

Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area: Land Protection Plan

FINAL



Mission

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.



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Preface

The Kankakee River Basin is a special area that people from all walks of life have connected with and been stewards of for generations. We recognize the ongoing conservation actions in this area by the communities and people living in the Illinois focal areas within the Kankakee River basin authorized as the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in 2000. Conservation actions come in many forms, and we look forward to learning from each other and exploring new opportunities together.

When we released the draft of this document in June 2021 we broadened the scope of a traditional land protection plan to include a preliminary vision for conservation within the refuge area.¹ We recognize now that calling that draft document a vision for conservation without more input from the residents in the communities was premature. As a next step, we look forward to building a true collective conservation vision with the communities and individuals within the refuge area that represents all conservation actions not just our own. To start that conversation we wanted to

publish this final land protection plan. It is the portion of the earlier draft document and provides the sideboards and tools we, as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have to be a partner in conservation to implement a larger vision driven by the communities.

This land protection plan outlines the wildlife conservation priorities that guide our work with interested landowners and partners in Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area in Illinois. This refuge was authorized as Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in 2000 in both Illinois and Indiana based on broad natural resource goals and objectives. The refuge was established in September 2016 as Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area with emphasis on preserving wetland, savanna and prairie habitat.

We are excited to present this document as our foundation to build from for our conservation journey together. We hope you look forward to turning the page and fostering a working relationship with us.



This is the Land Protection Plan for the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area.



Purpose

The purpose of a land protection plan is to provide information to the public in a clear and concise format outlining natural resource conservation needs and priorities for a national wildlife refuge.

We only work with landowners and stakeholders who voluntarily wish to work with us. It is our policy not to use eminent domain to grow national wildlife refuges.

Through this document, our intent is to help build a better understanding of how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can

be a collaborative partner in conservation delivery within the authorized refuge boundary. We outline our policies, process, obligations and acquisition considerations that guide our decision making when considering bringing lands into the refuge system from willing landowners.


The resource conservation needs that are outlined on page 10 of this document were derived from biological information and refer to the biological resources that are considered unique and

important in this area. They are reflected in the refuge goals, objectives and strategies outlined on pages 11 through 17.

The natural resource priorities outlined here guide our work with stakeholders and community members as we work to understand how we can be a part of a larger community vision of how conservation fits into the future of this area. We are committed to learning about the communities and what their values and vision are before we move large scale.

Planting, Laurie Hewitt/USFWS





Our mission is, working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

The Lands and Waters of the National Wildlife Refuge System

With more than 560 refuges spanning the country, the National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of public lands and waters that helps to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats. It also provides some of the best wildlife-related recreation opportunities in the world. National wildlife refuges serve a purpose distinct from that of any other federal public lands because wildlife conservation is our primary mission. Wildlife conservation drives our decisions like deciding what management tools to use, what habitats to restore or protect and what recreational activities are open to the American public.

The National Wildlife Refuge System contains places that inspire and empower people and wildlife to flourish. Wildlife have a place to call home, while people have a place to recreate and relax while also enjoying the benefits of clean water, air, soil conservation and more. Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area is one of those places!

Bumblebee on goldenrod, Jim Hudgins/USFWS



Western MOUNTAINS, endless views and cascading streams teeming with life.

Southwest DESERT landscapes, home to vibrant and rare plant communities that draw new life during the summer monsoon season.

WATERWAYS that give life to all critical ecosystems along rivers, streams, wetlands, coastal and marine areas.

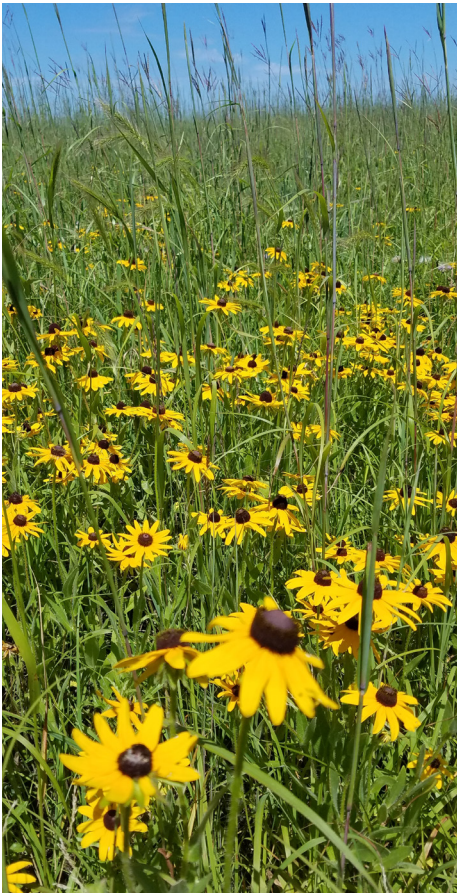
Hardwood FORESTS of the southeast, a source of regional and cultural pride.

PRAIRIE heartland home to abundant waterfowl and native pollinators.



The refuge system conserves some of the country's most important ecosystems and the fish and wildlife that rely on them.

Image credits left to right:
Tom Koerner/USFWS
Ryan Hagerty/USFWS
Jonna Gilkeson/USFWS
George Jordan/USFWS
Ashley Spratt/USFWS



Black-eyed susans,
Scott Ralston/USFWS
Oak seedling,
Jeanne Holler/USFWS

Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

Why is the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service here?

The Kankakee River Basin has long been recognized as a premier area for wildlife. The remaining gems of black oak savannas, prairie, floodplain forests and Kankakee River that have been conserved locally for generations are part of what makes this area unique. One of the reasons people settled here is because of these habitats and the wildlife that depend on them. They also settled here to make a living off of the land. We feel strongly the refuge can coexist with the needs of people, as we work together to conserve and enhance the natural and human communities of the area. Wild foods harvesting, hunting and other kinds of outdoor recreation draw people from all walks of life to connect with nature.

This area was once part of the midwest's largest and most biologically productive ecosystem. We know from records dating back to European settlement that less than 0.001% of northern tallgrass prairie,² one tenth of forests in Illinois³ and less than 0.0001% of the 27 million acres of oak savannas that once stretched from Ohio to Missouri remains.⁴ We recognize past and ongoing natural resource stewardship by local, private landowners. Indeed, thanks to that stewardship, Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area was authorized by Congress in 2000 to help conserve this area's important places for wildlife. It is also why we would like to join the dedicated citizens in this area to help them continue and expand their conservation legacy as a regional and national resource.

Refuge Vision

Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area was authorized in 2000 with the following vision: to restore and preserve an ecological system that supplies the needs of migratory waterfowl and songbirds, native fish, native plant communities and threatened and endangered flora and fauna. The refuge and its staff will have mutually-beneficial relationships with the public and our partners which will lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the natural world, and the role humankind plays in its stewardship.⁵



Refuge Purpose and Authorizing Authorities

The laws under which a refuge was authorized define a refuge's purposes. Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area was authorized in 2000 with the following purposes:

- “for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources.” (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)⁶
- “for the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.” (Emergency Wetlands Conservation Act of 1986)⁷



Least bittern, Steve Arena/USFWS

Refuge Goals

- 1 Preserve, restore and enhance in their natural ecosystems (when practical) all animals and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered
- 2 Support and sustain migratory bird resources
- 3 Preserve a natural diversity and abundance of fauna and flora on refuge lands
- 4 Provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and humankind's role in its environment
- 5 Provide refuge visitors with high quality, safe, wholesome and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife to the extent these activities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established⁸

The refuge serves as an avenue to work with the community to restore, preserve and enhance grassland and wetland-dependent populations of fish and wildlife in the Kankakee River Basin.

OBJECTIVES

Prairie/ Oak Savanna Planning Unit



1. CONSERVE existing oak savanna and tallgrass prairie habitat as this is a rare ecosystem essential for the wildlife that depend on it.
2. INCREASE the CONNECTIVITY of prairie and oak savanna habitats through restoration for the benefits of resident and migratory wildlife.

Wetland Planning Unit



1. CONSERVE existing floodplain forests and wetland habitat to increase biodiversity and floodplain storage potential.
2. INCREASE the CONNECTIVITY through restoration of floodplain and wetland habitat for water quality and wildlife benefits.

*Oak savanna,
Jeanne Holler/USFWS
Kankakee River,
Jeanne Holler/USFWS*



Natural Resource Conservation

PRIORITIES

PRIORITIES





PRIORITY

1

Conserve existing natural remnants

Based on our mission our first wildlife conservation priority is to work with people who want to help conserve areas where natural habitat already exists. Specifically, the area within the refuge boundary that contains rare remnant oak savanna, native prairie, floodplain forest and natural intact wetlands. Forming partnerships with interested landowners to help conserve what natural areas remain on the landscape can guarantee future generations will continue to enjoy and appreciate them for generations to come. In addition to providing habitat for wildlife dependent on them, these natural remnants provide free benefits to human populations. Wetlands clean water. Vegetation provides erosion control. Specific plants found only here provide food and medicines. It is easier to maintain the quality of what is present than it is to recreate a natural area after it is gone. These natural area remnants often remain due to an appreciation that a landowner or community has for a particular resource making them important not only for wildlife, but also for people. We want to help, where we can, continue that legacy.



**CONSERVE
and MANAGE
existing remnant
native habitat.**



Green-winged Teal, Tom Koerner/USFWS

PRIORITY 2



MAINTAIN the integrity of remnant lands in Priority 1, by developing a buffer to existing floodplain, oak savanna, prairie, and wetland habitats.

Add a protective buffer

Our second priority based on our wildlife conservation mission is to work with interested individuals to provide a buffer of land around existing natural remnants. Providing a buffer to existing natural areas helps protect their integrity, thereby maintaining the quality of that natural area.⁹ The goal is to minimize the amount of degradation often seen in natural areas due to “edge effects.” Edge effects occur along the borders, or “edges,” of a natural area and can vary in size and degree of disturbance depending on the neighboring land uses and vegetation. Examples of such effects are the spread of unwanted and damaging plants or animals into the natural area; possible transport of pathogens and disease; physical encroachments such as mowing or placement of garbage and inadvertent overspray of herbicides. Appropriate buffer size is based upon several factors and can vary depending on location, habitat type and outside influences. A 100-meter buffer was determined to be most appropriate for grassland, oak savanna, wetland and forested habitat areas based on scientific recommendations. A buffer 100-meter buffer has been shown to reduce predation and nest parasitism in grassland birds,¹⁰ aid in the reduction of soil erosion and is linked to improved water quality of wetland and riparian habitats.¹¹ Although a 100-meter buffer is shown on the priorities map, in practice, buffer sizes will be determined on a case-by-case basis. The needs of species present and shape and size of the unit determine the size of a buffer.¹²

PRIORITY

3

Restore and create connectivity

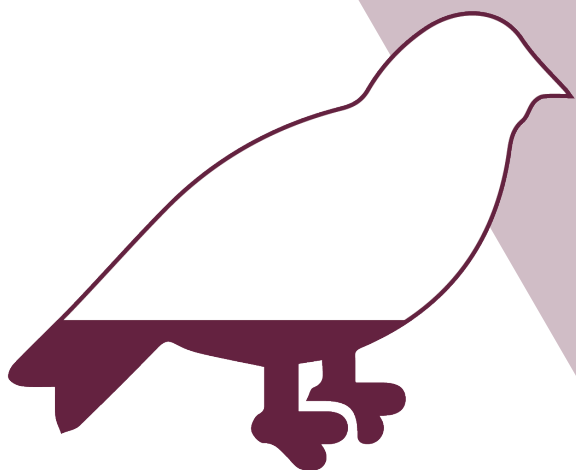


Our third priority to fulfill our wildlife conservation mission is to work with others to restore habitats back to natural conditions and create connections between the natural areas of prairie, oak savanna, wetland and bottomland hardwood forest habitats. Most of the land found within this priority area would require some form of restoration to natural habitat to benefit wildlife species. Restoration efforts will depend on the planning unit. In general, the Wetland Planning Unit will focus on connecting wetland and forested areas in the Kankakee River floodplain. The Prairie/Oak Savanna Planning Unit will focus on connecting tallgrass prairie and oak savannas. These connections would provide corridors for wildlife movement and increase the overall availability of habitat to sustain healthy wildlife populations. Restored areas within the wetland planning area have the added benefit of increase flood protection, and reduce sedimentation and nutrient loading within the waterways.



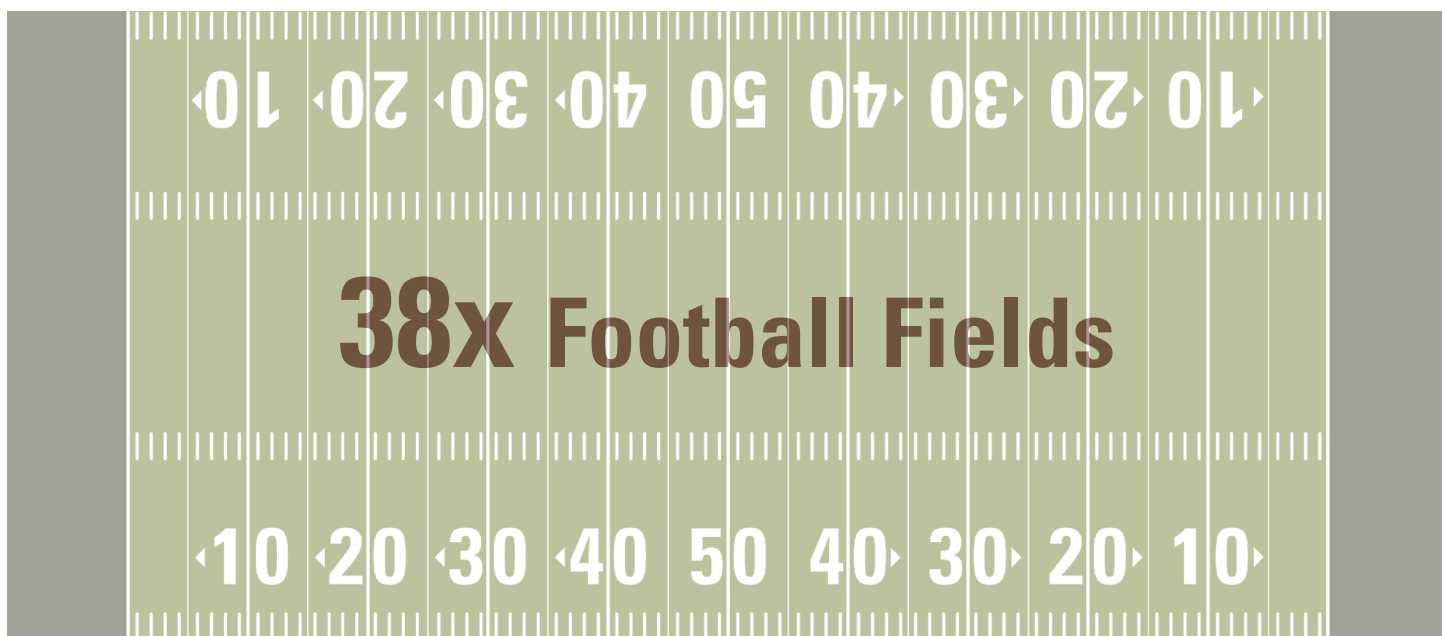
RESTORE larger blocks of habitat and create connectivity.

Bobolink, Jim Hudgins/USFWS



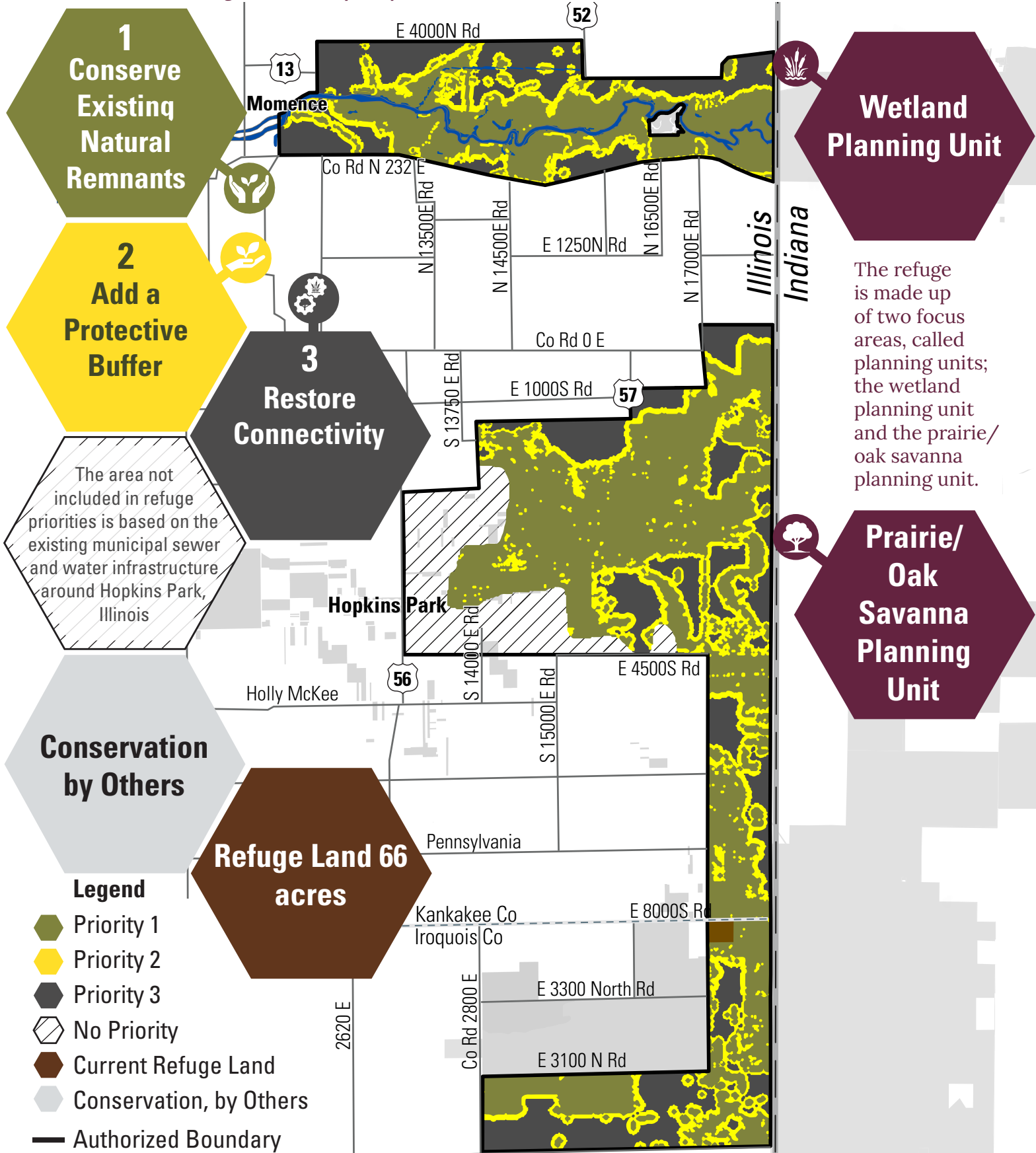
In general, North America has lost more than one in four birds in the last 50 years. This accounts for nearly 3 billion fewer birds today compared to 1970.¹³

Birds dependent on prairies and grasslands have declined the most of all the bird species with 53% of the population disappearing within that same 50-year time frame. Habitat loss is the main driver of this decline. If this loss of habitat continues, it is estimated 75% of the remaining grassland bird species will likely face further declines.¹⁴



Research has shown that birds dependent on grasslands to survive do best in contiguous prairie habitat greater than 50 acres in size.¹⁵ That's roughly as big as 38 American football fields!

This map shows the Service's overall biological priorities. It does not indicate that all of this land be put in conservation. The refuge is only authorized to grow up to 59% of the boundary, or a maximum of 12,716 acres. However, the final size and extent of the refuge is wholly dependent on the interest of local landowners



Data for this was provided by: National Landcover Dataset (NLCD), Digital soils data from Natural Resources Conservation Service, and U.S. Department of Agriculture – National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS).



Area shown in map

The Refuge and Conservation Area Boundary

The boundary and maximum acreage of Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area boundary and maximum acreage was authorized in 2000. This is an administrative boundary that gives the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service the ability to offer conservation options to landowners who wish to implement long-term natural resource stewardship on their property. For properties that fall within the authorized boundary, interested landowners can sell all or part of their property to us to become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. However, just because a property falls within the refuge's authorized boundary does not mean that we are interested in acquiring it. It depends on many factors, because we must make sure that each purchase meets the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the intent of Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. Please see the section titled Acquisition Considerations for more details. The growth of any refuge is a long-term process that progresses as willing sellers and funding allow. The authorization for this refuge capped the acreage at approximately three-fifths of its authorized boundary This equates to 12,716 acres in Illinois.

Meadow rue, Alex Galt/USFWS



Fee-simple acquisition and conservation easements count towards the 12,716 acreage cap for the refuge.

Permanent Conservation

The conservation priorities for the area will guide our work, but how those priorities are met will need creative solutions. We want to hear your ideas as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to fish and wildlife conservation. We work to understand individual conservation issues as they affect the interests of local communities and groups. Then, we customize approaches to address these needs to help fish, wildlife and people. Every situation is unique, and we treat it that way.

Selling, donating or exchanging land, or placing a conservation easement on land, are just a few of the tools we can offer to interested landowners located within the authorized refuge boundary. Under these options, anyone interested can set aside all or a portion of their land for natural resource conservation and become part of Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. Participation is **fully voluntary**. The most common tools are described at the right. On rare occasion tools like transfers, cooperative agreements and no cost lease agreements are also available.



Fee-Simple Acquisition – Involves an interested landowner who requests the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquire most or all the rights to their property. There is a total transfer of property with the formal conveyance of a title to the federal government. In some instances, certain rights such as water rights, mineral rights or use reservations can be negotiated at the time the property is transferred in ownership. We pay fair market value for property and any rights purchased.



Conservation Easements – Involves an interested landowner requesting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquire a portion of their property rights. The landowner retains ownership of the land but sells certain rights identified and agreed upon by both parties, like not altering wetlands on the property. Because ownership of the land remains with the individual, the property remains on the state and local tax rolls. The value a landowner may expect to receive for an easement is dependent on the number of rights the landowner chooses to sell. The purpose for conservation easements is to provide permanent conservation to the natural resources while retaining private landownership.



Donation - Landowners have the right to donate their land to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Lands considered for donation will be reviewed and evaluated prior to acceptance.



Land Exchanges - We can exchange Service land for other land deemed to be of equal or greater conservation value. This concept requires the federal government and the interested landowner to get dollar-for-dollar value. Exchanges usually do not increase federal land holdings or require purchase funds; however, they are typically very labor and time intensive to complete and rarely considered.



Yellow fringed-orchid, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) Adam Balzer

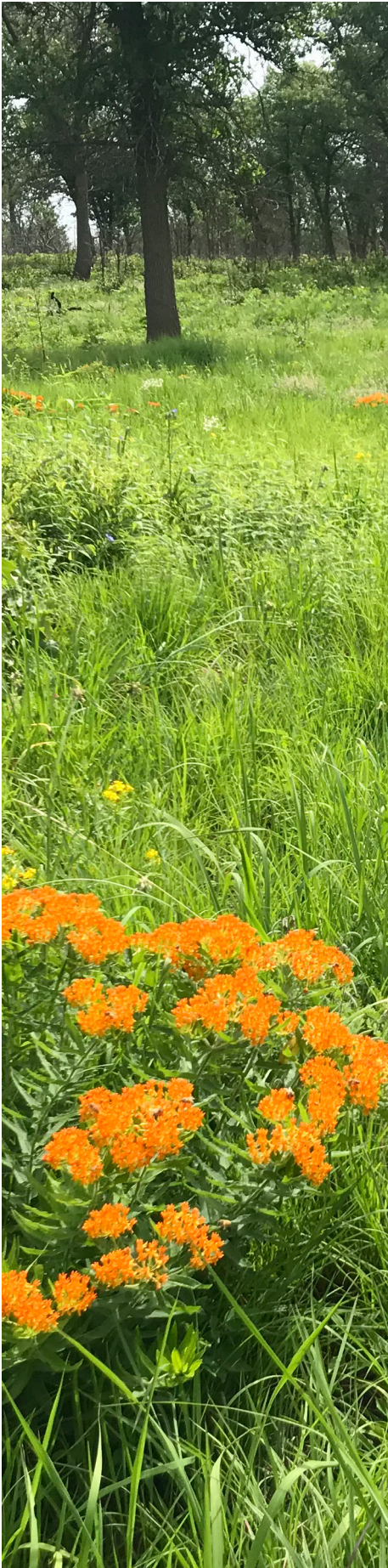


Ornate box turtle,
Kim Roman

We have a longstanding policy to acquire land for refuges only from people interested in selling to us. It is our policy to not use eminent domain or condemnation to acquire lands. If the opportunity arises for us to acquire land from a landowner within the planning areas who wishes to sell or place easements on their land for the conservation of wildlife, we will work with that landowner to work out a mutually agreeable solution. This is, of course, dependent on the conservation value of the property and if we have funds available at that time.

Obligations

Conservation work involving permanent land protection by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must be consistent with federal laws and regulations, congressional guidelines and the executive orders that guide us. These transactions must benefit fish, wildlife and public use of these lands. Purchases are just like any other realty transaction between two individuals. We offer fair market value for your property based on a professionally prepared appraisal. No sale is complete until the landowner agrees to the price and terms. We respect your personal right to sell your property to whomever you wish and if you wish to work with us, your privacy will be maintained throughout that process. Like selling your home to any potential buyer, you have full right to refuse any purchase offer you do not like.



Oak savanna with butterflyweed,
Kim Roman

Acquisition Considerations

When we are approached by a landowner wishing to sell their land to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a variety of considerations come into play for lands that may become part of Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. These range from federal laws that identify the agency's responsibility to protect migratory birds to local commitments like avoiding acquiring land currently connected to municipal sewer and water. Refuge staff will work through these considerations with the landowner to assist in determining the best course of action to meet the needs of both the landowner and the refuge. In some situations, the refuge may not be the best option and we will connect landowners with other conservation agencies and organizations that could better meet their needs.

Our considerations for land acquisition...

Protection of Federal Trust Species (Migratory Birds). We value land that provides or has a potential to provide a significant value to migratory birds for prime nesting and foraging habitat during all seasons, including migration.

Threatened or Endangered Species Present. A property that has documented federal or state threatened or endangered species present will have preference if not currently under permanent land protection.

Existing and Potential Resource Concerns. Parcels of significant importance to the Kankakee River watershed or remnant properties that face immediate pressure or are threatened by negative impacts to environmental conditions of an area will be valued.

Location Relative to Other Conservation Properties. Parcels located next to existing conservation lands or that provide an opportunity to connect with existing neighboring conservation lands would be highly desirable. These properties often present an opportunity to partner with others in management that could reduce duplication of effort. By combining forces, this saves time and money and yields a greater conservation outcome. Larger contiguous areas of habitat greatly benefit the ability of wildlife to succeed.

Potential to Contribute Towards Outdoor Recreation. Properties that can provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation will directly meet the goals of the refuge and be valued highly.

Presence of Infrastructure. Current land use of a property is always evaluated. It is not our intent to acquire land currently associated with municipal sewer and water infrastructure. If buildings or support infrastructure other than current municipal sewer and water are located on a property, additional factors like type, condition and location will be highly scrutinized before we consider that property. Buildings and structures do not make good wildlife habitat, so we usually avoid them.

Acquisition Funding

Funding to buy land and easements within Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area will primarily come from the Land and Water and Conservation Fund.¹⁶ The Land and Water Conservation Fund is appropriated by Congress annually to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to acquire refuge lands or conservation easements from interested landowners. The main source of revenue for the fund is proceeds from Outer Continental Shelf federal oil and gas leases. It also receives revenue from certain user fees, the proceeds from the disposal of surplus federal property and the federal tax on motorboat fuels. The Migratory Bird Conservation Fund could be another source of funding and is derived from Federal Duck Stamp revenues. Grants and gifts to the Service are additional sources of acquisition funding that can present themselves.



Regal fritillary on butterflyweed,
Kim Roman



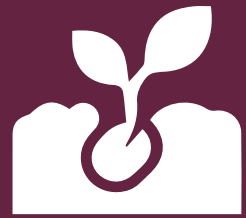
Pair of sandhill cranes, USFWS

Growing Conservation Together

We are committed to conservation and growing a flourishing Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. As a next step in implementing the land protection plan, we are shifting to a community-focused, inclusive, intentional and collaborative conversation with the communities about how conservation fits into their vision for their future. In this endeavor, we are coming to the table as a potential partner with the desire to work on natural resource conservation and stewardship where and when it makes sense, based on community interests and needs.

Having this established refuge located in the Kankakee River Basin in Illinois provides the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service the opportunity offer additional tools to landowners and stakeholders who are interested in long-term conservation. The development of the refuge is part of a realization of continued and enhanced natural resource conservation in this area, which is already recognized locally, regionally and nationally, as an important area by the Service and the communities.

The conservation of the natural resources not only benefits wildlife and wildlands it can also protect the rural lifestyle of the area and the character of the communities, provide environmental services, and add to the local economy. There are many paths to the conservation of fish and wildlife. We wish to work together with all who are solutions that jointly meet the needs of landowners, the communities and the fish, wildlife and habitats of this very special place.





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- 16 More information about the Land and Water Conservation Fund available from: <https://www.doi.gov/lwcf>





**Interested in learning more about
Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge
and Conservation Area or working
with us?**

Contact the refuge at:
<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/kankakee-and-conservation-area>
TTY Relay System: 1-800-877-8339
kankakee@fws.gov

Printed May 2022

Prairie flowers, Shawn May/USFWS