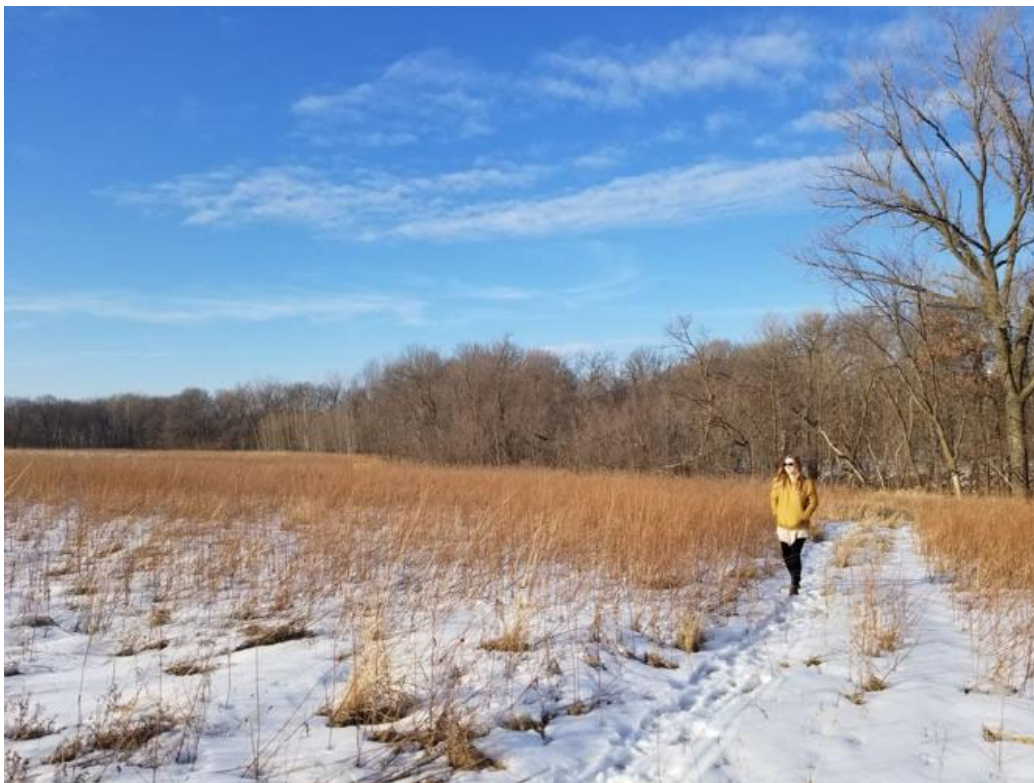


## Conservation efforts renewed in a complex landscape

By DANE MCKITTRICK Clean River Partners  
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Rachel Larson takes a hike through the Prairie Creek Woods State Natural Area, located in Nerstrand Big Woods State Park. (Photo courtesy of Dane McKittrick)

**F**rom fishing the Boundary Waters to hiking the bluffs of the Mississippi River, finding diverse ways to enjoy prairies, forests, and wetlands has long been part of Minnesotans' cultural identity.

Realizing this, the voters of Minnesota passed the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment in 2008, which established the Outdoor Heritage Fund to protect and enhance natural areas. Since then, organizations and individuals around the state have been working to make natural areas more abundant, healthy, and accessible.

Here in Southeast Minnesota, various groups are cooperating to protect and restore a range of natural areas. This protection process begins when organizations like the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit that works to increase the amount of protected and natural public space, works with private landowners to acquire land and transition it to public domain.

Next, entities like the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Great River Greening (an environmental nonprofit based in St. Paul) work to restore these lands to a more diverse natural state.

"The Outdoor Heritage Fund has been essential for scaling up our conservation and restoration efforts [in the Cannon River watershed]," said Brad Gordon, the Southern Minnesota program manager at Great River Greening.

With Outdoor Heritage Fund funding, Great River Greening will continue restoring and enhancing critical habitats across the region, including through prairie seeding, forest seeding, and invasive species removal. Several of these practices are scheduled to take place at the Sakatah, Diamond Lake, John Peter Hoffman and Aurora wildlife management areas, and other areas over the coming months.

Often these restoration activities are most effective when conducted during fall hunting seasons, and this can sometimes disturb hunting experiences. Although restoration activities may create temporary disturbances, the improvements made on the landscape benefit game populations, and in turn benefit hunters now and in the future.

The Outdoor Heritage Fund has provided funding for the Cannon River Watershed Habitat Protection and Restoration Program since 2011. Over the past 11 years, seven new wildlife management areas and a new aquatic management areas have been created and six other wildlife management areas and a scientific natural area have been expanded, permanently protecting more than 2,500 acres of high quality habitat within the Cannon River Watershed.

Habitat restorations and enhancements began in 2018, and to date, over 300 acres have been restored and more than 500 acres of habitat improvements are underway. These protected and restored places now provide habitat for a wide variety of wildlife, and offer quality outdoor experiences such as hiking, hunting, bird watching, and fishing for current and future generations.

Many in the conservation community acknowledge that accomplishing the most effective habitat protection requires that private landowners be part of conservation discussions. Addressing ecological problems requires focusing on the entire landscape, not just protected areas.

"A lot of work, such as clearing woody invasive plant species like Siberian elm and buckthorn, goes into improving natural preserves. However, it's always challenging to see that ecological problems, like seed sources for these species, can frequently be seen on adjacent private lands," Gordon said.

To promote private lands conservation, Clean River Partners, a watershed conservation organization in Northfield, has hosted outreach events throughout the Cannon River Watershed. In 2022, such events were held at Prairie Creek Woods Scientific Natural Area, Cannon River Turtle Preserve Scientific Natural Area and Boyd Sartell Wildlife Management Area.

Looking ahead to 2023, Clean River Partners will continue to host events including land dedications that recognize former landowners for their recent contributions, and 'walk with a naturalist' hikes to share ecological knowledge with landowners and the public.

These programs will continue to spread the word on conservation opportunities available to local landowners, and increase the public's knowledge of new and improved habitats that are available to all for hunting, fishing, birding, hiking, and more.

If you are thinking about how you can protect your land, are someone with naturalist experience who would like to get involved with upcoming Clean River Partners outreach programming, or have questions about any of this information, visit [www.cleanriverpartners.org](http://www.cleanriverpartners.org) or contact Conservation Program Assistant Dane McKittrick at [dane@cleanriverpartners.org](mailto:dane@cleanriverpartners.org).

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