
THE BATTLE CREEK GRASSLAND

Background

The Battle Creek grassland is adjacent to Battle Creek Regional Park in Maplewood, MN. It is bounded by the park on the north and west, by Century Avenue on the east, and by the Ramsey County correctional facility on the south. The grassland is owned by Ramsey County and managed by the Corrections Department.

Natural history

The grassland is 77.79 acres, including ~6 acres forest and ~6 acres shrubby wetland.

Apparently a hayfield formerly farmed by inmates, the grassland has been idle for perhaps 10 years.

Why is the grassland important?

The grassland is not “vacant” but a significant habitat and nesting site for rare and declining bird species (see Appendix).

The avian survey conducted by Midwest Natural Resources, Inc., during the 2021 nesting season identified eight Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SCGN), including the Minnesota-endangered Henslow’s Sparrow. [The MNR report](#) summed up



the significance of the bird species as follows: ***“Taken individually, the SCGN birds ... are regionally uncommon, particularly outside of typical migratory windows. Collectively, they represent a biological assemblage more typical of western grasslands, which is unique for Ramsey County and the greater Twin Cities metropolitan area.”***

Grasslands are one of the most threatened ecosystems. More than 98% of Minnesota’s pre-European grasslands have been [lost](#) to agriculture and development. (Unlike wetlands, grasslands have no protection in Minnesota.)

The Bobolink, a species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Battle Creek grassland. Photo by John Zakelj

The biodiversity of the grassland is important for ecosystem services, e.g., carbon sequestration, cleaning the air, cooling the urban heat island, and stormwater management as well as for the beauty it provides.

Nature is important for human mental and physical health. During the pandemic people are spending more time outdoors and in Nature. The Metropolitan Council reports park visitation was up 6.3% from 2018 to 2019.

More than one million species are predicted to go extinct in the next few decades; the extinction crisis is real.

Media coverage

The *Star Tribune* published articles about the grassland on [7/17/21](#), [8/25/21](#), and [10/16/21](#).

County actions

County commissioners committed orally to delaying the development decision until after the eco-survey results were received, but the county issued a [Request for Developer Interest](#) on 8/16/21 (more than a month before the eco-survey report was created). The developers' proposals were due 10/4/2021. In a brief update on 10/10, the *Star Tribune* reported that **no** proposals were received for the grassland.

Ramsey County commissioners are concerned about the affordable housing crisis, and they are looking for county-owned properties to develop. But, in the words of the River Corridor Program Director of the Friends of the Mississippi River, "We can't make the mistake of responding to our housing crisis by worsening our environmental crisis."ⁱⁱ

City actions

The Battle Creek grassland is currently zoned by the city of Maplewood as Farm/residential. In addition, the city's Comprehensive Plan anticipates continued institutional use. Before any housing can be developed, the county and/or developer must submit an application to rezone the grassland. The city would have to approve the rezone and amend its Comprehensive Plan. In anticipation of this request, the city conducted a community engagement process from November 2020 to June 2021. A description of the process and a link to the planners' final report is available [here](#). It is not clear when a rezoning request will be submitted. It may be later this year or early next year. There will be an opportunity for the public to participate in the city's rezoning and plan amendment process.

Benefitting people and the birds

The grassland is unique: it is highly diverse, already adjacent to a much-loved regional park, can help offset the urban heat island, clean the air, sequester carbon and manage stormwater. It could have a novel use as a "[Birdability](#)" site, where people with disabilities could see birds and hear the burbling of Bobolinks from platforms set at the periphery of the grassland.

Declaring the grassland an Environmental Natural Area and managing it as a grassland ecosystem is the "highest and best use" providing benefits for the entire community.



Minnesota's state butterfly, the Monarch on Goldenrod in the Battle Creek grassland. Photo by John Zakelj.

Appendix: Some of the bird species documented in the Battle Creek grassland and their population status.

| Species | MN Endangered ⁱⁱ | Greatest Conservation Need ⁱⁱⁱ | Area-Sensitive ^{iv} | MN Stewardship Species ^v | Population Trend 1966-2019 ^{vi} | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--------------|
| | | | | | Minnesota | U.S & Canada |
| Grasshopper Sparrow | | ● | ● | | -97% | -74% |
| Clay-colored Sparrow | | | | | -37% | -35% |
| Field Sparrow | | ● | | | -56% | -69% |
| Henslow's Sparrow | ● | ● | ● | | -67% | -63%* |
| Savannah Sparrow | | | ● | | -66% | -52% |
| Bobolink | | ● | ● | ● | -58% | -43% |
| Eastern Meadowlark | | ● | ● | | -68% | -74% |
| Dickcissel | | ● | | | -82% | -27% |

*Henslow's Sparrow is not found in Canada; the trend is for the U.S.

ⁱ <https://www.startribune.com/audubon-society-urges-ramsey-county-to-save-grassland-eyed-for-development/600079014/>

ⁱⁱ https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/ets/endlist.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/assistance/nrplanning/bigpicture/cwcs/chapters_appendix/appendix_b.pdf

^{iv} Herkert, J. R. (1994c). The effects of habitat fragmentation on Midwestern grassland bird communities. *Ecological Applications* 4 (3):461-471

^v <https://mn.audubon.org/conservation/stewardship-birds-minnesota>

^{vi} <https://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/>