

MINNESOTA'S WILDLIFE ACTION PLAN 2025-2035

CONSERVING HABITATS AND BIODIVERSITY

CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY AREAS



mn DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES

NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank more than 300 people who contributed to the development of this State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) throughout our revision process over the past two years (see List of Plan Contributors). Everyone's varied perspectives and expertise has improved the plan and will carry on into the next ten years of conservation action for Minnesota's biodiversity and vulnerable wildlife. A specific thank-you to members of the Nongame Wildlife Program core team who facilitated teams, developed content, and pulled together this huge resource: Alison Cariveau (lead), TJ Boettcher, Daren Carlson, Mags Edwards, Julia Geschke, Benjamin Gieseke, Kristin Hall, Chris Jennelle, Tim Mitchell, Elizabeth Nault-Mauer, Jessica Ruthenberg, and Jim Wanstall. Special appreciation also to Lee Pfannmuller, Bridget Henning-Randa, Bob Dunlap, and April Rust who contributed so much to this revision. We thank numerous taxonomic experts and all the volunteers who participated in eleven revision teams; please see the full List of Plan Contributors.

Funding

The SWAP revision was funded through U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service State Wildlife Grants as well as matching funds from private donations to the Nongame Wildlife Fund and Reinvest in Minnesota funds. We also received funding from the Minnesota Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).



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This document contains maps that are available in alternative formats to individuals with disabilities by calling (651) 259-5149 or emailing the SWAP Coordinator at alison.cariveau@state.mn.us.

Cover Photos: Goats are being utilized to combat regrowth of common buckthorn on dry bluff prairies and surrounding woodlands following removal of eastern red cedar, TJ Boettcher; Field Tour hosted by the Prairie Coteau Conservation Opportunity Area showcasing a grazing collaboration between a producer and Hole in the Mountain Wildlife Management Area

How to cite this document: Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. (2026). Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2025-2035: Conserving Habitats and Biodiversity. Ecological and Water Resources Division.

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Chapter 6. Implementation - Conservation Opportunity Areas

Chapter 6 contains three sections, each of which are applied to guide our conservation work under this Plan. The first, the Conservation Action Network, represents biodiversity and high-quality habitat in our state spatially as a resource to prioritize conservation actions geographically (see Chapter 6 Implementation – Conservation Action Network). Here we describe Conservation Opportunity Areas, which identify locations for partners to focus on-the-ground conservation efforts that build and improve areas in and around the Conservation Action Network. Third, we provide foundational information regarding climate trends in Minnesota and strategies for climate adaptation that are broadly applicable throughout many types of conservation actions (see Chapter 6 Implementation – Climate Adaptation).

What are Conservation Opportunity Areas?

Conservation Opportunity Areas (COAs) are designated geographic areas where high biodiversity and active partnerships overlap and where on-the-ground actions are focused to directly benefit Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and their associated habitats. This network of partnerships provides a non-regulatory approach to help focus and prioritize statewide conservation actions to prevent future Federal or state listing of species and to promote the

recovery of species that have already been listed. Partners may include private landowners and non-government organizations as well as federal, state, and local government agencies collaborating to identify, design, and implement coordinated on-the-ground conservation actions that not only benefit SGCNs but help partners reach their specific conservation goals.

Conservation Opportunity Area Delineation

Locations of COAs are based on core areas of high biodiversity, SGCN, high-quality habitats, and buffers and corridors identified in the Conservation Action Network (CAN). However, not all important areas identified in the CAN have an associated COA, and COA boundaries can also go beyond the CAN. COAs must also include resources such as active and interested partners, and/or funding available to address conservation needs. As a result, many of the COAs expand beyond those priority areas identified in the CAN to incorporate areas where established partnerships are actively collaborating to deliver habitat management projects that can benefit SGCN. These partnership efforts present unique opportunities to capitalize on established working relationships and shared conservation goals to achieve the goals of Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan (MNWAP).



Photo: Field Tour hosted by the Prairie Coteau Conservation Opportunity Area showcasing a grazing collaboration between a producer and Hole in the Mountain Wildlife Management Area

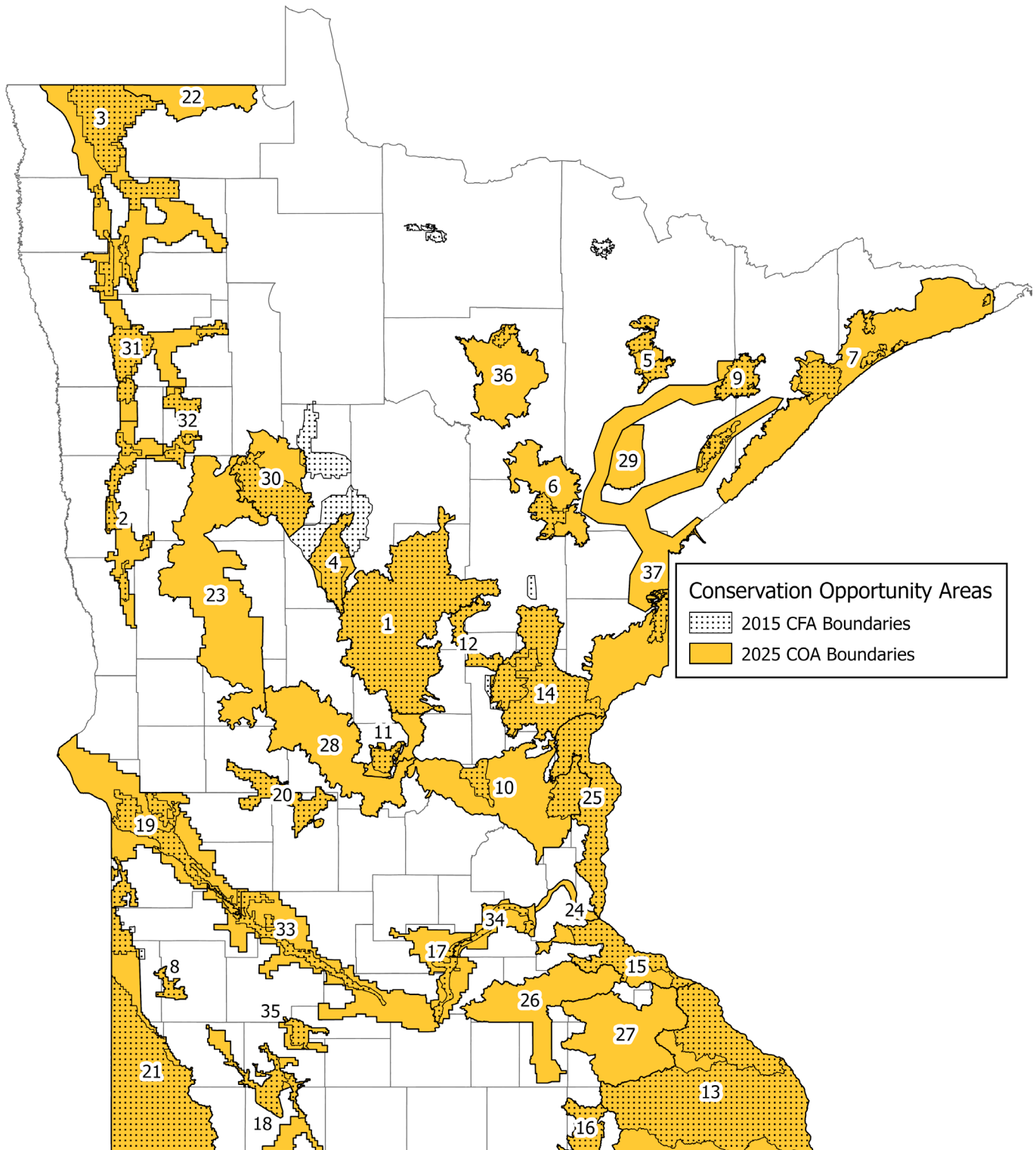


Figure 7. Map of Conservation Opportunity Areas (COAs) for 2025-2035, developed with input from internal and external partners to revise the 2015-2025 Conservation Focus Areas. After some COA's were added, some were merged, some were split, and some were removed altogether, the number of COA's remained at 37. Two additional COAs proposed in north central Minnesota require further consultation with Tribes for delineation and were not depicted on this map.

The 2025 version of Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan designates 37 COAs, as listed below and depicted in Figure 7.

1. Brainerd Lakes
2. Agassiz Beach Ridges
3. Aspen Parklands
4. Pine Sands-South
5. Big Rice- Lost Lake-Pike Range
6. Cornish Hardwoods
7. North Shore Resilient Forests
8. Altamont Moraine
9. Sand Lake
10. Anoka Sandplain
11. Avon Hills
12. Mille Lacs Moraine
13. Lower Driftless
14. St. Croix River Watersheds-North
15. Vermillion River Watershed
16. Cedar River
17. Lower MN River Valley
18. Des Moines River Valley
19. Lac qui Parle
20. Glacial Lakes
21. Prairie Coteau
22. Roseau River
23. Pothole Lakes
24. Gray Cloud
25. St. Croix River Watersheds-South
26. Cannon River
27. Zumbro River
28. Sauk River
29. Saz-Zim Bog
30. Pine Sands-North
31. Glacial Ridge
32. Mahnomen
33. Upper Minnesota River Valley
34. Metro Big Rivers
35. Cottonwood River-Red Rock Ridge
36. Coon Creek
37. St. Louis-Cloquet Rivers

In addition, two additional COAs were proposed in northern Minnesota: a Northern Minnesota Peatlands COA primarily in Beltrami, Koochiching, and Lake of the Woods Counties, and Sand Plain Pine primarily located in Cass, Beltrami, and Itasca Counties. We did not designate COAs in these two areas due to the proximity to the Red Lake Band of Chippewa and Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Tribal lands. Further consultation will be needed with the Tribes to determine if a COA would be desirable in these locations. Over the next ten years an increased focus on developing Tribal relationships within the COA framework is an important goal. Understanding Tribal priorities and working to adapt habitat management efforts to help address those priorities is an important part of addressing the habitat needs of SGCN statewide.

COAs and the CAN Focus Habitat Management Efforts

The footprint of many of the COAs have been expanded since 2015 to incorporate areas where established partnerships are actively collaborating. To focus habitat management efforts within critical areas designated by the CAN, the COAs will prioritize State Wildlife Grant project funding based on the location of the project in relation to the priority areas designated by the CAN. Focusing habitat management, restoration, and protection for SGCN within the CAN will enhance core areas of habitat and connections between habitats. This approach will also allow land managers/ owners to use existing partnerships while focusing their efforts on priority areas.

Building Relationships, Capitalizing on Opportunities, and Working in Partnership

Since the first SWAP was established in 2005, broad-based collaborative partnerships have proven to be a very successful way to implement natural resource-based projects nationwide. By sharing resources

and working collaboratively to overcome roadblocks, partnerships between federal, state, and local government entities, private landowners, non-government organizations and local stakeholder groups have been able to implement large-scale watershed level projects that cross jurisdictional boundaries as well as smaller site-based projects. Since the COA coordinator position was created 7 years ago, the partnership approach and the relationships built through the local COAs have increased the capacity of the DNR Nongame Wildlife Program to implement effective habitat management, restoration, and improvement projects by facilitating the coordination of management, prioritizing outreach efforts, and targeting technical assistance.

What Makes a COA Effective?

Effective COAs typically hold partnership meetings at least twice a year. These meetings generally occur in the late winter to plan for the upcoming field season and in fall to evaluate and discuss how much progress was made on various efforts. Besides being an opportunity to conservation projects, the meetings often accomplish the following:

- Develop/update dynamic planning documents to guide partnership efforts.
- Provide opportunities to coordinate the implementation of on-the-ground habitat conservation projects to meet the conservation goals of partner organizations while addressing Wildlife Action Plan objectives.

Case Study: Build Biodiversity or Bus(t): Grazing, Wildlife, Cover Crops

A field tour was an identified action item by partners of the Prairie Coteau Conservation Opportunity Area in southwest Minnesota. Many of the SGCN are imperiled due to conservation issues related to prairie/grassland loss and fragmentation, stream sedimentation and contamination, channelization, and impoundments which this tour hoped to address. The goal of this field tour was to showcase good examples of management, especially for grazing and cover crops, and to emphasize how these practices can directly or indirectly improve wildlife habitat. The target audience was private landowners and agency personnel. Around forty people attended the tour which started at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, Minnesota and travelled to a local farm that showcased regenerative grazing and cover crops. Breakout sessions at this farm included Grazing for Soil Health, Small Ruminant Economics, Water and Stream Quality, and Bird Use of Cover Crops. The bus then travelled to Hole in the Mountain Wildlife Management Area to showcase a patch-burn grazing operation in partnership with a local agricultural producer. Breakout groups included Effects of Grazing on Nongame Species, and a discussion on forage differences between warm and cool season grasses and goal-oriented grazing.

Funding for this field tour was provided by a USFWS State Wildlife Grant. Partners who were involved in the planning, advertisement, and implementation of the field day included the Minnesota Grazing Lands Conservation Association, the DNR Nongame Wildlife Program, Sustainable Farming Association, Pheasants Forever, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Pipestone Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.



Photo: A producer describes his strip grazing system to a group of attendees at the "Build Biodiversity or Bus(t)-Grazing, Wildlife, and Cover Crops Farm Tour, TJ Boettcher

- Identify and prioritize potential future projects to be implemented. This could include assessing available resources needed to implement projects, reviewing new information on species and habitats that has become available, defining project effectiveness, and implementing monitoring to evaluate and report on effectiveness.
- Address opportunities for watershed/landscape project planning within the COA and the Conservation Action Network (CAN). This can include considering how management objectives and actions at the site level can be coordinated across sites to sustain or enhance landscape-scale biological diversity and improve the ecological functionality of the habitat types involved.

Improving Habitat for SGCN While Meeting Shared Objectives

Minnesota has an abundance of habitat management and restoration work being accomplished by state, federal, and local government entities as well as non-government organizations and private landowners.

Conservation Opportunity Areas often contain multiple partnership groups that are actively collaborating on project implementation. Each of these groups may have a slightly different approach to their efforts and/or a slightly different set of habitat types in which they work. While there may be different goals associated with each partner's involvement, each partner is able to bring resources to the table to address those goals while enhancing the overall effectiveness of a project. In most

cases, managing habitat for the benefit of SGCN incorporates many of the same land management practices as managing for non-SGCN wildlife. Often just changing the timing of implementation, leaving patches of a specific habitat type untouched, or the implementation of follow-up practices such as reseeding, grazing, burning or mowing can address the needs of SGCN within a project site. Working with partners to coordinate project planning can incorporate these types of practices within the existing framework of the project. In this way, all the partners involved can achieve their intended goals while benefitting a wider range of wildlife species.

Approximately 75% of the land in Minnesota is privately owned. In order to increase connectivity between and improve habitat within the areas delineated by the CAN, an increased capacity to implement conservation work on private lands will need to be developed. The partnership approach that COAs foster has been able to facilitate the implementation of SGCN related conservation work on private lands to date (see the Case Study below). However, to increase that impact over the next ten years, greater capacity for promoting SGCN related conservation on private lands will need to be developed. This could include identifying funding sources, allocating staff, and developing procedures to facilitate the flow of funding to partners and landowners for SGCN conservation work on private lands that emphasizes native biodiversity.

Conservation Opportunity Areas in Your Area are a Great Starting Place to Direct Conservation Efforts

- Local governments can work together on referencing COAs in land use planning and capitalize on opportunities for conservation within those areas
- Work with property owners whose lands host significant natural features and share and discuss voluntary conservation options ranging from habitat management actions to permanent land conservation
- Become familiar with the rare plants, animals, and habitats that occur within the COA and learn how to better manage their habitats for long-term conservation
- Educate landowners and the public about significant natural areas within the COA and create support for local conservation initiatives to conserve them
- Collaborate with state agencies for funding support

Case Study: Partnering with Private Landowners for Driftless Habitat

Many projects are completed on public properties within COAs; however, many agencies and NGO's work with private landowners to implement conservation work on private properties. One private land steward started their conservation journey in 1987 when they bought their first parcel of property in Houston County. The property consisted of agricultural fields, old pastures, and degraded native plant communities. Conservation work began when the land steward received a copy of the Minnesota Conservation Volunteer magazine. In it, they read an article about reforestation and decided they would like to convert one of the old fields to forest, so they partnered with a DNR forester and planted a combination of red and white pine. This was a start, but conversion of the agricultural fields didn't stop there. Many more were enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and were planted to a diverse mixture of native grasses and forbs. With many of the fields retired, the land steward began to make a concerted effort to restore the native plant communities on the property. These consisted of oak-hickory forest and woodlands, savanna, and remnant bluff prairie, which were all suffering from non-native species pressure from plants such as honeysuckle and common buckthorn as well as native eastern red cedar on the savanna and bluff prairie. The land steward partnered with several agencies including the NRCS and their Environmental Quality Incentive Program as well as the DNR's Nongame Wildlife Program. Together, efforts were made to first remove the eastern red cedar on the south facing slope of the bluff, and since then, a variety of follow-up treatments including forestry mowing, drone seeding, prescribed fire, and goat grazing have been utilized in an effort to control the woody invasives. These habitats are important for a variety of species near the property including timber rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*) and brown snakes (*Storeria dekayi*). Partnering with private landowners will be crucial for the survival of these species in a landscape where most land is privately owned.



Photo: Goats are being utilized to combat regrowth of common buckthorn on dry bluff prairies and surrounding woodlands following removal of eastern red cedar, TJ Boettcher