson. March 19 2021. [fws.gov/partners](https://fws.gov/partners)

<sup>26</sup> Bancks, Nick. Associate Director of Land Protection, Minnesota Land Trust. Phone communication with R. Swanson. March 29 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Duluth Natural Areas Program. <https://duluthmn.gov/parks/natural-resources/dnap/>.

- Create a new interpretive trail with flood-proof signs on Prairie Island's existing nature trails.
- Optimize the remaining habitat's unique location beside the city's campground and the Mississippi to celebrate a nature preserve.

Thank you for reading about our concerns. We have posted this letter at the Bird Studies Tab at [RichieSwanson.com](http://RichieSwanson.com) to share it with other citizens and organizations. We look forward to helping the City of Winona achieve a sustainable future.

Sincerely,

Winona Bird Club members

Linda Arnesen, Barbi Bell, Sandy and Craig Brooks, Rosemary Broughton, Ken and Val Critzman, Helen Davis, Julie Erickson, Anne Femister, Sue Fletcher, Sherry and Lou George, Muriel Gunderson, Cherie Hales, Barbara Hassing, Karolee Hogden, William Hurkman, Susan Jensen, David Johnson, Lorraine Kilmartin, Dan and Colleen Koll, Catherine Kreisel, Scott Lowery, Sigrid Okeefe, Ken McCullough, Scott Mehus, Matt and Karen Merchlewitz, Lyn Nankivil, Eric Nelson (wildlife biologist, retired, Upper Miss Refuge, Winona), Bill and Gaye Nepper, Todd Paddock, Dave and Kathy Palmquist, Sandy Pankratz, Anne Scott Plummer, Cathy Richardson, Taff Roberts, Sara Ricker, David Ruff, Karry Sandvig, Cullen Schwemer, Kay Shaw, Allen Blake Sheldon, Don Smith, Bev Spande, Richie Swanson, Jack Wera, Al and Jane Wernecke, David White

Allison Quam, member of the Winona Area Pollinators