At a stone outcrop near the Crawfish River, not very far upstream from the buried ruins of ancient Aztalan, a visitor can stand on a hillside beneath the outstretched limbs of a great oak tree and gaze down at the river, then northward across acres of tallgrass prairie. Sandhill cranes trumpet in the distance and a red-tailed hawk wheels overhead.

Two miles away, cars and trucks on I-94 rush east and west between Madison and Milwaukee, cities that seem to grow closer each year as homes and businesses spring up between them. But here on the Crawfish, it’s possible to imagine time has stood still. The reality is a bit more complicated. The outcrop and the prairie are part of Madison Audubon Society’s Faville Grove Sanctuary, a 675-acre mosaic of prairie, wetlands, savanna and woodlands just north of Lake Mills in Jefferson County. The sanctuary offers a glimpse of the once-vast Crawfish Prairie that extended for miles along the Crawfish, a tributary of the Rock River.

A portion of the riverside grassland is virgin prairie — never broken by a plow or even grazed by cattle — but most of the diverse habitats at Faville Grove are the result of a decades-long and ongoing effort by the Madison Audubon Society, its partners and volunteers. The goal is to bring native plant communities back to lands that over the course of the 20th century had been plowed, leveled, drained or otherwise altered for agricultural production.

**Beginnings led by Leopold**

The transition was well underway in the 1930s when a group of graduate students, supervised by their professor, Aldo Leopold, worked on a study aimed at helping a group of landowners improve wildlife populations on their lands west of the Crawfish River. One of those students was Robert McCabe, who in 1978 published an article for the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters detailing Leopold’s efforts to persuade the university — or some other conservation champion — to purchase and thus protect what was described as “one of the largest and best remnants of unplowed, ungrazed prairie sod left in Wisconsin.”

Ultimately, a parcel of about 60 acres was purchased by two Madison benefactors, Mr. and Mrs. Philip E. Miles, who later conveyed it to the UW Arboretum. The donated land was named the Stoughton Faville Prairie Preserve, to honor the farmer-conservationist who had aided the research project and even housed students in his home.

Other parcels were sold one by one to individuals who saw the land’s value for agriculture, but not its importance to wild species. It must have seemed that, aside from the Faville preserve, the rest of the prairie would be lost for good.

And it might have been. But 20 years ago, at a June 1997 meeting, the board of the Madison Audubon Society voted to establish a sanctuary along the Crawfish River. The Audubon chapter was already experienced in sanctuary management, having founded Goose Pond Sanctuary, north of Madison in Columbia County, in 1969.

In 1998, Madison Audubon purchased 50 acres adjacent to the Stoughton Faville Prairie Preserve and, using many of the techniques pioneered by Leopold and refined by those who followed him, began the long process of turning a former cornfield back to wetland and prairie.
**Growth means more to see**

The first steps included cutting the trees that choked the field edges, re-excavating wetland basins that had been filled in to accommodate farming, and filling ditches that had been draining off water and thus drying out what had formerly been a wet — or floodplain — prairie. Then in the fall of 1999, volunteers and interns, carrying 5-gallon buckets of native plant seed, walked to and fro, tossing out seeds that had been collected at Goose Pond Sanctuary and at nearby Department of Natural Resources lands.

Since then, the sanctuary has grown many times over, as neighboring landowners offered to sell land to Madison Audubon. The state-funded Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been instrumental in helping to fund these acquisitions, with matching funds from Madison Audubon donors and partner organizations.

Today, visitors will find nearly 200 acres of restored floodplain prairie and wetlands on the banks of the Crawfish River adjacent to the native Stoughton Faville Prairie Preserve, which Madison Audubon now manages on behalf of the UW Arboretum. Here, the kaleidoscope of wildflowers is ever-changing, from dainty purple spiderwort in late spring to the striking orange of Turk's-cap lilies in July, followed by the yellow blossoms of compass plants and prairie dock.

Where the land rises to the west, additional restored prairie is across the road from the Lake Mills Ledge, the outcrop of pre-Cambrian rock that overlooks a spring-fed wetland. Among the widely spaced white oaks and bur oaks on the ledge, you might spot the black-and-white flash of a red-headed woodpecker, or perhaps a rose-breasted grosbeak.

Southwest of the Lake Mills Ledge, a separate portion of the sanctuary straddles Highway 89 and includes grasslands, wetlands, woodland and savanna. Habitat on recently acquired acres in this segment have been undergoing restoration. In addition to the land it owns, Madison Audubon has cooperated with neighboring landowners to help them restore, protect and manage habitats, bringing the total area of wildlife-friendly land to nearly 1,200 acres.

Best of all, the Madison Audubon-owned lands are open to the public for wildlife viewing and quiet enjoyment. Sanctuary brochures encourage visitors to roam off-trail — to see and feel the land up close.

**Visit and volunteer**

Grassland birds and wildflowers are attractions in the spring and summer. And fall also is a delightful time to visit Faville Grove, to see the russet hues of the prairie’s tall grasses, to let the grass run through your fingers, and to listen as the dry seed heads rustle in the breeze.

Visit on your own or join one of Madison Audubon’s regular field trips. On an April 5 field trip, visitors can watch for the springtime displays of woodcock and snipe. Other outings later in the year include birdwatching and plant identification.

One of the best ways to get to know Faville Grove is by volunteering for one of many habitat-related projects. For example, on a sunny day last July, a group of volunteers and interns walked back and forth across the 25-acre Snap-
per Prairie to survey for eastern prairie white-fringed orchids. Surveyors found a record number of this state-endangered and federally threatened species that grows on two portions of the sanctuary.

Along the way, they also found the fluffy white blossoms of meadowsweet, spiky Culver’s-root and hundreds of leathery, upright leaves of prairie dock, while song sparrows provided musical accompaniment.

Each fall, volunteers are busy harvesting ripened seeds from prairie plants. No expertise is required. If the target on a given day is prairie cord grass, say, or stiff gentian, coordinators will point out the seed heads and demonstrate the method of collection. In addition to learning about these plants, volunteers become part of the rebirth of Faville Grove by contributing to the stock of seeds that will be used in future restoration plantings.

Time didn’t stand still at Faville Grove, but through the efforts and vision of Madison Audubon Society members and leaders, volunteers, partner organizations and conservation-minded neighbors, we can get a glimpse of how the land once looked. We get a hint of how it once sounded, how it smelled, how it felt. And we can feel hope for its future.

Doreen Pfoest of Elroy is the author of “This River Beneath the Sky: A Year on the Platte.” She met her husband on a volunteer work day at Faville Grove.

>>> TAKE A TRIP TO FAVILLE GROVE

Madison Audubon Society’s Faville Grove Sanctuary is in Jefferson County in southcentral Wisconsin. From I-94, take exit 259 and drive north on State Highway 89 about 2 miles to County Highway G. Turn right and continue about a mile and a half to Prairie Lane. A sanctuary map and brochures are available at the information kiosk. Maps and information also are available at madisonaudubon.org/faville-grove. Madison Audubon Society field trips, generally open to the public, are a good way to see the sanctuary. To learn more, visit madisonaudubon.org/field-trips. In addition, volunteer projects at Faville Grove and elsewhere are listed at madisonaudubon.org/volunteer.

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