

PROTECTING MINNESOTA'S NATURAL TREASURES

One of a series of case studies showing how Minnesota communities have used ecological information to protect their natural heritage

Working Together to Protect a Prairie

LUND PRAIRIE,
CHIPPEWA COUNTY



SUMMARY

With the help of solid ecological information, the Lund family recognized the conservation value of the tallgrass prairie on their Chippewa County farm. A collaborative effort between the DNR, The Nature Conservancy, Pheasants Forever, and the landowners resulted in the land's dedication as a state Wildlife Management Area, guaranteeing the prairie will be managed and protected for future generations.

Division of Ecological Services

The Ecological Services Division of the Minnesota DNR houses over 20 programs that collect and deliver ecological data on Minnesota's native plant and animal populations and their habitats. Four of these programs survey, map, interpret, and protect locations of significant native plant communities, rare plants, and rare animals. Local governments, landowners, and resource managers are among the many Minnesotans who have used this information to guide planning and land use policy and to protect some of the state's best natural areas. The four programs are:

- Minnesota County Biological Survey
- Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program
- Nongame Wildlife Program
- Scientific and Natural Areas Program

These case studies provide detailed examples of how these programs work with partners to accomplish important conservation projects throughout the state.



Prairie Heritage

There was a time not so long ago that Alfred and Olaf Lund's remnant blacksoil prairie was not a remnant. Less than two hundred years ago it was part of a sea of native tallgrass prairie that encompassed 18 million acres in Minnesota, and reached from North America's mid-continent to the Rockies. By the time the two brothers acquired the land in 1947, prairie was a rarity in Chippewa County, replaced by regularly alternating crops of soybeans and corn.

Under the brothers' ownership, these 55 acres of prairie sod would be destined for a different fate. Alfred and Olaf worked the surrounding lands of their two farms, but left the prairie intact. Aside from periodic haying it was left to its seasonal parade of blooming native wildflowers, progressing from spring's prairie smoke and white lady's slippers, to summer's blazing stars and Maximilian's sunflowers, to autumn's purple bottle gentians nestled at the base of bluestem grass.

Neither Alfred nor Olaf lived to witness the September day in the year 2000 when a signpost was pounded into the ground on the land that had once been theirs: a sign that reads "The Olaf and Alfred Lund Prairie" and recognizes the family's role in protecting the area. Acting

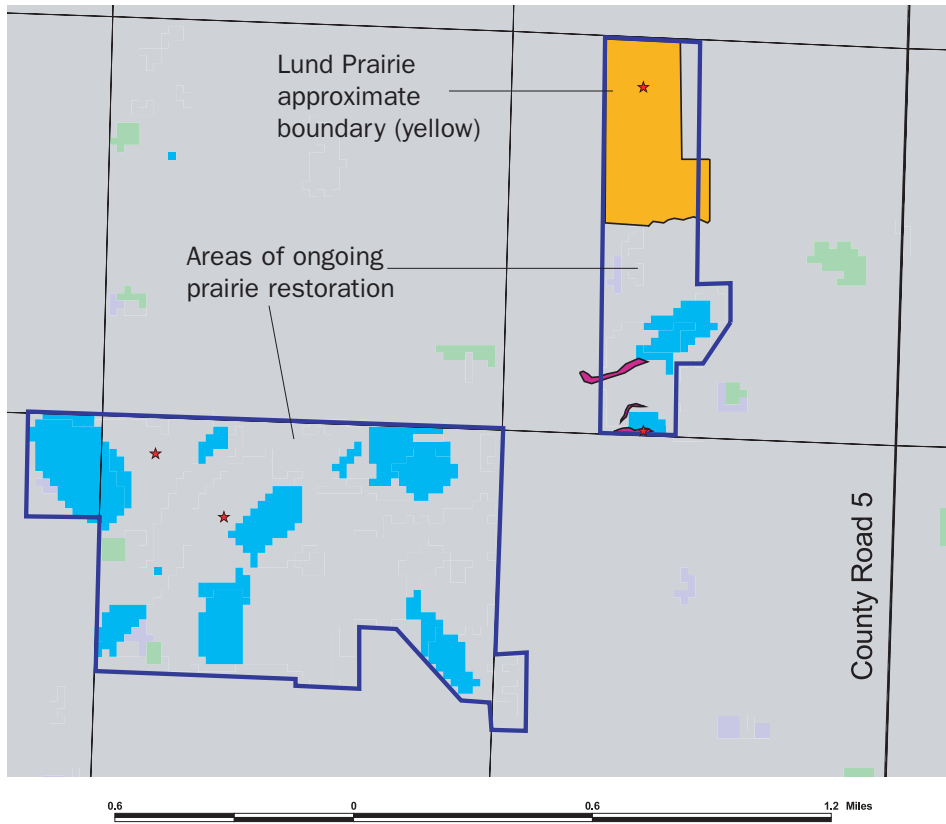
as trustee of the estate, Olaf's daughter Leona Loken approved the purchase of the land by The Nature Conservancy of Minnesota and Pheasants Forever, which subsequently transferred the land to the State for inclusion in the DNR's Grace Wildlife Management Area. Loken and her five siblings believed her dad and Uncle Alfred would have been happy to see it. "I can't say as I remember Dad talking about it much: about appreciating the prairie, that is." She chuckles at the idea that his taciturnity may have had something to do with his Norwegian heritage. "But we all knew that he had enrolled the prairie in the Conservancy's Registry of Natural Areas many years ago. He had the plaque they gave him on the shelf at the nursing home. He was proud of it."

It had been a long road from the Lund brother's acquisition of the land to its eventual protection. Visits in the 1970s from Ben



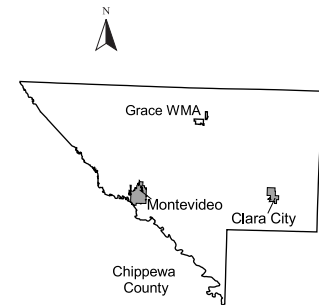
MCBS Plant Ecologist Steve Merchant examines prairie in Chippewa County.

Photo by Carmen Converse, MN DNR



Grace Wildlife Management Area, showing Lund Prairie

- ★ Rare Plant
- ▭ Grace Wildlife Management Area
- ▭ Native Plant Communities
- ▭ Mesic Prairie
- ▭ Wet Prairie
- ▭ MNDOT County Roads
- ▭ Section Lines
- GAP Land Cover - Level 2
- ▭ Crop/Grass
- ▭ Shrubland
- ▭ Aquatic Environments
- ▭ Upland Deciduous Forest



Rare Features Data in Chippewa County

This map of the Grace Wildlife Management Area in Chippewa County shows the draft boundaries of native plant communities and locations of rare species

derived from field survey results. The background colors show land cover as mapped by the U.S. Geologic Survey’s Gap Analysis Program. When completed, the

map of the county will help resource managers and government officials gain a better understanding of important locations for conservation projects.

Thoma, a biology instructor at Willmar Community College, and from Conservancy representatives had made Olaf and Alfred increasingly aware of the uniqueness of their tract of native prairie. It was in 1983 that Olaf enrolled the property in the Conservancy’s Registry Program, making a voluntary commitment to good stewardship of the land. At his request, the Conservancy conducted prescribed burns on the prairie to stimulate the native vegetation. Olaf and his brother also sought and received the aid of the Conservancy and the DNR in successfully resisting a 1988 county-proposed drainage ditch that would have negatively impacted the prairie.

The Land is Protected

With Alfred’s death in 1997 and Olaf’s two years later, decisions regarding the land fell to Leona and her siblings. Remembering the long-standing positive relationship with the Nature Conservancy, they called to inquire whether the organization would be interested in purchasing the land. The Conservancy worked in concert with another private conservation organization, Pheasants Forever, to make an offer acceptable to the Lund family.

“We provided some funds and helped negotiate the deal,” says Lisa Mueller, Associate Director of Land Protection for The Nature Conservancy of Minnesota, “but Pheasants Forever brought the resources



Photo by Dan Engstrom

The small white lady’s slipper (Cypripedium candidum) is a rare plant of prairies and wet meadows



MN DNR

Burrowing owls are rare prairie birds that have been documented to occur in Chippewa County.

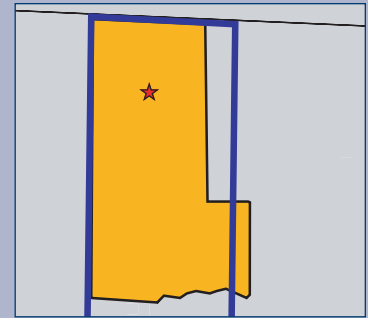
together to make the acquisition possible. They pooled the Conservancy’s funds with contributions from Pheasants Forever chapters and from their Minnesota Habitat Fund. Then they used that money as a match to leverage funds from the Legislature’s Prairie Heritage Program and from the North American Wetland Conservation Act’s Prairie Heritage Conservation Initiative program.” The cooperative effort enabled the purchase of 110 acres that included the Lund prairie tract and a comparably sized area of adjacent cropland, to be restored to native vegetation using the prairie as a seed source.

“We use MCBS data to hone in on the gold nuggets.”

— Lisa Mueller, Associate Director of Land Protection, The Nature Conservancy of Minnesota

Leroy Dahlke is DNR Area Wildlife Manager for the Grace Wildlife Management Area. “We’ve collected enough seed to plant 21 acres of the former cropland this year,” Dahlke notes. “I’d say we’ve got about 40 or 50 native species represented in the mix. Next year we’ll plant more.” The Lund Prairie displays the rich diversity characteristic of a mesic prairie, with an estimated 200 native species. “It’s quite a place,” says Dahlke. “With the prairie and the intermittent wetland that’s associated with it, you see a fair amount of wildlife: deer,

MCBS works for landowners and conservation programs



Steve Merchant was the principal plant ecologist for the MCBS survey conducted in Chippewa County in 1999. He is pleased to see the outcome for the Lund Prairie site. “Look at how this was accomplished and you can see possibilities for MCBS sites in other areas. You have the initial commitment by the private landowners making the decision to maintain the land in a natural state. You have conservation organizations and public agencies providing information to the landowners about the value of the site, helping to maintain the native prairie, and helping to defend it against threats such as the proposed drainage. You have the family creating the opportunity for long-term conservation. Acquisition is made possible with a combination of private funds and good use of available federal and state grant programs. Then, you enhance the value of the site by doing restoration work on adjacent land. Taken all together, it’s really very impressive.”

pheasant, ducks, bobolinks. Last year, after we burned the prairie, there were upland sandpipers out there — that was good to see.”

According to Mueller, it would be a mistake to equate the relatively small

acreage involved in the Lund acquisition with the importance of the project. “It’s true that the Conservancy, in its eco-regional planning process, tries to focus on projects that can allow for natural systems to function on a large scale,” says Mueller, “but



Photo by Fred Harris, MN DNR

The DNR has found that less than one percent of the mesic tallgrass prairie that once covered much of western Minnesota remains with us today.

intact mesic prairie is extremely rare. Most of the land that historically supported mesic prairie has been converted to cropland. All you need to do to recognize the significance of this site is to look at the maps and data produced by the **Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS)** for Chippewa County. It makes a very compelling case for conservation — there’s just so little left.”

While The Nature Conservancy is always interested to hear about potential land protection projects, in reality it must carefully evaluate sites to ensure the best use of the organization’s resources. To frame its priorities, the Conservancy relies heavily on information generated from the County Biological Survey and other data available through the **Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program**. “I don’t know if people realize how fortunate



Photo by Tim Whitfeld, MN DNR

Dry sand-gravel prairie covering hillsides in western Minnesota.

Minnesota is to have natural features data of this quality,” says Mueller. “Prior to the establishment of the DNR’s Heritage Program, which the Conservancy initially helped to design and fund, there was no comprehensive inventory of non-game species or native plant communities in the state. That’s critical information needed for planning.”

Marbled godwits, Arogos skipper butterflies, loggerhead shrikes: exotic sounding as these might be, all are species native to Minnesota that MCBS ecologists docu-

mented in Chippewa County on sites that presently receive no formal protection. Each of these creatures is born with a genetic heritage rooted in this western Minnesota landscape. In general, they understand what they need to survive and how to get it — with one notable exception. Over time, maybe they’ll learn to keep an eye out for a couple of Norwegian farmers like Olaf and Alfred Lund.



MN DNR

Bottle gentians give color to the tallgrass prairie.

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