



Grassland near New Richmond



Western Prairie *ecological landscape*

Attributes and Characteristics

This ecological landscape is located on the far western edge of the state just below the “tension zone” and contains some of the best prairie potholes in the state. This is the easternmost extent of the vast prairie pothole region that stretches across Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Montana, and south central Canada. The area is characterized by generally open, gently to moderately rolling hills with pothole lakes, ponds, and wet depressions. A ribbon of forest occurs along the St. Croix River. Soils consist of a mosaic of silty, shallow and stony alluvial sands and peats, with a red clay subsoil.

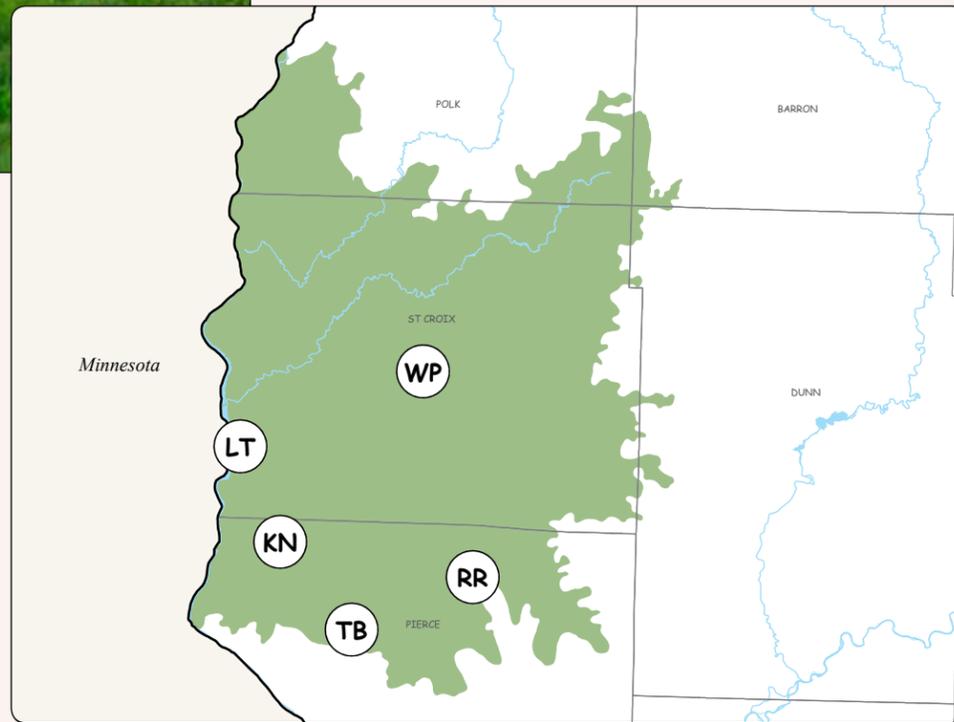
Pre-settlement vegetation was comprised of dry to mesic prairies in the broad rolling areas and wet prairies in the wide depressions. Open oak savannas were found on the hilly topography with

small inclusions of sugar maple-basswood forest in the steeper sites protected from fire. Prairie pothole-type wetlands were most prominent in St. Croix County. Barrens were found along the river terraces of the St. Croix River. Floodplain forests, marshes, and wet prairies occurred within the floodplain of the St. Croix.

Almost one-half of this landscape is now in agriculture with another one-third in grasslands. Forest pockets are mostly comprised of maple-basswood and oak-hickory, with smaller amounts of lowland hardwoods and conifers. Although dairy farming and row crops remain the predominant agricultural uses, this area is experiencing rapid urbanization along its western fringe due to its proximity to the Twin Cities.

Legacy Places

- KN **Kinnickinnic River**
- LT **Lower St. Croix River**
- RR **Rush River**
- TB **Trimbelle River**
- WP **Western Prairie Habitat Restoration Area**



Key characteristics:

- » Prairie pothole ponds and wetlands
- » Prairie remnants and grassland landscape
- » Oak savanna and oak barrens
- » St. Croix River corridor

Size:

- » 1,090 square miles
- » 697,400 acres (1.9% of Wisconsin)

Population:

- » 98,000 (1.8% of Wisconsin's population)

Notable species:

- » Western meadowlark
- » Bobolink
- » Loggerhead shrike
- » Blue-winged teal
- » Regal fritillary butterfly
- » Smallmouth bass
- » Sand shiner
- » River redhorse
- » Dotted blazing star
- » Ground plum
- » Prairie satin grass

Natural communities:

(See Appendix B for descriptions)

- » Dry-mesic prairie
- » Emergent aquatic
- » Mesic prairie
- » Moist cliff
- » Oak opening
- » Oak woodland

Figure 86: Legacy Places and public conservation lands of the Western Prairie

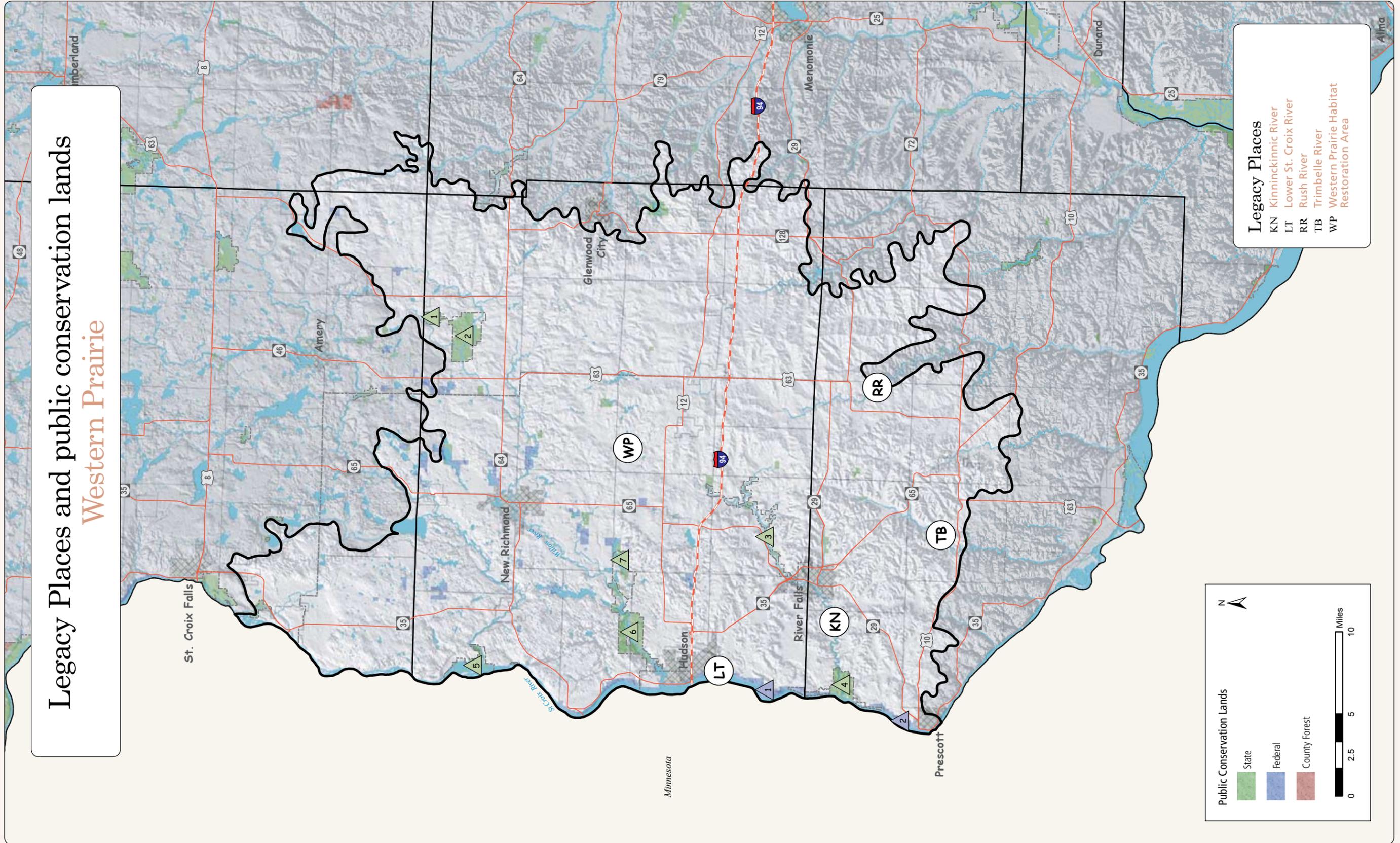
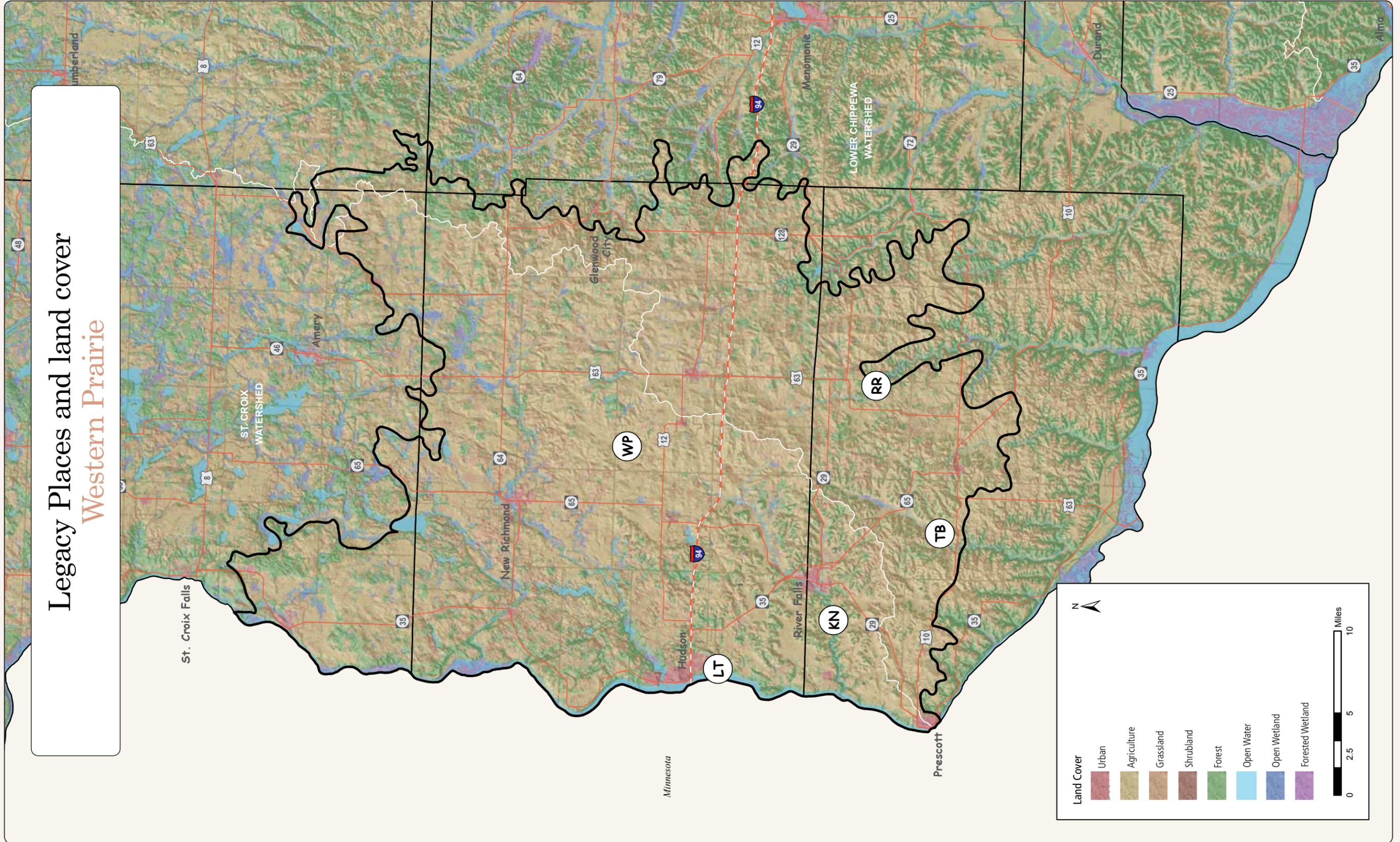


Figure 87: Legacy Places and land cover of the Western Prairie



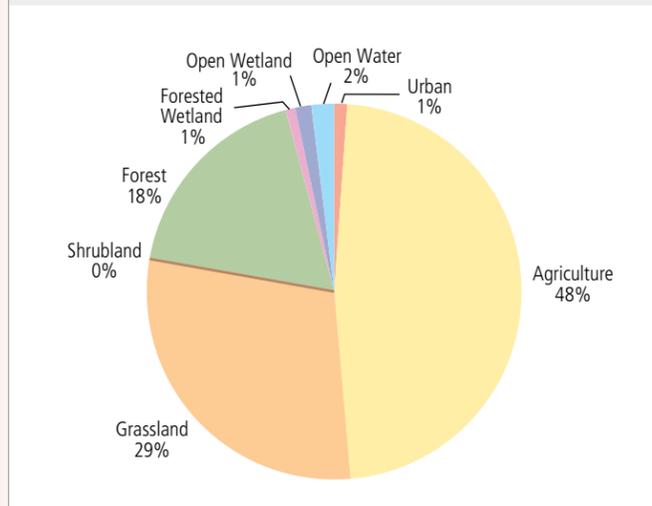
Western Prairie ecological landscape

Public Conservation Lands

| Map# | Property Name | Size (acres) ¹ |
|----------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| State | | |
| 1 | Cylon Marsh State Wildlife Area | 340 |
| 2 | Cylon State Wildlife Area | 2,500 |
| 3 | Kinnickinnic River State Fishery Area | 365 |
| 4 | Kinnickinnic State Park | 1,310 |
| 5 | St. Croix Islands State Wildlife Area | 1,110 |
| 6 | Willow River State Park | 2,810 |
| 7 | Willow River State Wildlife Area | 860 |
| | Miscellaneous Lands ³ | 3,260 |
| Federal | | |
| 1 | Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway | 4,900 |
| 2 | Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge | 3,480 |
| | Waterfowl Production Areas | 5,130 |
| County Forest⁴ | | |
| | None | |
| TOTAL | | 26,065 |

¹ Actual acres owned in this Ecological Landscape.
² This property also falls within adjacent Ecological Landscape(s).
³ Includes public access sites, fish hatcheries, fire towers, streambank and non-point easements, lands acquired under statewide wildlife, fishery, forestry, and natural area programs, small properties under 100 acres, and properties with fewer than 100 acres within this Ecological Landscape.
⁴ Locations and sizes of county owned parcels enrolled in the Forest Crop Law are presented here. Information on locations and sizes of other county and local parks in this Ecological Landscape is not readily available and is not included here, except for some very large properties.

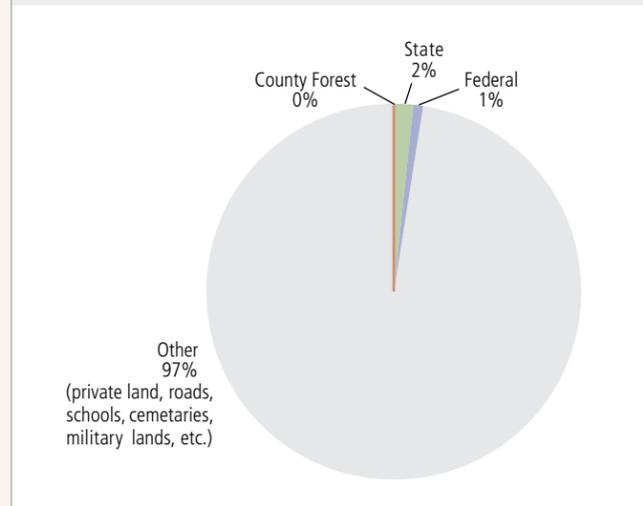
Figure 88: Land cover of the Western Prairie



Conservation Needs and Opportunities

This ecological landscape offers the best opportunity in the state to maintain a true prairie-pothole complex and thus is an important component of maintaining and recovering grassland birds and waterfowl in the state. Protection of remaining pothole wetlands and their associated uplands, prairie remnants, and oak savanna is very important. Maintenance of the scenic and habitat values associated with the St. Croix National Wild and Scenic River is also important. Cold, headwater streams originating in this landscape offer opportunities to establish, restore and maintain brown and brook trout fisheries.

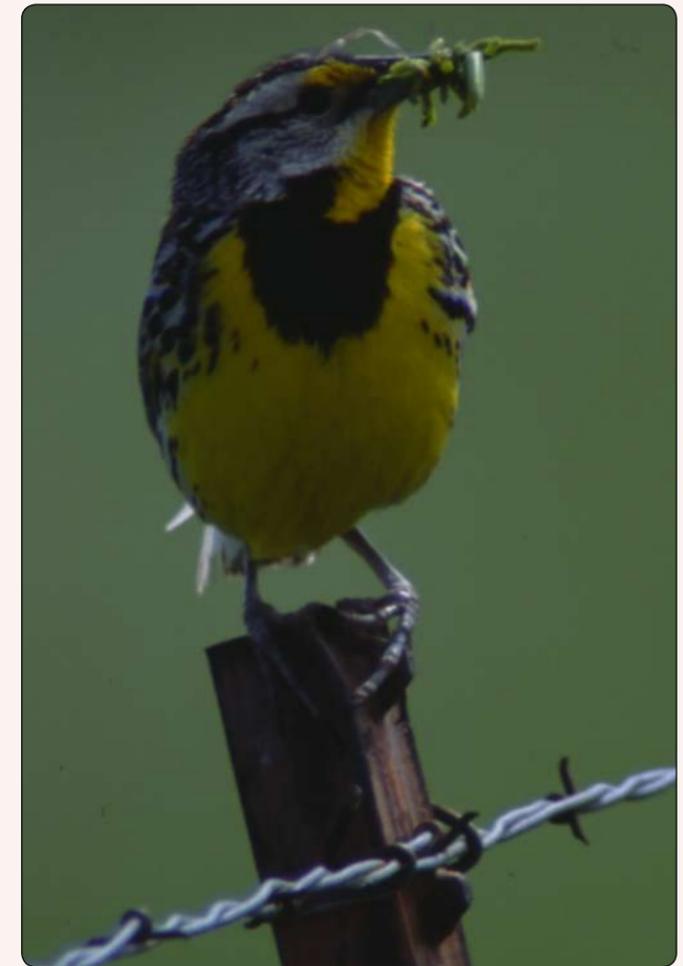
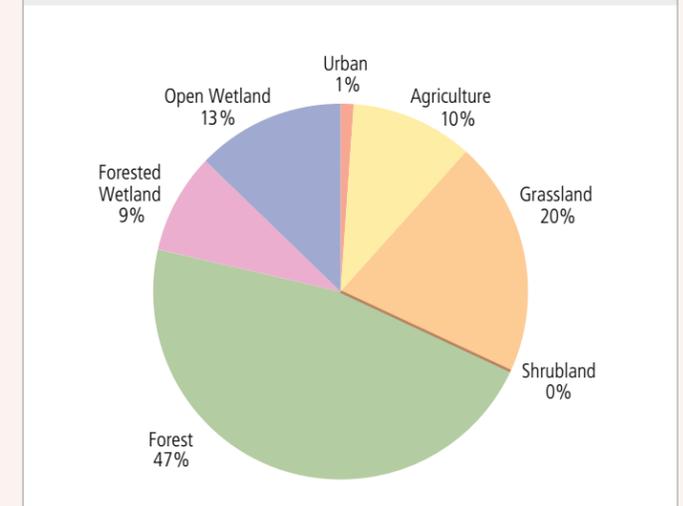
Figure 89: Public conservation and other land ownership in the Western Prairie



Recreation Uses and Opportunities

Given its proximity to Minneapolis and St. Paul, this ecological landscape receives heavy recreational use. Boating and fishing are very popular on the St. Croix River, as are canoeing and “tubing” on the Apple River. Several coldwater streams in the area are very popular fishing destinations, including the Kinnickinnic, Trimbelle, and Rush Rivers. Pheasant and waterfowl hunting are also popular activities on public and private land. State parks within this landscape receive substantial use for a variety of activities, including camping, hiking, and nature observation. Additional off road biking, hiking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing trails would likely receive heavy use, as would additional rustic and fully developed campsites.

Figure 90: Land cover of public conservation lands in the Western Prairie



Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*)

HERBERT LANGE

Legacy Places



Farm scene

JIM McEVoy '94

DON BLEGEN

KN Kinnickinnic River

Size Medium
Protection Initiated Substantial
Protection Remaining Moderate
Conservation Significance ★★★★★
Recreation Potential ★★★★★

Originating in an open, rolling landscape of farmland, the Kinnickinnic flows southwesterly through River Falls to the St. Croix River. The upper and middle reaches of the Kinnickinnic support a high quality trout fishery. Below River Falls, the river valley dramatically deepens and narrows resulting in a spectacular canyon. The south-facing slopes harbor scattered dry prairies; the north-facing slopes are blanketed with sugar maple, basswood and white pine. The steep sides of the valley support numerous species of rare, cliff-dwelling plants. Near its confluence with the St. Croix River, the deeply incised channel gives rise to scenic bluffs surrounded by large tracts of deciduous forest.

Recognized as one of the best trout fisheries in the Upper Midwest, the “Kinni” draws many anglers every year. Due to its proximity to Minnesota’s Twin Cities, land use in the watershed is rapidly changing from agricultural to residential and threatens water quality in the river. Small stretches of the river above River Falls are protected as part of the Kinnickinnic River State Fishery Area. The spectacular scenery at the mouth of the river is protected by Kinnickinnic State Park and the St. Croix River National Scenic Riverway. In addition, the Kinnickinnic River Land Trust, one of the state’s most successful land trusts, is actively working with landowners to protect important places in the watershed. A protected corridor along the length of the Kinnickinnic River not only would help maintain water quality, but could also provide important open space and facilitate restoration of rare habitats, including prairie and oak savanna.

LT Lower St. Croix River

Size Large
Protection Initiated Substantial
Protection Remaining Limited
Conservation Significance ★★★★★
Recreation Potential ★★★★★

The Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway extends 52 miles along the border of Minnesota and Wisconsin, from the dam at St. Croix Falls to its confluence with the Mississippi River. The last 25 miles of river are wide, gently flowing, and bordered by heavily wooded bluffs. The Riverway is very popular with enthusiasts that enjoy boating, canoeing, fishing, rock climbing and hiking along its scenic shoreline. Congress added this segment of the St. Croix River to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers program in 1972, complementing the previous (1968) designation of the Upper St. Croix River. Many rare species are associated with the St. Croix and the corridor is highly significant to migratory birds.

RR Rush River

See the Western Coulee and Ridges ecological landscape.

TB Trimbelle River

Size Medium
Protection Initiated Limited
Protection Remaining Substantial
Conservation Significance ★★
Recreation Potential ★★★

The Trimbelle River originates in the rolling, open landscape of northern Pierce County. As the river flows south, it enters the heavily forested Driftless Area of western Wisconsin. A mix of deciduous woodlands, dairy farms, and light residential development characterizes the watershed. The Trimbelle River supports one of the best trout fisheries in western Wisconsin. Rich deciduous woodlands supporting numerous species, including a high diversity of songbirds, are found throughout the lower watershed. Due to its proximity to Minnesota’s Twin Cities, trout anglers heavily use the river corridor. Land use in the watershed is changing rapidly and threatens both the water quality of the Trimbelle, access for anglers, and, due to fragmentation, the integrity of the woodlands.

WP Western Prairie Habitat Restoration Area

Size Large
Protection Initiated Moderate
Protection Remaining Substantial
Conservation Significance ★★★★★
Recreation Potential ★★

The Western Prairie Habitat Restoration Area was established in 1999 to protect and restore up to 20,000 acres of grassland and wetland habitat in western St. Croix and southwestern Polk counties. The project’s goal is to protect and restore scattered blocks of prairie, savanna and wetland within a larger area of farm fields and low density development. Such a “checkerboard” pattern, combining working farms and native prairie/savanna vegetation, would meet the habitat needs of many grassland species. It may also help buffer both farms and natural areas from conflicts with residential development. Although work on this project is just beginning, interest is high and there is good local support. Most public lands within the Western Prairie Habitat Restoration Area will be open to the public for hunting, hiking, wildlife watching and educational activities.

Other Areas of Interest

County E Prairie (Pierce County)

This extensive grassland area is perhaps the best opportunity remaining in this part of the state for a large-scale prairie restoration. The open landscape supports a variety of rare grassland birds and mammals.