

THE BATTLE CREEK GRASSLAND

Nesting Site for Rare and Declining Bird Species

Background

The Battle Creek grassland is adjacent to Battle Creek Regional Park in Maplewood, Minnesota. 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. It is owned by Ramsey County and managed by the Corrections Department. It was farmed by inmates at the Correctional Facility with plantings of brome grass and alfalfa. Other than occasional mowing, it has not been farmed for many years. It encompasses 77.79 acres, including about 6 acres of forest and a small shrubby wetland.

Why is the grassland important?

The grassland is not “vacant” but a significant habitat and nesting site for rare and declining bird species (see the Appendix). An avian survey conducted by Midwest Natural Resources, Inc., during the 2021



THE BOBOLINK, A SPECIES OF GREATEST CONSERVATION NEED IN THE BATTLE CREEK GRASSLAND. PHOTO BY JOHN ZAKELJ

nesting season identified eight Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), including the Minnesota-endangered Henslow’s Sparrow. [The MNR report](#) summed up the significance of the bird species as follows: ***“Taken individually, the SGCN 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.)

Benefitting people and the birds

Grasslands are important for ecosystem services such as sequestering carbon, cleaning the air, cooling the urban heat island, and managing stormwater, as well as for the beauty they provide. The Battle Creek grassland is highly diverse and adjacent to a much-loved regional park. The national organization Birdability has expressed support for adding small observation sites on the periphery of the grassland where people with vision or mobility challenges could enjoy the sights and/or songs of the grassland birds.

Ramsey County actions

Ramsey County commissioners, concerned about the affordable housing crisis, are looking for county-owned properties to develop. In August 2021 Ramsey County issued a [Request for Developer Interest](#) for the grassland and the nearby golf course. No proposals were received for the grassland. Three proposals were received for the golf course, all of which the county rejected. In the words of the River

Corridor Program Director for the Friends of the Mississippi River, "We can't make the mistake of responding to our housing crisis by worsening our environmental crisis."

Ramsey County staff have indicated that the grassland "will be maintained consistent with past practice pending a future decision on development." However, contrary to past practice, the grassland was unofficially opened to the public during 2022 with a mowed trail extending from Battle Creek Park into the grassland. Dog walkers, hikers, bikers, skiers, and birders are now entering via this trail. This could cause the ground-nesting birds arriving in April and May to abandon the site. We have expressed our concern to the county regarding possible impacts on nesting birds. During the nesting season public access should be limited to accessible observation sites on the periphery.

Maplewood actions

The Battle Creek grassland is zoned by the City of Maplewood as farm/residential. The city's comprehensive plan anticipates continued institutional use as a corrections facility. Before housing can be developed, the city would have to rezone and amend its comprehensive plan. The city conducted a community engagement process from November 2020 to June 2021. A description of the process and the final report are [here](#) and [here](#). Community engagement was conducted prior to the Midwest Natural Resources survey, when few people knew that the grassland is an important nesting site for rare and steeply declining bird species. Mayor Marylee Abrams has stated publicly that the grassland should be part of Battle Creek Regional Park.

Media coverage

The *Star Tribune* published articles about the grassland on [7/17/21](#), [8/25/21](#), [10/16/21](#), [1/28/22](#), [5/9/22](#) and [1/2/23](#). The *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* published on [3/3/21](#), [3/13/21](#), and [2/1/22](#). Bring Me the News published an article on [2/1/22](#).

Let's save it!

Declaring the grassland an Environmental Natural Area within Battle Creek Regional Park and managing it as a grassland ecosystem will save an important bird nesting area and provide benefits for the entire community.



MONARCH BUTTERFLY ON GOLDENROD, BATTLE CREEK GRASSLAND.
PHOTO: JOHN ZAKELJ, 2021.

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

Species	MN Endangered ¹	Greatest Conservation Need ²	Area-Sensitive ³	Tipping Point Species ^{4, 5}	MN Stewardship Species ⁶	Population Trend 1966-2019 ⁷	
						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.

¹ https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/ets/endlist.pdf

² http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/assistance/nrplanning/bigpicture/cwcs/chapters_appendix/appendix_b.pdf

³ <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.2307/1941950> - All but the Meadowlark would surely be eliminated if the grassland were fragmented or reduced in size.

⁴ <https://www.stateofthebirds.org/2022/grassland-birds/>

⁵ <https://www.stateofthebirds.org/2022/taxonomic-list-of-on-alert-and-tipping-point-species/>

⁶ <https://mn.audubon.org/conservation/stewardship-birds-minnesota>

⁷ <https://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/>