

# Conserving Bird Habitat in Flood Plain Forest on Private Lands in Minnesota and Iowa

## Background

Wide, diverse, flood plain forests are globally rare, have high bird species richness, and provide breeding habitat for many bird species of concern. Flood plain forests rival all other habitat types in bird species richness, and bird abundances in flood plain forests can be twice as high as in upland forests. Even though wide flood plains support more species than do narrow flood plains, even small patches of flood plain forest in large river systems can provide valuable habitat for forest-nesting songbirds.

The Upper Mississippi River area contains one of the largest expanses of flood plain native plant communities in the United States. This flood plain forest is dominated by silver maple, and emergent marsh is dominated by river bulrush.

Both flood plain forest and emergent marsh are important sites in the region for rare forest birds. Between them, they have the highest numbers of two bird species of special concern in southeast Minnesota: red-shouldered hawks and cerulean warblers. The sites also provide important nesting or migratory habitat or both, for prothonotary warblers, peregrine falcons, bald eagles, and Acadian flycatchers.

## Location

Mississippi River flood plain forests in or adjacent to the Vermillion and Cannon rivers in Minnesota; and the McGregor District of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Upper Mississippi River Refuge and the Yellow River Important Bird Area (IBAs) in Iowa (star on map).

## Goals

The Minnesota Audubon Society will carry out a pilot project to promote flood plain forest management to private landowners in and adjacent to its highest-priority IBAs along the Upper Mississippi River.

## Expected Results

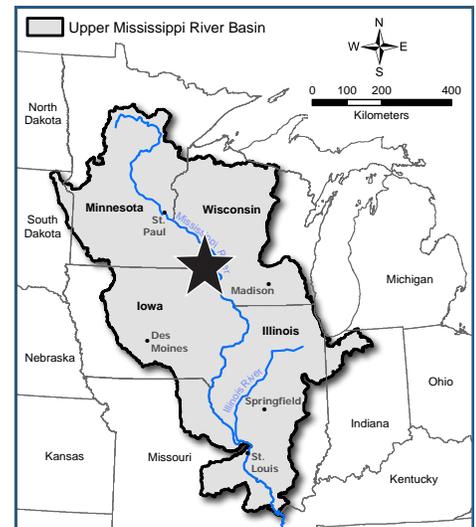
The Minnesota Audubon Society has begun identifying and vetting targeted landowners with local forestry professionals in the two project areas. Audubon's approach will be informed by the best available research into conservation activities in the area, landowner networks that are in place, and landowner preferences in terms of contacts and carrying out conservation practices.

The landowner(s) and Audubon's forest "charette" team will survey the land. The team will consist of the team leader, a local forest professional, a bird habitat specialist, and any other conservation specialists appropriate to the property. The resulting Forest Habitat Plan will include an outline of financial and technical conservation resources available to the landowner and an offer of assistance to navigate these resources. Recommended opportunities and actions in the Forest Habitat Plan will address the regional conservation threats and outline bird species monitoring.

## Expected Outcomes

The Audubon Society will use a systematic approach to recruiting private landowners. During the course of the 2-year project, Audubon will begin with the largest-parcel landowners in the project areas closest to the main stem of the Upper Mississippi River. As landowners are enrolled, Audubon will engage owners of smaller parcels and radiate out into contributing watersheds.

In terms of tracking the project impact on bird populations, in most instances small site bird monitoring is not statistically valid. Most IBA monitoring is for quality and quantity of habitat, which it is presumed will be



The Upper Mississippi Forest Partnership and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation jointly initiated the Upper Mississippi River Watershed Fund. The fund supports projects that benefit the forests of the Upper Mississippi while improving wildlife habitat and water quality.

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occupied by appropriate bird species over time. Audubon's monitoring in these IBA's will build on strengths in citizen science and monitoring dating back over 100 years to the first Christmas bird counts.

The project areas are also priority landscapes for State departments of natural resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and nongovernmental organizations. Through these organizations and related collaborative working groups, qualitative assessments of habitat and birdlife are already ongoing in many locations. Audubon will remain active in the working group(s) currently assembled, to encourage and monitor restoration efforts in those areas.

## Partners

- National Audubon Society (grantee)
- Aveda Corporation
- Audubon Minnesota
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
- Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council
- Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation

## Grant Amount

\$62,607

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