



Save It, Don't Pave It: The Tallgrass Prairie in Detroit's Backyard

Sibley Prairie: The Case for Preservation

April 2026

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Design by Monica Dubray



For Flora

For Fauna

For People

For Planet

Executive Summary

The prairie, woods, and wetlands in the 440-acre parcel of Sibley Prairie represent the most important conservation opportunity in the state of Michigan right now.

99% of the tallgrass prairie in the U.S. has been destroyed and this land is home to endangered and threatened plants and animals dependent on its biological diversity. Preserving Sibley Prairie would also create public access for a nature-deprived Southeast Michigan population and maintain key ecological services that mitigate the effects of industrialization,

urbanization, and climate change. To prevent Sibley Prairie from being sold to private developers and protect it for flora, fauna, people, and planet, organizers are seeking donors to contribute **\$9.7 million** by December 2026 to secure its purchase, restoration, and long-term stewardship.

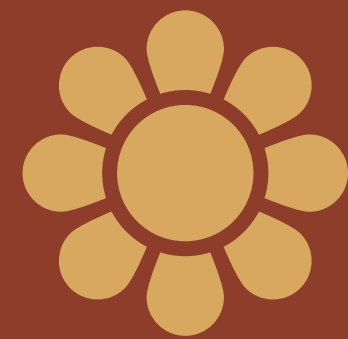


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Introduction: Preserving the Last Great Prairie of Southeast Michigan

Just 15 miles from the bustle of downtown Detroit exists a rare ecological oasis bursting with biodiversity: the largest remaining lakeplain prairie in the entire state, a landscape found almost nowhere else on earth.

Sibley Prairie is a mosaic of high-quality marshes, forested wetlands, oak savanna, and tallgrass prairie. Against a distant backdrop of skyscrapers and factories, a magical garden beckons with asters, goldenrods, blazing stars, and milkweeds within a sea of soaring Indian grass and big bluestem. To get there, one needs no reservation, just preservation.

200+ years ago, southern Michigan's vast meadows were alive with movement—waves of tall grasses, clouds of wildflowers, and even herds of American bison roaming freely

across Wayne County. Today, less than 1% of the tallgrass prairie remains, the rest lost to farming and development. Right now, the urban cacophony is softened by the soundscape of bees buzzing, crickets chirping, and birds singing across Sibley Prairie. Without immediate action, nature will be further silenced.

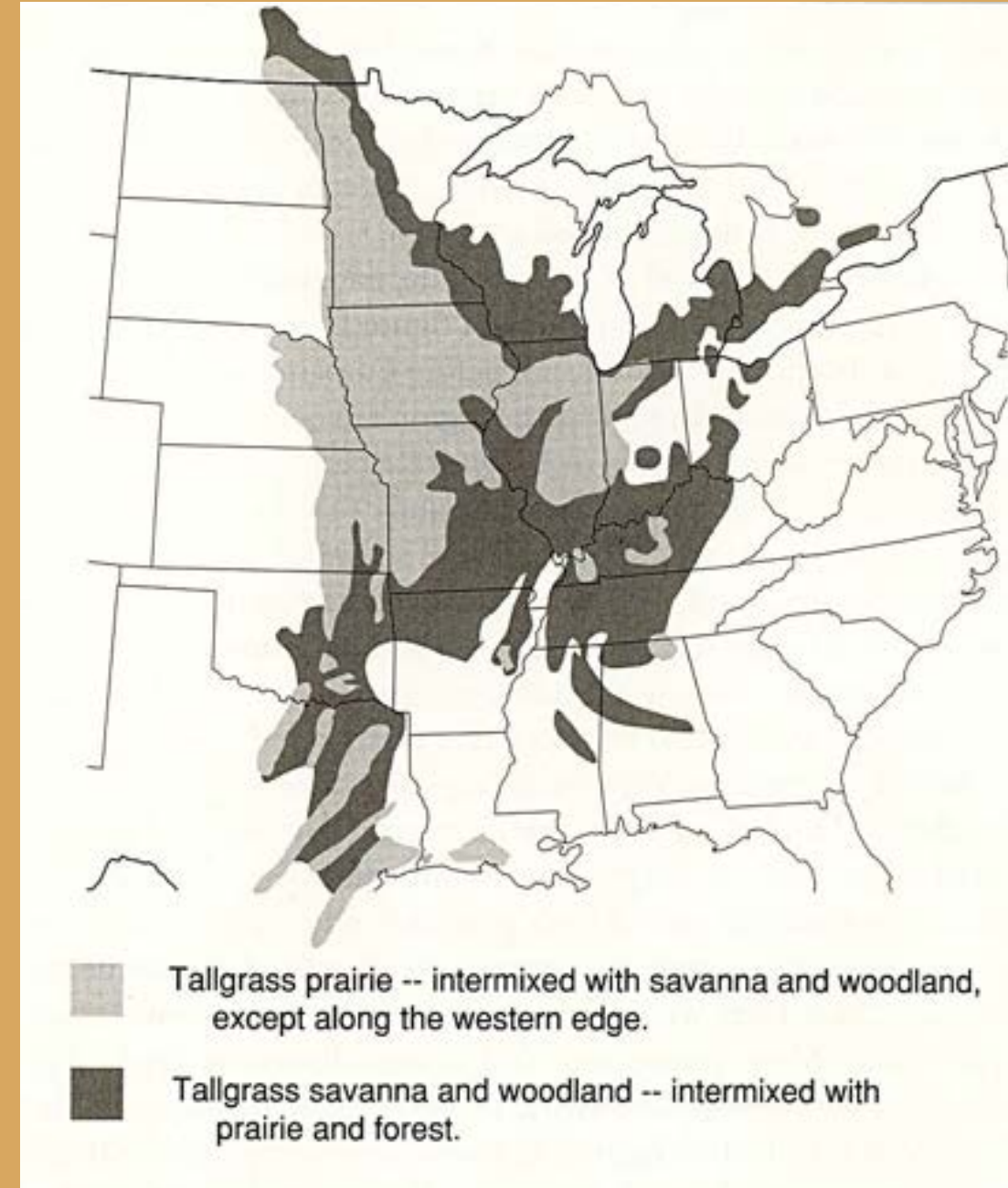
In August 2025, the 440-acre heart of Sibley Prairie was scheduled for auction, its future uncertain and development looming. At the last possible moment, the Michigan Land Conservancy secured an option to purchase the property, backed by a lender. Now, philanthropists have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect this ecosystem and ensure that it remains a safe haven for plants and animals as well as a healing place for people and the planet.

So, What Is a Prairie, Anyway?

“What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked.”

—Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949)

The American prairie is one of four great temperate grasslands across the globe—a sibling to the steppes of Central Asia, the pampas of South America, and the veld of Southern Africa. Michigan is within the northeasternmost edge of the historic range of the tallgrass prairie. Characterized by sod-forming bunchgrasses with deep roots, tallgrass prairies are among the most diverse plant communities in the world, second only to the rainforest. And yet, due to their attractiveness for agriculture,



Map of Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Woodland Region, *The Tallgrass Restoration Handbook*

they have long been an afterthought for conservation. Of all the major landscapes in the United States, grasslands were the last one to get their own national park—in 1996.

Lakeplain prairie, a type of tallgrass prairie, is a species-rich community that occurs on the seasonally wet ground of glacial lakeplains in the southern Great

Lakes region. In lakeplains, a layer of clay often sits below permeable sand, both impeding drainage from the surface and preventing groundwater from rising. This results in temporary flooding in winter and spring and drought in summer and fall. In the aquatic and wet sections of the lakeplain prairie, ducks swim in spring where flowers and grasses will wave in midsummer breezes—these are the wetlands. This ecosystem has been almost entirely lost to agriculture, industry, and urban and suburban development in places like Chicago, Detroit, Toledo, and Windsor, leaving only small, isolated remnants.

More broadly, at 440 acres in Detroit’s backyard, this is one of the largest remaining natural properties in Southeast Michigan and therefore is among the most important conservation opportunities in the Great Lakes region. Acquisition of this

property would also complement existing preserved land nearby, creating roughly 675 acres of protected and preserved acreage. Furthermore, this is also a critical piece of a larger, rare ecosystem called the lakeplain oak openings region, a savanna spanning Southeast Michigan and northwest Ohio—an area the Nature Conservancy has described as one of “The Last Great Places.”

Note:

Sibley Prairie contains prairie, woods, and wetlands. Given the uniqueness and extreme rarity of the tallgrass lakeplain prairie as well as the greater familiarity for most people of woods and wetlands, this document will focus primarily on the prairie ecosystem. That said, the woods and wetlands present are interrelated and of significant ecological and social importance in their own right, though they will be referenced here with less frequency.





Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) in a field of Fireweed
(*Chamerion angustifolium*) by Diane Cheklich, Detroit Bird Alliance

Prairie, Woods, and Wetlands: For Flora

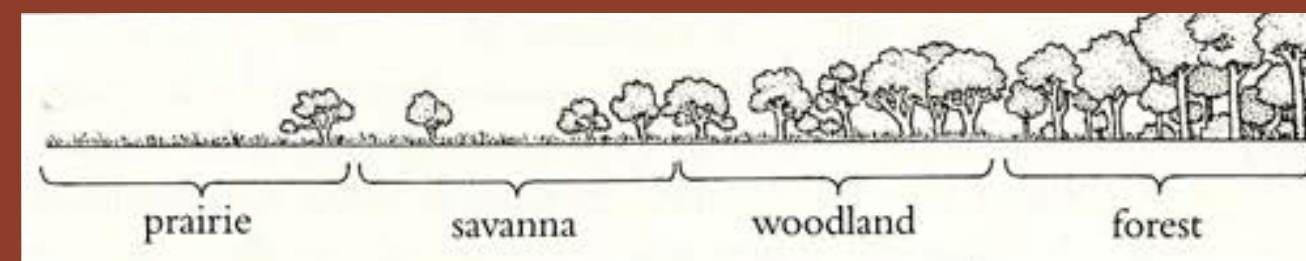
“To most Americans, the word “Prairie” suggests either a romantic element in pioneer fiction or a vast expanse of level land which must be crossed in going from one coast to another. But to the botanist, the American Prairie is a wonderfully complex society of living organisms.”

—J.E. Weaver, *North American Prairie* (1954)

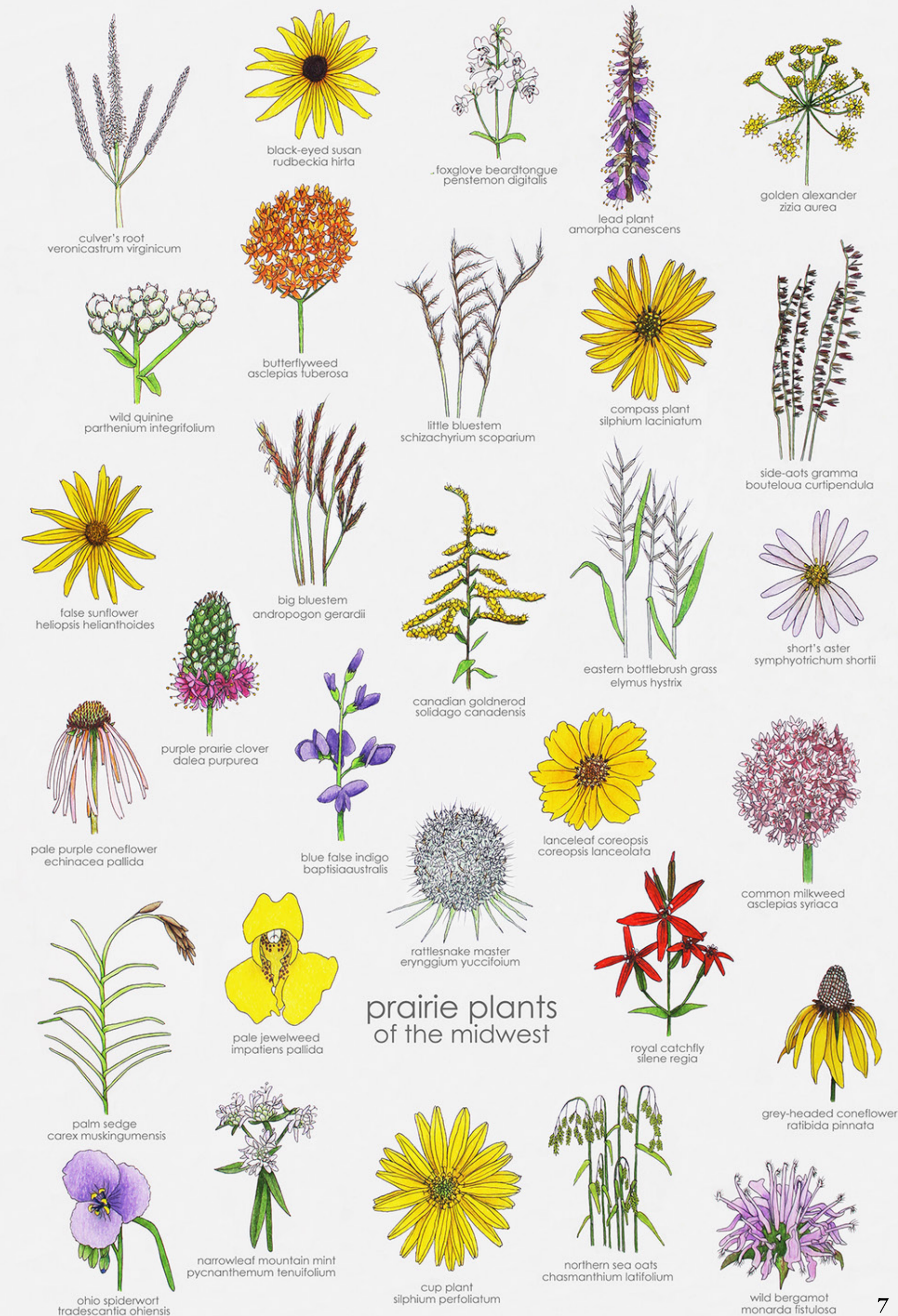
Plants, especially grasses, make the prairie. The bunchgrasses—big bluestem, switchgrass, Indian grass, prairie cordgrass, and more—are complemented by other graminoids—grass-like plants—such as sedges and rushes. Amongst the grasses, colorful flowers such as asters, goldenrods, milkweeds, and coneflowers erupt like fireworks across the landscape, contrasting with the greens and coppers in the sea of grass.

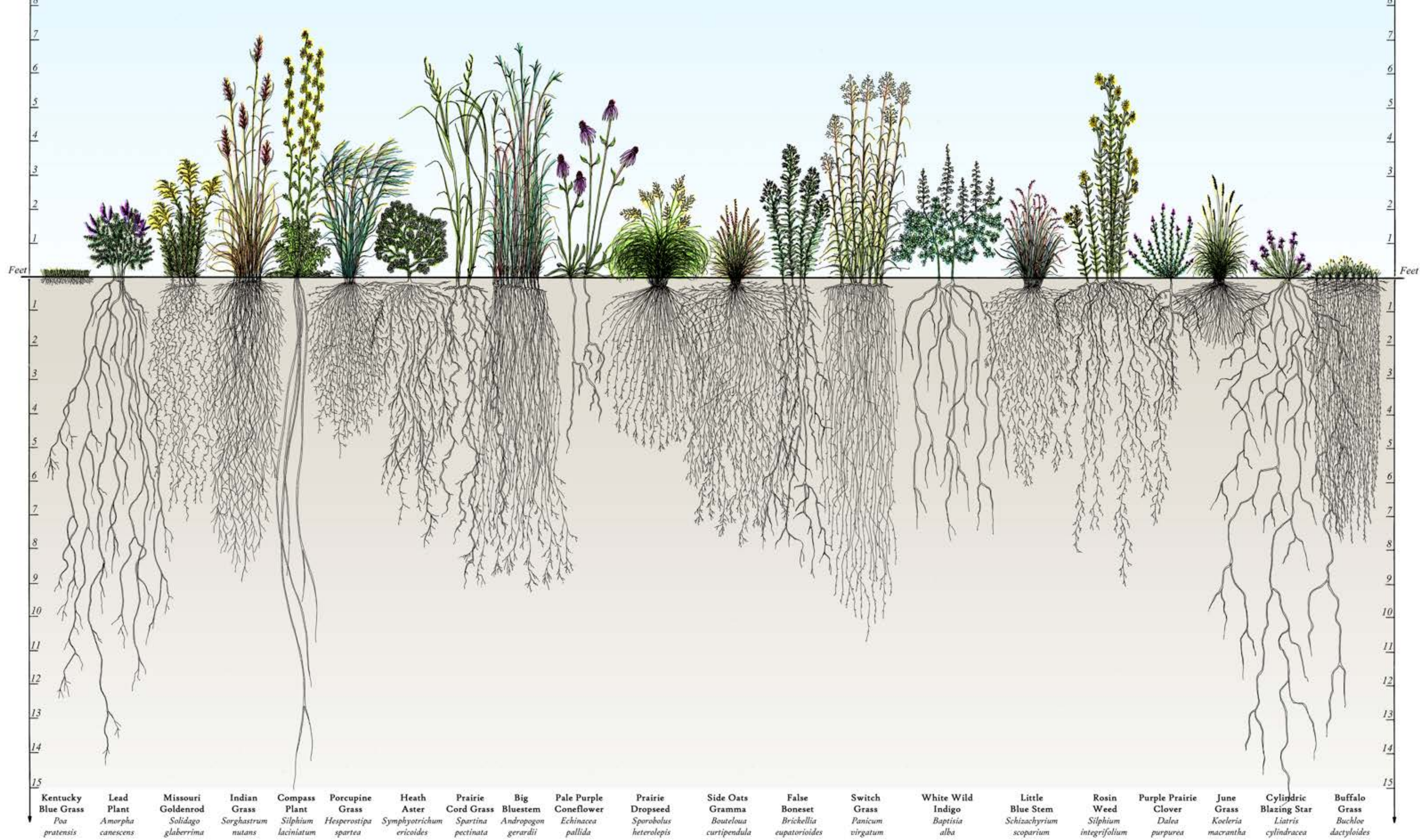
Iconic prairie flowers are prized for their beauty and ecological value. Flowers found here include: lupines, ironweeds, mountain mints, coreopsis, Indian plantains, prairie docks, lobelias, blazing stars, bog laurels, and more.

It often takes three to five years for a perennial prairie grass or flower to reach maturity from seed; they grow down before they grow up. Their deep roots allow them to survive through heat, cold, fire, pests, flood, and drought. Prairie grasses also create channels for rainwater to penetrate the soil and support bugs, fungi, bacteria, and other microbes. This invisible underground community has been described as the “most complex ecosystem on earth.”



Above: Prairie-Forest Continuum, *The Tallgrass Restoration Handbook*
Right: Prairie Plants of the Midwest, Melbry Arts





Root Systems of Prairie Plants

Living Habitats

Heidi Natura 1995 ©



“Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.”

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2013)

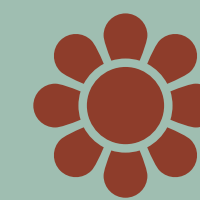
Nature Notes:

Above ground, prairie grasses are incredibly efficient at capturing sunlight with narrow blades; one acre of grass contains ten acres of leaf surface. Below ground, root density is unparalleled; a cubic yard of big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) sod contains nearly 13 miles of roots and root hairs.

For visitors, these flowers and grasses are beautiful to behold in all seasons. This is a gardener’s delight seemingly frozen in time, a natural ecosystem emulated in many of the most famous botanical gardens, but not easily replicated. The Michigan Natural Features Inventory identifies Sibley Prairie as the highest-quality lakeplain prairie remnant in the state, ranking first among 53 surveyed sites. It carries an exceptional Floristic Quality Index of 69.95. (Anything above 40 is considered outstanding.)

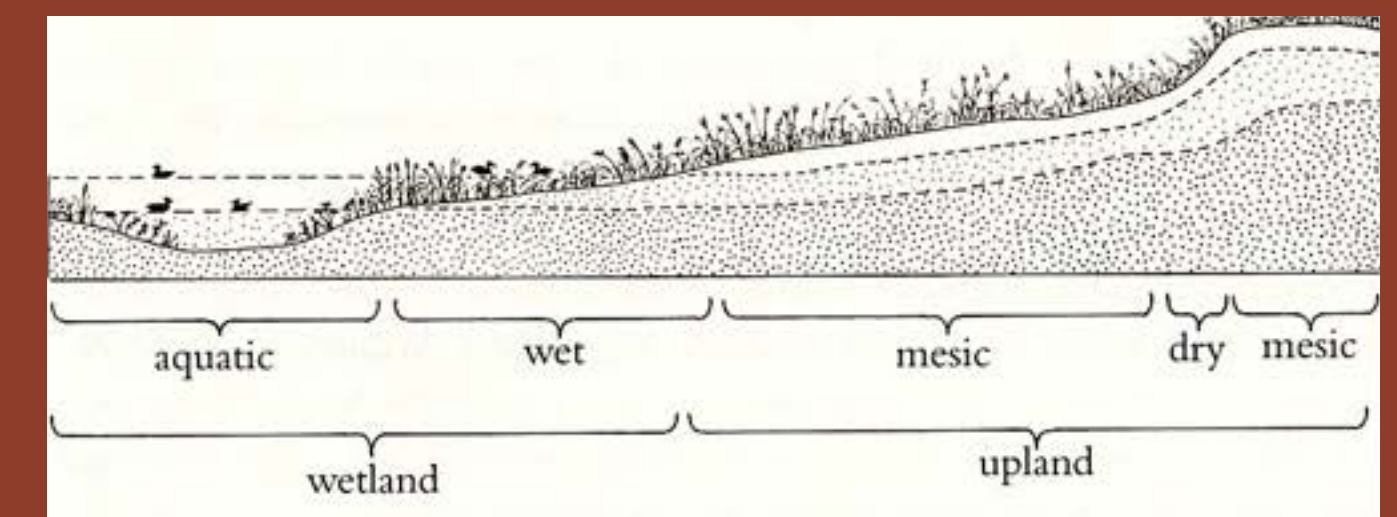
The uniqueness, rarity, and special conservation value of the prairie, woods, and wetland plants found in Sibley Prairie have been recognized by federal and state governments. Seven legally protected—endangered or threatened—plant and animal species are documented on or near the property. Another 16 species are of special concern, meaning they are at risk of becoming threatened or endangered. There may yet be more discovered.

While this rich ecosystem could be paved over quickly, it took thousands of years of succession and evolution to build such complexity and could never be recreated elsewhere as it is now.



Endangered, threatened, or special concern plants present:

- Tall green milkweed (*Asclepias hirtella*)
- Sullivant’s milkweed (*Asclepias sullivantii*)
- Short-fruited rush (*Juncus brachycarpus*)
- Vasey’s rush (*Juncus vaseyi*)
- Hairy angelica (*Angelica venenosa*)
- Three-awned grass (*Aristida longespica*)
- Gentian-leaved St. John’s-wort (*Hypericum gentianoides*)
- Gray birch (*Betula populifolia*)





Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) by Brad Imhoff;
Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library

Prairie, Woods, and Wetlands: For Fauna

"...the Prairies and the Plains, while less stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest, and make North America's characteristic landscape."

—Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (1879)

Mammals, birds, insects, reptiles, amphibians, and soil microbes all depend on Sibley Prairie, woods, and wetlands for food, water, and habitat. Insects, the structural and foundational base of all living systems, drive most plant reproduction through pollination. They coevolved with plants and the extraordinary diversity in plant scents, shapes, and colors was driven by the competition for pollinators. Bugs also provide sustenance for innumerable species, including fish and most birds. Important insects of the prairie include butterflies, moths, skippers, wasps, flies, beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, dragonflies, damselflies, fireflies, and more.

Pollinators that depend on prairie are at risk of extinction due to loss of habitat as well as herbicides and insecticides. Eastern

Monarch butterflies have declined by more than 80% since the 1990s and have been proposed to be listed as federally threatened by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Milkweeds, like those found at Sibley Prairie—including the state-threatened tall green milkweed and Sullivant's milkweed—are the only host plant genus on which monarchs lay eggs and that their caterpillars eat. Following metamorphosis, prairie flowers then provide the necessary nectar for the adult butterflies.

The state-endangered American bumble bee has also seen a precipitous decline, with an 89% reduction in abundance. Additionally, Michigan is home to over 450 species of native bees. Of those, roughly 25% are specialists, meaning that they have evolved to feed on just a handful or even a single native plant species.

Endangered & Threatened Species

Endangered, threatened, or special concern prairie animals present:

- **American bumble bee (*Bombus pensylvanicus*)**
- **Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)**
- **Duke's skipper butterfly (*Euphyes dukesi*)**
- **Leafhopper (*Flexamia reflexa*)**
- **Blazing-star borer moth (*Papaipema beeriana*)**
- **Regal fern borer moth (*Papaipema speciosissima*)**
- **Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*)**
- **Pickerel frog (*Lithobates palustris*)**





Photo by Andrew Berg

Home gardeners are doing their part to restore habitat. Saving Sibley Prairie will connect wildlife corridors and flyways on public and private lands.

Further, many native bees only forage within a few hundred feet. Without the wide variety of plants already available in places like Sibley Prairie, native bees, butterflies, moths, and other pollinators cannot survive.

Nature Notes:

Oak trees, like those found in Sibley Prairie's oak savanna or oak openings, are keystone species and support 897 types of caterpillars across the United States.

Birds, iconic members of the prairie ecosystem, are threatened as well. Over the past 50 years, grassland bird populations have declined in North America by 43%, more than any other group of birds in North America. Some species, such as the greater prairie chicken and lark sparrow, have already been extirpated from Michigan and are at a tipping point, putting them at risk of extinction in the remainder of their range. Direct habitat loss and a decline in insects to eat are key causes.

Sibley Prairie is five miles from the Detroit River, the strait between Lake Huron and Lake Erie. Two of the four main migratory bird routes in North America converge here: the Mississippi Flyway and the Atlantic Flyway. Thermals do not form over water, so many birds follow routes that

minimize flight distances over the Great Lakes. This increases concentrations of migrating birds up to fourfold compared to other areas. Sibley Prairie provides crucial habitat for countless migratory birds heading to or from other parts of Michigan, Canada, and far beyond. Birds are not the only fliers found here. Seven of Michigan's nine bat species have been recorded within the Sibley Prairie complex. This assemblage spans migratory and resident, tree and cavity-roosting, and both urban-tolerant and forest-dependent bats. Other mammals that may be found in ecosystems like this include white-tailed deer, coyotes, foxes, beavers, woodchucks, muskrats, and even flying squirrels.

Rare reptiles and amphibians documented at Sibley Prairie include the Blanding's turtle and the pickerel frog. Additional likely cold-blooded residents include other turtles and frogs, snakes, and salamanders. Finally, the mix of wetlands, oak openings, and prairie provide perfect habitat for the Eastern massasauga rattlesnake, which is federally threatened and of special concern in Michigan.

Nature Notes:

96% of all terrestrial birds eat insects. Small songbirds require some 6,000-9,000 caterpillars to raise a brood of nestlings. Those caterpillars depend on the native plants of the prairie, woods, and wetlands.

Rare Grassland Birds

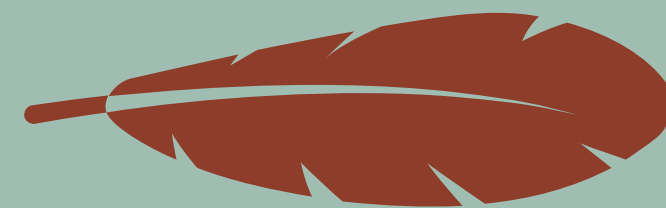
Grassland birds that will likely benefit from this preservation include but are not limited to:

- Bobolinks
- Meadowlarks
- Indigo Buntings
- King Rails
- Ruby-throated Hummingbirds
- Dickcissel
- Upland sandpiper
- Killdeer
- Horned Lark

Migrating Birds

Provides crucial habitat for countless migratory birds including:

- Ducks
- Geese
- Sandhill Cranes
- Hawks
- Owls
- Eagles
- Warblers



“Grassland birds are in steep decline all across Michigan and indeed across North America. Preserving Sibley Prairie would be a boon to both breeding and migrating birds, as we work to build a robust wildlife corridor in Southeast Michigan.”

—Jim Bull & Diane Checklich, Detroit Bird Alliance

Prairie, Woods, and Wetlands: For People

“When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully.”

—bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2008)

Sibley Prairie would be beneficial for human visitors as well. Time spent in natural settings has been shown to lower heart rates, reduce stress, support emotional well-being, enhance short-term memory, and potentially reduce the risk of depression. Trees and plants also help clean the air, supporting healthier lungs. Psychological well-being is further enhanced by exposure to diverse plant and animal life, making Sibley Prairie’s approximately 200 species especially valuable. These benefits extend to young people as well, as direct contact with nature supports children’s cognitive, emotional, and moral development.

Southeast Michigan is home to nearly five million people. The French founded Detroit in 1701, but this area is part of the contemporary and ancestral homelands of three Anishinaabe nations of

the Council of Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi, as well as the Wyandot (also known as the Huron). The City of Detroit, with nearly 650,000 residents, is the largest Black-majority city in the United States. 77% of Detroiters and 37% of Wayne County residents are Black, with sizable populations of Latinos and Asian Americans as well. Metro Detroit is also home to the largest concentration of Arab Americans—some 400,000—in the United States.

All people deserve the opportunity to enjoy prairie, woods, and wetlands. Across the country, communities of color are “nature deprived” at a rate three times that of white communities; 74% of communities of color live in nature-deprived areas, compared with just 23% of white communities. This is especially acute for families of color with children.



Photo by Noah Elliott Morrison



Photo courtesy of Friends of the Rouge

“All nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. Do not resist her. With the least inclination to be well we should not be sick.”

—Henry David Thoreau, Journal (1853)

This unequal distribution of nature is particularly concerning because nature is not an amenity but a necessity for everyone’s health and well-being.

Locally, this equates to a conspicuous lack of green space in urbanized Southeast Michigan. Nowhere is that deficit greater than in Wayne County, Michigan’s most populous county and the home of Detroit. In Detroit, just 6% of the land area is dedicated to parks—compared to the top 100 most populous cities in the U.S., which have a national average of 19%. Highways, skyscrapers, manufacturing, housing, parking lots, shopping malls, and gas stations cover the land here like an impermeable blanket, snuffing out the embers of nature.

One crucial way to provide better access to nature is by creating close-to-home outdoor opportunities. Yes, Sibley Prairie deserves protection for its biodiversity alone; however, its proximity to Detroit makes it an

invaluable and accessible destination for residents of Detroit and Southeast Michigan.

Creating access to green spaces is also an investment that pays significant dividends. Researchers estimate that every dollar spent on creating and maintaining park trails saves nearly three dollars in health care costs alone.

This preservation and its creation of public access would build on the significant recent momentum in Detroit and across Southeast Michigan in prioritizing green infrastructure for the health and future of humans. Complementing these types of projects, a social movement has emerged in

Recent Regional Green Space Initiatives:

Detroit Riverwalk, Dequindre Cut, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Park, Joe Louis Greenway, Chandler Park Marshland, Arboretum Detroit, Pointe Rosa Coastal Marsh Restoration, Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, Superior Greenway, Pointe Mouillee, Southeast Michigan Conservation Coalition (SMCC), and Detroit Bird City program.

recent years that celebrates the crucial role of native plants—like those found in Sibley Prairie—in providing clean air and water, flood control, pollinator habitat, pest control, and carbon storage. Gardeners of all ages are reintroducing native plants, decreasing stormwater runoff, and reducing or eliminating insecticides, fertilizers, and other harmful practices where they live, work, learn, pray, and play, recreating species diversity to form an archipelago of interconnected nature.

Multiple national environmental organizations encourage and certify these efforts. Additionally, a strong regional network of local nonprofits and government agencies provide hands-on training, tools, and outreach in Southeast Michigan, engaging thousands of residents every year. These individual and collective efforts demonstrate a grassroots groundswell of support for initiatives whose values align with the preservation and protection of Sibley Prairie.

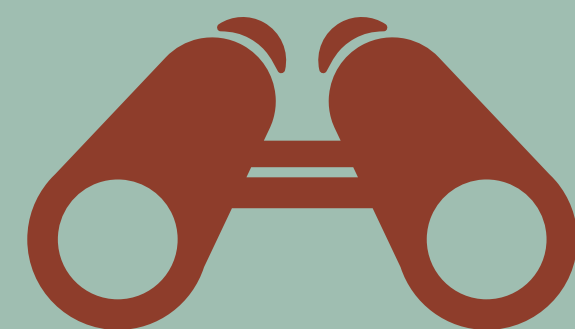


Birding is Good for Business

New Opportunities for All

There are **96 million** American birders—37% of the adult population. Birdwatching activity pumps \$279 billion into the U.S. economy every year, generates more than \$38 billion in total tax revenue (county, state, and federal combined), and supports 1.4 million jobs.

- Birdwatching
- Environmental Education
- Field Trips
- Hiking
- Hunting
- Nature Study



Prairie, Woods, and Wetlands: For Planet

“Every landscape needs to manage the watershed in which it lies. Every landscape needs to support pollinators. Every landscape needs to support a viable food web. And every landscape needs to sequester carbon.”

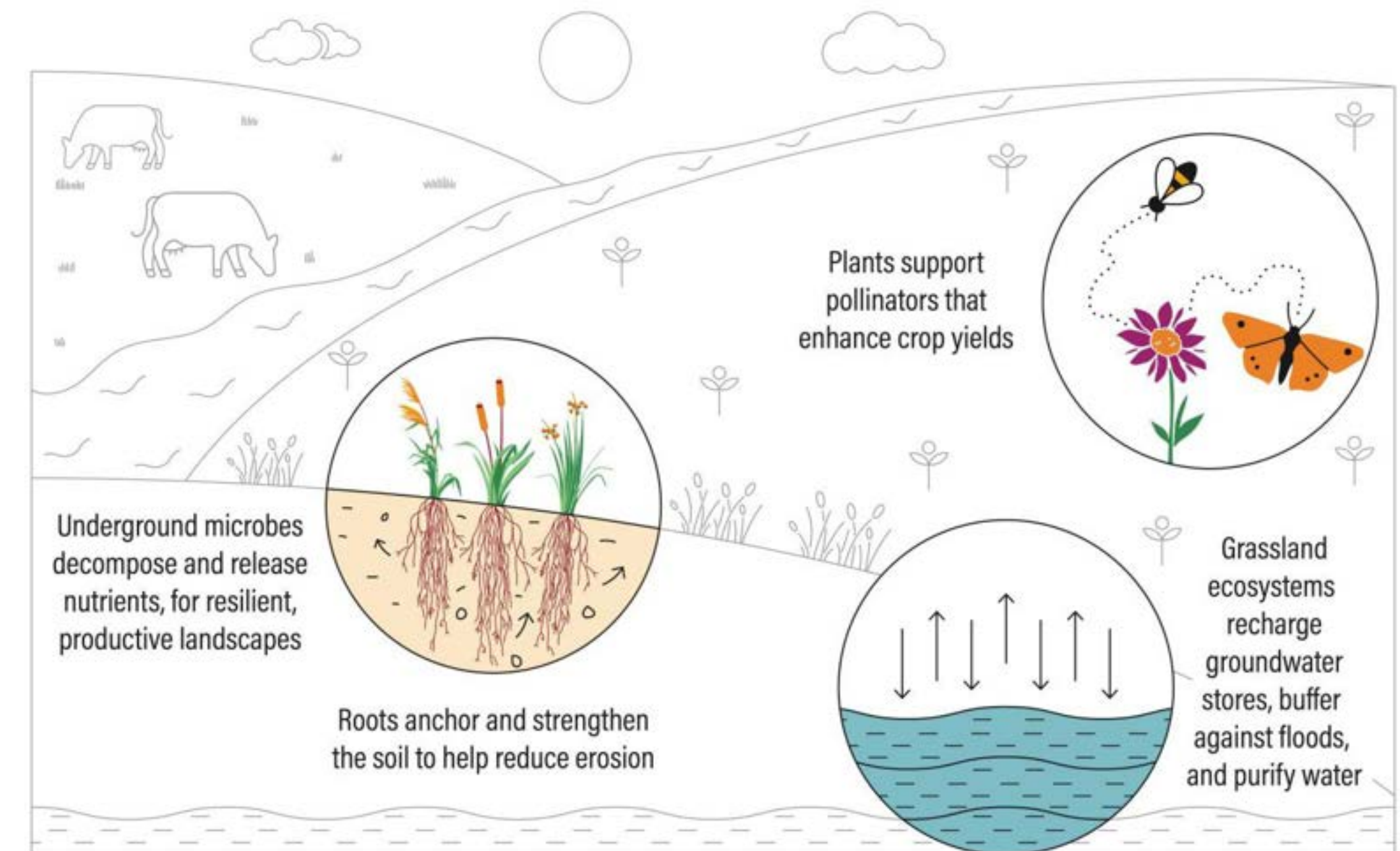
—Prof. Doug Tallamy, The New York Times (2025)

In addition to the biodiversity, recreational, and health benefits, preserving this natural area will allow it to continue to serve as the green infrastructure desperately needed to mitigate the effects of climate change, store carbon, protect water quality, clean the air, lessen heat island effects, reduce flood risks, and decrease erosion. These ecological services are desperately needed; the legacy of being the birthplace of the auto industry, the arsenal of democracy, and the poster region for urban sprawl has cast a long environmental shadow.


Once the fifth largest city in the country, Detroit has experienced decades of unsustainable development patterns. Improbably, urban-suburban sprawl

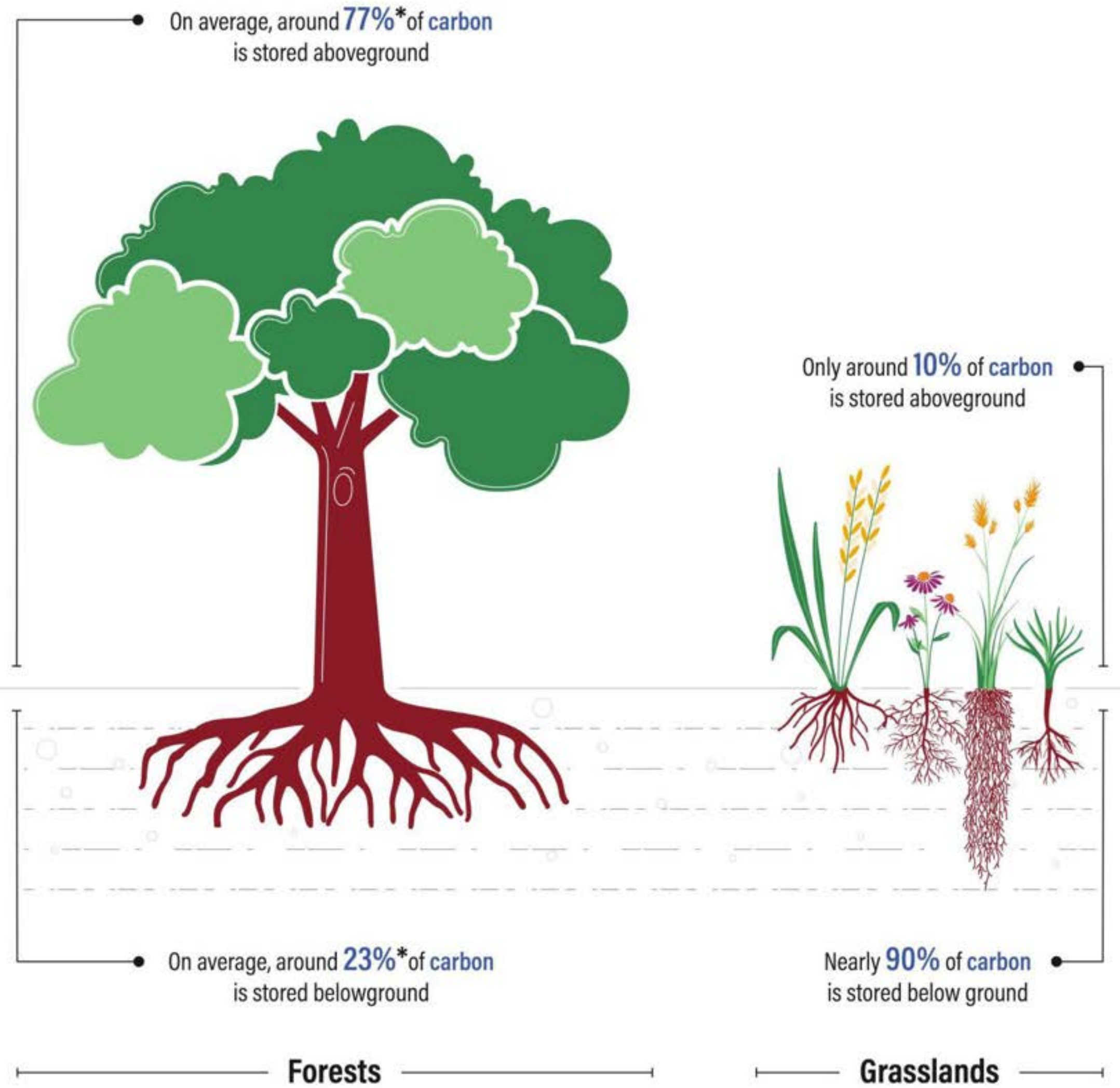
expanded while the population remained relatively stable. This has led to one of the most intense urban heat island effects in the nation, with 86% of the Southeast Michigan population experiencing an increase in temperatures of 8 degrees or more. Detroit is on track to suffer more extreme heat-related deaths than some southern cities. The Southeast Michigan region’s combined sewer overflow system—which carries stormwater and sewage in the same pipes—has repeatedly caused contaminated water to flood some residents’ homes as well as pollute rivers and other bodies of water. Air quality in Detroit, already ranked among the worst in the nation, also stands to worsen with climate change.

Grasslands in Action: Key Landscape Functions



Source: WRI

 WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE

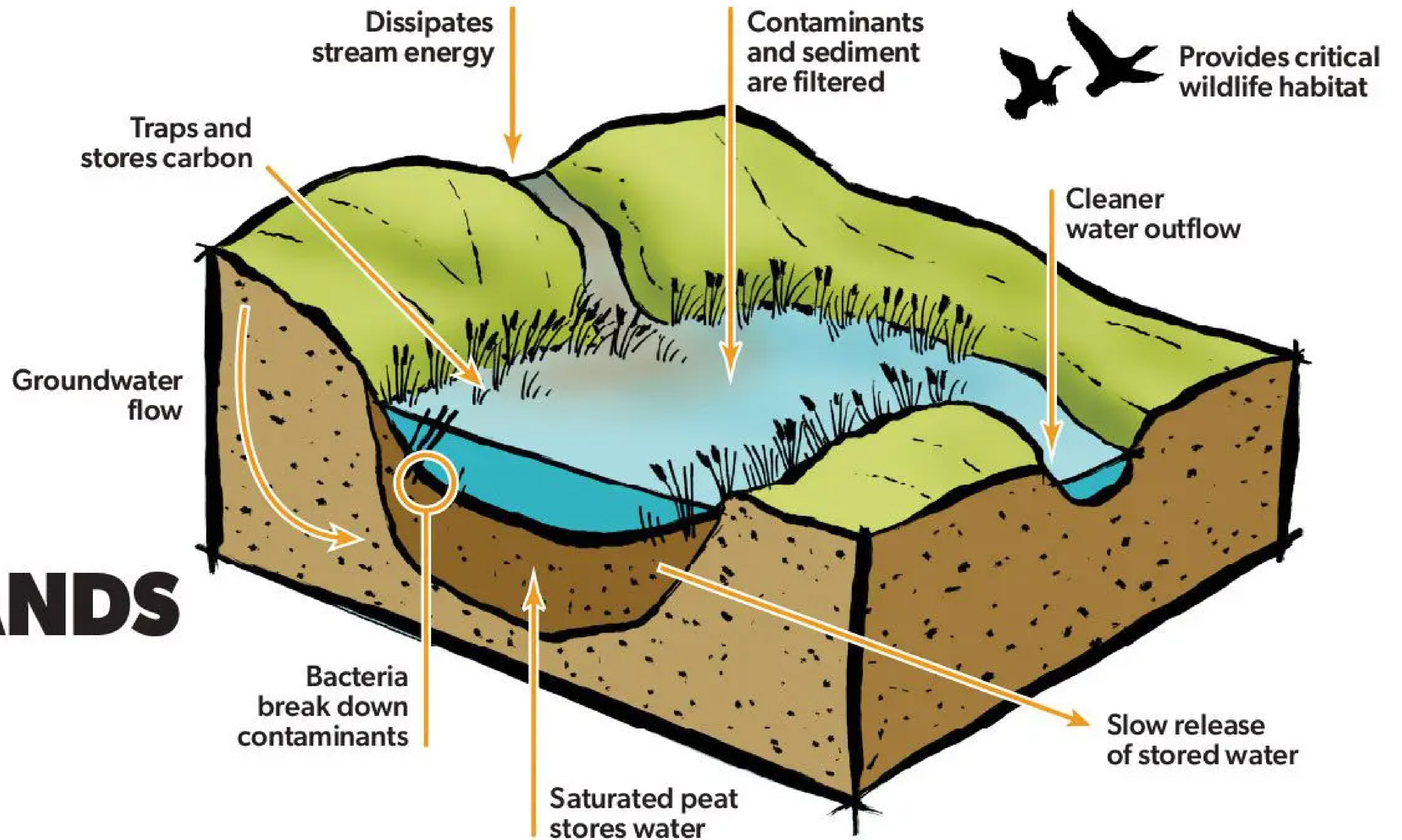


* This number was found by averaging root to shoot ratios across biomes. Numbers vary widely across biomes (Mokany et al., 2006)

Source: WRI



HOW WETLANDS WORK



Fortunately, prairie, woods, and wetlands can help—if sprawl can be contained and nature can be preserved. Prairies and woodlands help regulate temperatures and reduce urban heat island effects through shading and evapotranspiration, lowering temperatures by 2 to 9 degrees. Grasses inhale vast quantities of carbon dioxide through photosynthesis and store carbon deep in their roots and the tiny soil particles that form around them. Together, grasslands and their wetlands hold more carbon than the planet’s rainforests or the atmosphere itself. Every acre lost to development is also an acre that will not capture future greenhouse gas emissions.

Additionally, prairies and woods improve air quality by absorbing pollutants and capturing particulate matter. Leaves act as filters, pulling pollutants from the air and storing them or converting them into less harmful forms. Particulate matter can be trapped by the surfaces of leaves and blades of grass, ultimately absorbed by soil instead of entering human lungs.

“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops.”

**—Norman Maclean,
A River Runs Through It and Other Stories (1976)**

Clean water is a basic human need and an environmental necessity. The Great Lakes are the largest system of fresh surface water on earth, containing 21% of the world’s and 84% of North America’s surface supply of fresh water. The rivers, streams, creeks, drains, and wetlands that ultimately flow into the Great Lakes are crucial parts of this system. Brownstown Creek and its adjoining wetlands, part of the Combined Downriver Watershed, flow through the Sibley Prairie area and into the Detroit River six miles downstream, just before it becomes Lake Erie.

For decades, the Detroit River and its tributaries, like Brownstown Creek, received untreated waste discharges from industrial use, inputs from urban development, and stormwater runoff. This caused the water to be undrinkable for people, largely uninhabitable for wildlife, and left lasting pollution that has severely harmed human, animal, and plant health. The Detroit River also supplies 80% of Lake Erie’s total inflow, leading Lake Erie



Photo courtesy of Friends of the Rouge

to be the most polluted of all the Great Lakes.

Famously, tributaries of the Detroit River and Lake Erie caught fire in 1969. In 2014, pollution-caused algal blooms shut down drinking water in downstream Toledo, Ohio. These problems are not just in the past; as recently as April of 2025, Michigan regulators found “immediate health risk to consumers of water” and “significant deficiencies” in the municipal water of nearby Wyandotte, which is also in the Combined Downriver Watershed.






Wetlands, like those in Sibley Prairie, act as regulators of the hydrological cycle, helping to mitigate the effects of industry, development, and stormwater runoff. A natural filter, wetlands slow water movement to prevent rapid runoff, minimize soil erosion, and ensure gradual release. Nutrients from fertilizers, manure,

and sewage are filtered by plants and microorganisms. By storing and filtering water, wetlands reduce flood risks, recharge groundwater, and maintain stable flows essential for both human and ecological resilience.

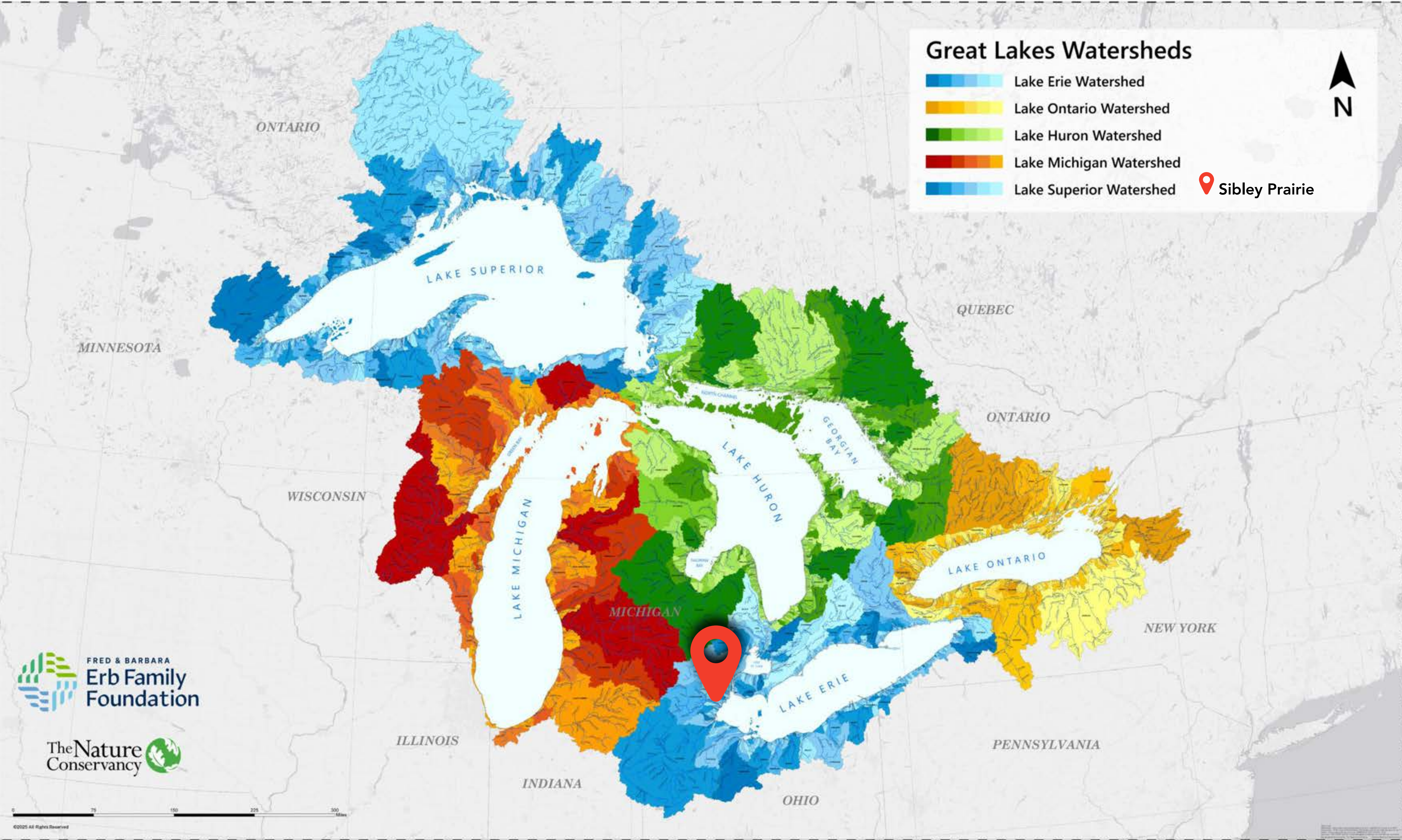
Wetlands are not just important for people and our drinking water. Shallow wetland waters provide ideal habitat for plants, fish, frogs, birds and mammals. About 75 percent of all commercial fish species in the United States spend at least some part of their lives within a wetland, and about half of all North American bird species live or feed within wetlands.



Great Lakes Watersheds

-  Lake Erie Watershed
-  Lake Ontario Watershed
-  Lake Huron Watershed
-  Lake Michigan Watershed
-  Lake Superior Watershed

 Sibley Prairie



 FRED & BARBARA Erb Family Foundation

 The Nature Conservancy

Putting Sibley Prairie on the Map

“...the joy of prairie lies in its subtlety. It is so easy—too easy—to be swept away by mountain and ocean vistas. A prairie, on the other hand, requests the favor of your closer attention. It does not divulge itself to mere passersby.”

—Suzanne Winckler, *Prairie: A North American Guide* (2004)

The Sibley Prairie complex is located 15 miles from downtown Detroit in Brownstown Township, Wayne County, Michigan. The land is currently owned by Fritz Enterprises, a steel mill services and scrap metal processing company based in nearby Trenton, Michigan. Prairie remnants are scattered over several square miles, but the largest remaining portions are in a 2-square mile area bordered by Telegraph Road (on the East), Inkster Road (West), Sibley Road (North) and King Road (South).

The 440-acre property under option is in Section 8—the square mile west of Telegraph Road between Sibley Road and King Road. This parcel is adjacent and

nearby to existing preserves and parks and would bring total protected land in the greater Sibley Prairie complex to about 675 acres. Combined with other parks and preserves in the area, this land would become a crucial piece in the regional patchwork of native plant habitats, wildlife corridors, recreational destinations, and ecological services providers.

Industrial, commercial, and housing development looms from nearly every direction. Immediately to the north across Sibley Road is Ford’s Parts Redistribution Center. A mile and a half to the east along King Road is GM’s Brownstown Battery Assembly Plant. Immediately to the west on Sibley Road, developers have filed

a wetland destruction permit to build 102 homes between two parcels of the Brownstown Prairie State Wildlife Area.

Ensuring access to Sibley Prairie is a priority. Existing regional bus lines come within a few miles of Sibley Prairie. Options for adding a bus stop to create public transit access to and from Detroit and surrounding communities will be explored. As for active transportation access for pedestrians and cyclists, a trail is planned to connect Sibley Prairie to the Brownstown Township Trail network, part of the Downriver Linked Greenways.



Sibley Prairie Complex Preserves and Parks

53 acres

Brownstown Prairie State Wildlife Area

42 acres

Sibley Prairie Nature Preserve

8 acres

Charlotte C. Evans Memorial Plant Preserve

Area Preserves and Parks

1,258 acres

Lower Huron Metropark

1,700 acres

Willow Metropark

1,756 acres

Oakwoods Metropark

1,607 acres

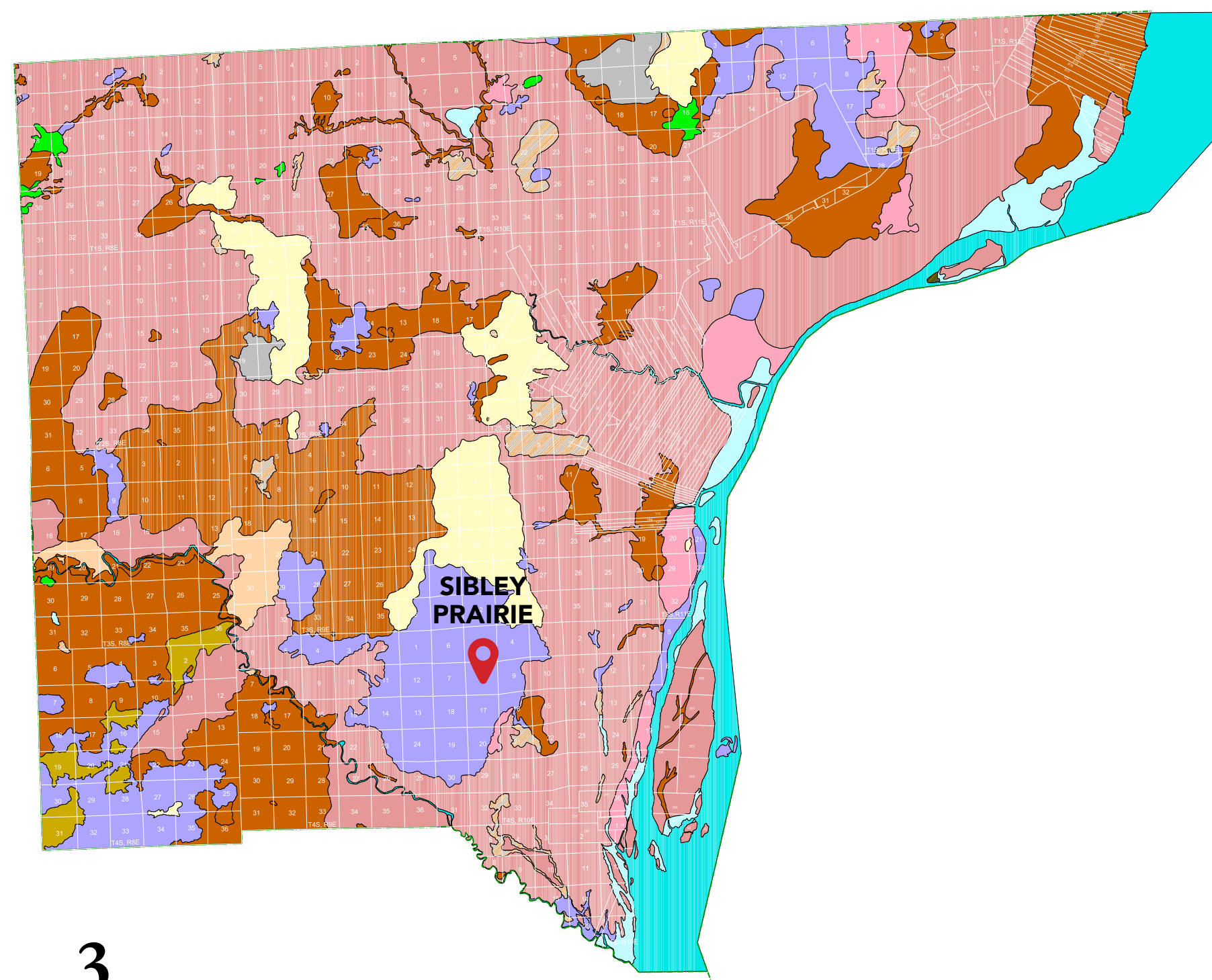
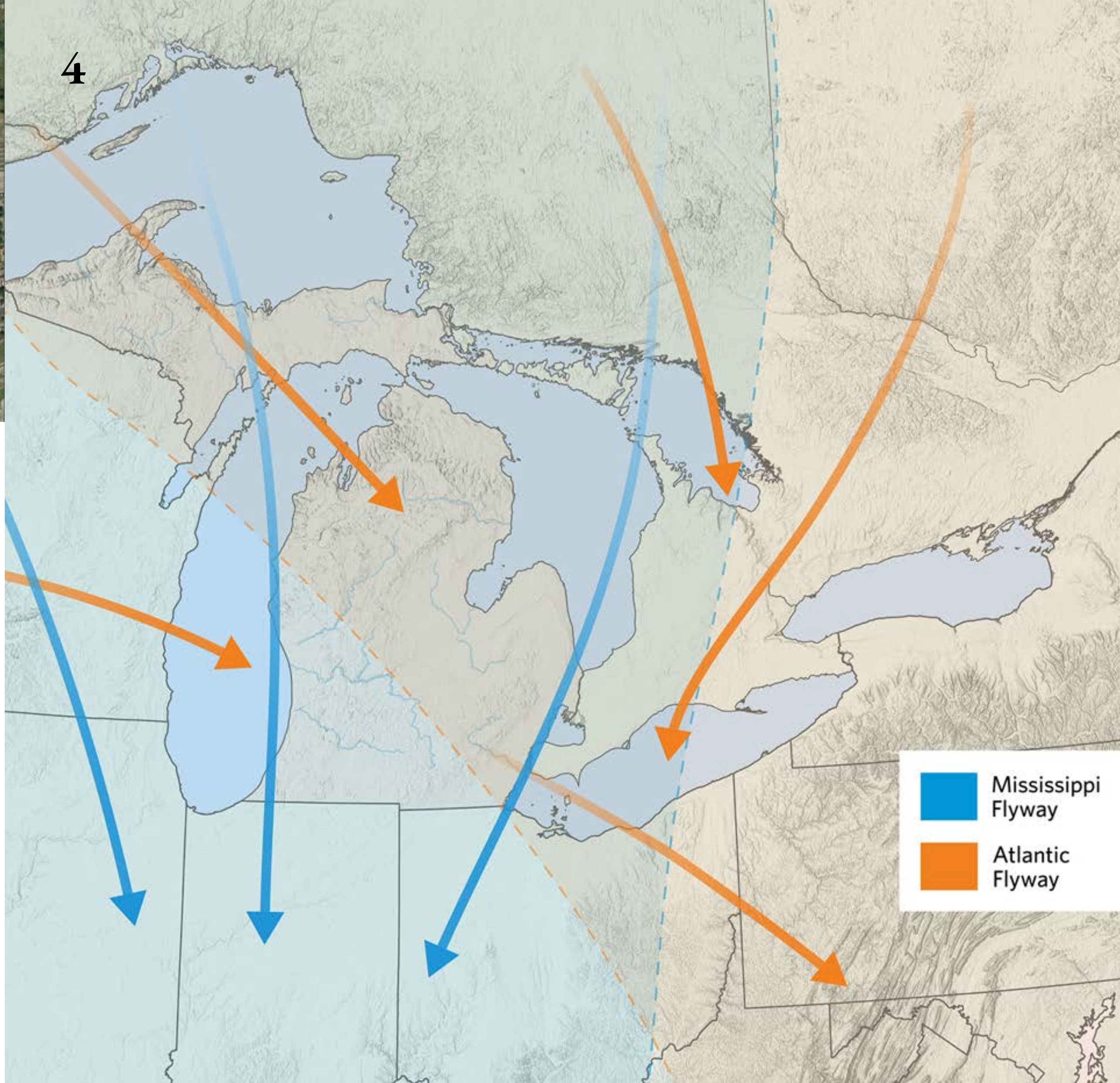
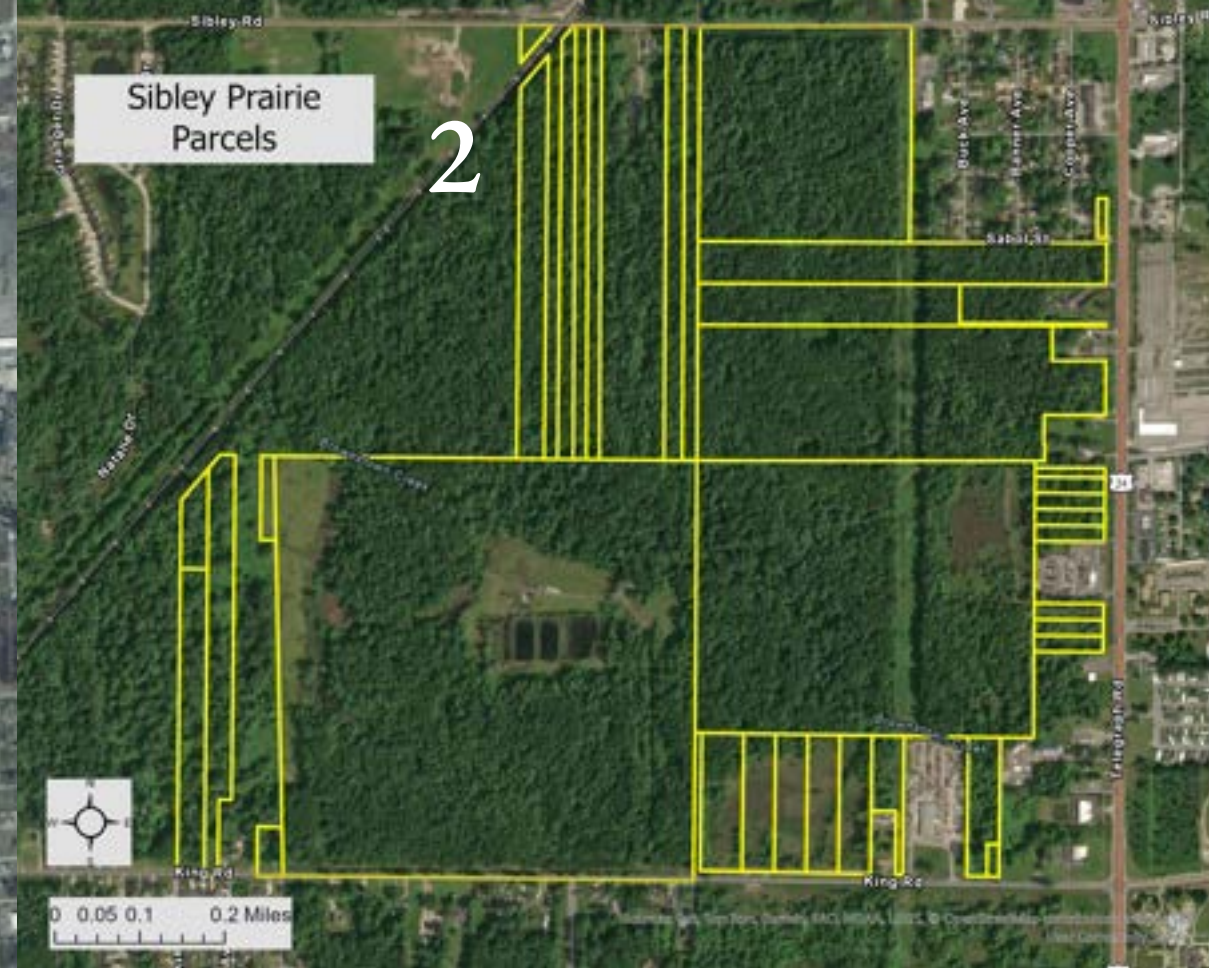
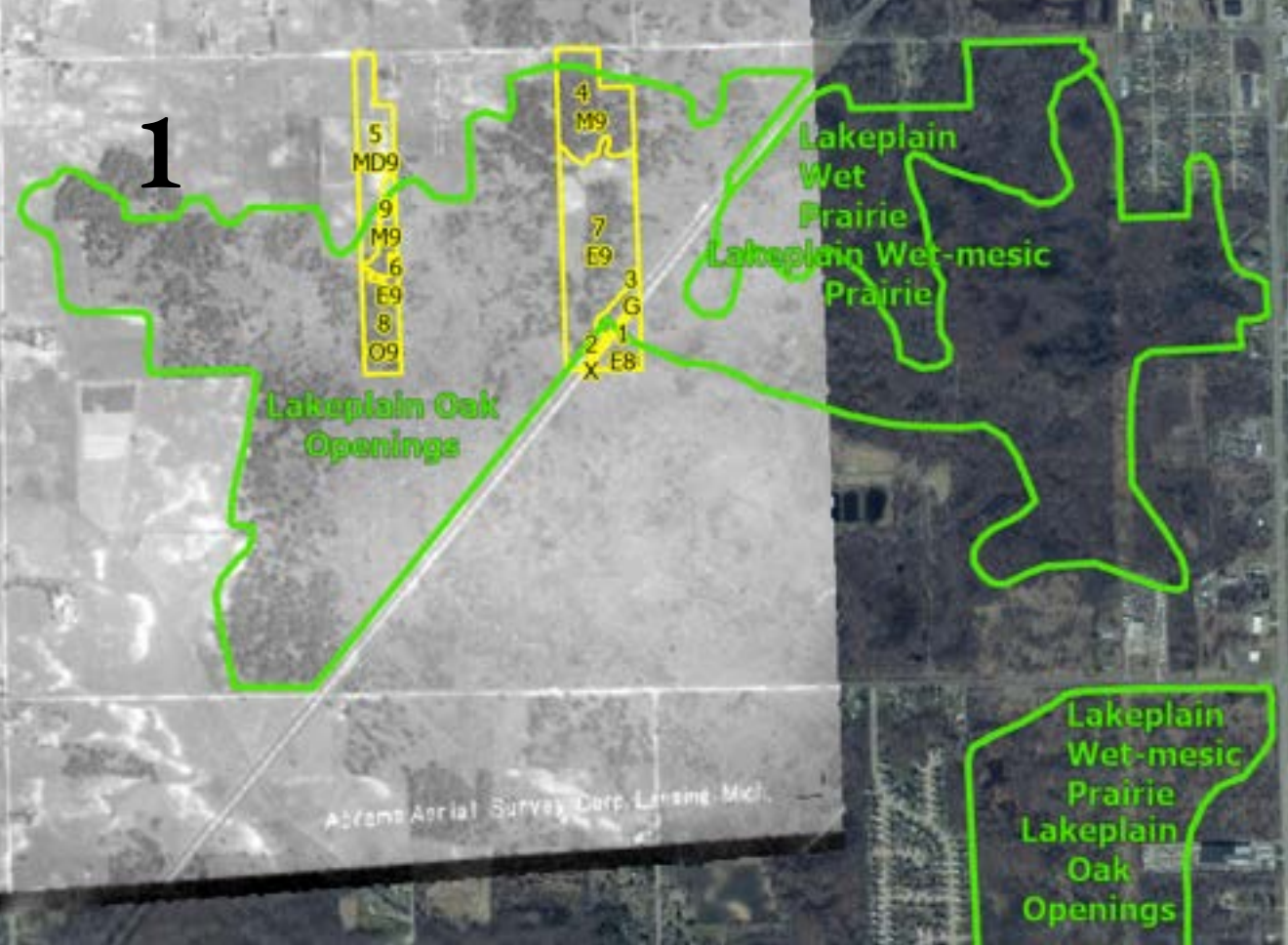
Lake Erie Metropark

5,195 acres

Pointe Mouillee State Game Area

6,200 acres

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge



Vegetation circa 1800 of Wayne County, Michigan

An Interpretation of the General Land Office Surveys
By P. J. Comer and D. A. Albert
Michigan Natural Features Inventory
1997

Legend

- ✓ ASPEN-BIRCH FOREST
- ✓ BEECH-SUGAR MAPLE FOREST
- ✓ BEECH-SUGAR MAPLE-HEMLOCK FOREST
- ✓ BLACK ASH SWAMP
- ✓ BLACK OAK BARREN
- ✓ CEDAR SWAMP
- GRASSLAND
- HEMLOCK-WHITE PINE FOREST
- HEMLOCK-YELLOW BIRCH FOREST
- ✓ JACK PINE-RED PINE FOREST
- ✓ LAKE/RIVER
- ✓ MIXED CONIFER SWAMP
- ✓ MIXED HARDWOOD SWAMP
- ✓ MIXED OAK FOREST
- ✓ MIXED OAK SAVANNA
- ✓ MIXED PINE-OAK FOREST
- ✓ MUSKEG/BOG
- ✓ OAK-HICKORY FOREST
- ✓ OAK-PINE BARREN
- ✓ PINE BARREN
- ✓ SAND DUNE
- ✓ SHRUB SWAMP/EMERGENT MARSH
- ✓ SPRUCE-FIR-CEDAR FOREST
- ✓ WET PRAIRIE
- ✓ WHITE PINE-MIXED HARDWOOD FOREST
- ✓ WHITE PINE-RED PINE FOREST
- ✓ WHITE PINE-WHITE OAK FOREST

✓ = LAND COVER TYPE PRESENT ON THIS MAP

Scale 1:100,000

Map Projection: Lambert Conformal Conic

SOURCE: Comer, P.J., D.A. Albert, H.A. Wells, B.L. Hart, J.B. Raab, D.L. Price, D.M. Kashner, R.A. Comer, D.W. Schuen (Map Interpretation), M.B. Austin, T.F. Ledford, K.M. Kordecki, L. Prange-Gregory, J.G. Sotzky, C.J. DeLain, L.J. Schonger, (Digital Map Production) 1997.
Michigan's Pre-settlement Vegetation, as Interpreted from the General Land Office Surveys 1816-1856.
Michigan Natural Features Inventory, Lansing, MI. Digital Map.

3

Map 1: Aerial image of Sibley Prairie from 1937. Locations in green indicate areas mapped by the Michigan Natural Features Inventory in the 1980s of historic lakeplain wet, wet-mesic, and oak openings natural communities. This site had significantly fewer trees 90 years ago.

Map 2: A current aerial view of Sibley Prairie parcels and vegetation

Map 3: Wayne County Vegetation Circa 1800

Map 4: Bird Flyways in Michigan, courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

Sibley Prairie Acquisition Conceptual Site Plan



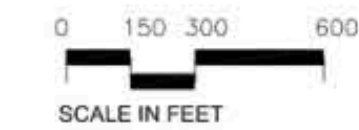
Existing road network to become
trail system

Pavilion, parking,
educational kiosks

new trail

Proposed King Road Trail
(would go on existing road inside of
fence, connecting to Township Hall)

Potential second entrance



Township Hall,
Community Center
and Thorn Park

LEGEND

WETLANDS (157 AC)

- 1. Scrub/shrub wetland dominated by alder
- 2. Scrub/shrub wetland dominated by buttonbush
- 3. Forested wetland dominated by cottonwood, American elm, red maple, silver maple and silky dogwood
- 4. Forested wetland dominated by pin oak, swamp white oak, lake sedge, royal fern and sensitive fern
- 5. Forested wetland dominated by pin oak with significant signs of tree mortality
- 6. Forested/scrub wetland dominated by scattered pin oak and cottonwood (less than 6" diameter), ninebark, silky dogwood, gray dogwood and false nettle
- 7. Emergent wetland dominated by lake plain prairie species
- 8. Emergent wetland dominated by *Phragmites australis*

UPLAND (228 AC)

- 9. Scrub/forested upland dominated by black cherry, red oak, quaking aspen, hazelnut, gray dogwood and witchhazel
- 10. Scrub/forested upland dominated by scattered mature red oak and black oak with young quaking aspen and blueberry
- 11. Closed canopy forested upland dominated by red oak, black oak, black cherry, white ash and hazelnut
- 12. Closed canopy forested upland with significant tree mortality
- 13. Upland dominated by *Phragmites australis*
- 14. Lake plain prairie
- 15. Disturbed upland

POTENTIAL INDIANA BAT HABITAT

- HIGH QUALITY HABITAT TREE
- MEDIUM QUALITY HABITAT TREE
- LOW QUALITY HABITAT TREE

NOTE: ALL LOCATIONS ARE APPROXIMATE

NOTE: Wetland and lake plain prairie boundaries shown were flagged by KME, Inc. and surveyed by Atwell Hicks, Inc. *Phragmites* boundaries shown were GPS located by KME, Inc. All other habitat types are based on field estimates by KME, Inc. and are approximations of actual boundaries.



Safeguarding Sibley Prairie, Woods, and Wetlands Forever

“The disappearance of a major natural unit of vegetation from the face of the earth is an event worthy of causing pause and consideration by any nation. Yet so gradually has the prairie been conquered that scant attention has been given to the significance of this endless grassland or the course of its destruction. Civilized man is destroying a masterpiece of nature without recording for posterity what he destroyed.”

—J.E. Weaver, North American Prairie (1954)

The process of identifying the entity best suited to serve as the long-term owner, manager, and steward of the Sibley Prairie property is underway and proceeding in parallel with fundraising efforts. Two primary pathways are being pursued simultaneously: ownership by a qualified nonprofit organization or by a governmental entity. In either case, any entity would need to have professional staff, expertise in managing natural areas, sufficient infrastructure and resources, and the capacity to secure private and/or public funding for purchase, analysis, restoration, amenities, and stewardship.

Nonprofit Organization

A principal advantage of a nonprofit land conservancy or wildlife protection organization is its 501(c)(3) status, which enables it to seek and receive both grant funding and private charitable donations. Such organizations are also more likely to possess the specialized experience and technical capacity required for long-term conservation land management.

The Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy (SMLC) is currently the leading nonprofit candidate to serve in this role. The Greater Sibley Prairie Complex is one of SMLC’s three priority conservation areas, and SMLC has experience in

restoring lakeplain prairie through partnerships and other efforts. SMLC already owns two nearby protected parcels: Sibley Prairie Nature Preserve (3 acres) and the Sibley Prairie Nature Preserve – West Prairie (39 acres). Founded in 1988, SMLC has protected approximately 3,400 acres across southeast Michigan through 43 land protection projects. Today, SMLC manages 18 nature preserves and holds 15 conservation easements throughout the region.

Government Entity

A key advantage of ownership by a governmental entity or agency is eligibility for public funding, including the Michigan

Natural Resources Trust Fund, as well as other state and federal grant programs. Eligible applicants generally include state and local units of government, along with a limited number of school districts and recreation authorities.

The Charter Township of Brownstown is the primary governmental entity under consideration, as the entirety of the Sibley Prairie parcel lies within the township’s boundaries. Protection of the site would complement Brownstown Township’s existing land management portfolio, which includes 11 neighborhood parks, two community parks, and one designated natural resource area. In addition, the township’s municipal campus and parklands—including a downstream section of Brownstown Creek—are kitty-corner to Sibley Prairie. Brownstown Township is also home to two other regionally significant natural areas: Lake Erie Metropark and a portion of the Pointe Mouillee State Game Area. The Brownstown Township Board of Trustees voted unanimously on March 16, 2026, to apply for a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) grant to support the acquisition of 440 acres of this project known as Sibley Prairie.



Funding Needed

Given the December 2026 deadline, raising the necessary funds for purchase remains the first priority. This will ensure that Sibley Prairie remains preserved and does not succumb to development and destruction. Meanwhile, coalition members will continue their careful review of ownership and stewardship options, in conversation with not-for-profit and government conservation and recreation partners and affiliates.

Beyond the \$6M purchase price, additional funds will be needed for acquisition costs, property readiness, ecological restoration, and ongoing stewardship. Initial expenses after purchase over the first four years are

estimated to be roughly \$1.17M. Ongoing stewardship and management costs are expected to be around \$125,000 annually. The stewardship and management cost would, ideally, be supported entirely by the roughly 5% annual payout of a \$2.5M permanent endowment, likely to be housed and managed by the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan. As such, a total of **\$9.7M** is sought to Save Sibley Prairie. Any funds beyond this initial goal will be used to support the stewardship, management, and expansion of this natural area. In all cases, Save Sibley Prairie Coalition is committed to ensuring that this extraordinary natural treasure is protected for generations to come.



Total Funding Needed: \$9.7M

\$6,000,000

for land purchase by Dec 2026

\$550,000

for property readiness

\$2,500,000

for perpetual stewardship

\$86,200

for acquisition costs

\$540,000

for ecological restoration

Acquisition, Readiness, Restoration, and Stewardship Costs

Acquisition:

- Buy the land from current owner
- Prevent development and destruction
- Appraisals, closing costs, and legal fees
- Property taxes and title insurance
- Land survey and environmental assessments

Property Readiness:

- Use planning and design
- Street access, parking lot, and other infrastructure
- Connection(s) to local walking/cycling paths
- Interpretive signs, waymarkers, and information stations
- Fence repair and demolition of structures
- Educational, recreational, and community facilities
- Rustic & accessible trail building
- Restrooms

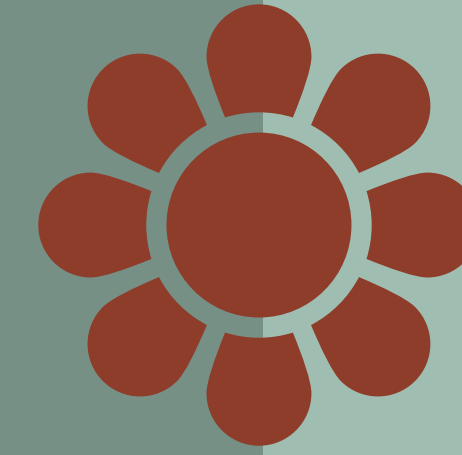
Ecological Restoration:

- Biological surveys
- Removal of invasive species
- Prescribed burns to regenerate the prairie
- Streambank stabilization
- Wetland restoration
- Native planting
- Equipment and supplies for volunteers and staff

Stewardship:

- Staffing, communications, and preserve management
- Ongoing maintenance and restoration
- Educational, recreational, and community programming

Your Role in Saving Sibley Prairie, Woods, and Wetlands Forever



Grassroots Support

1,200+ donors

42 US States, DC, Ontario, and Manitoba

210+ municipalities in Michigan

\$50 median contribution

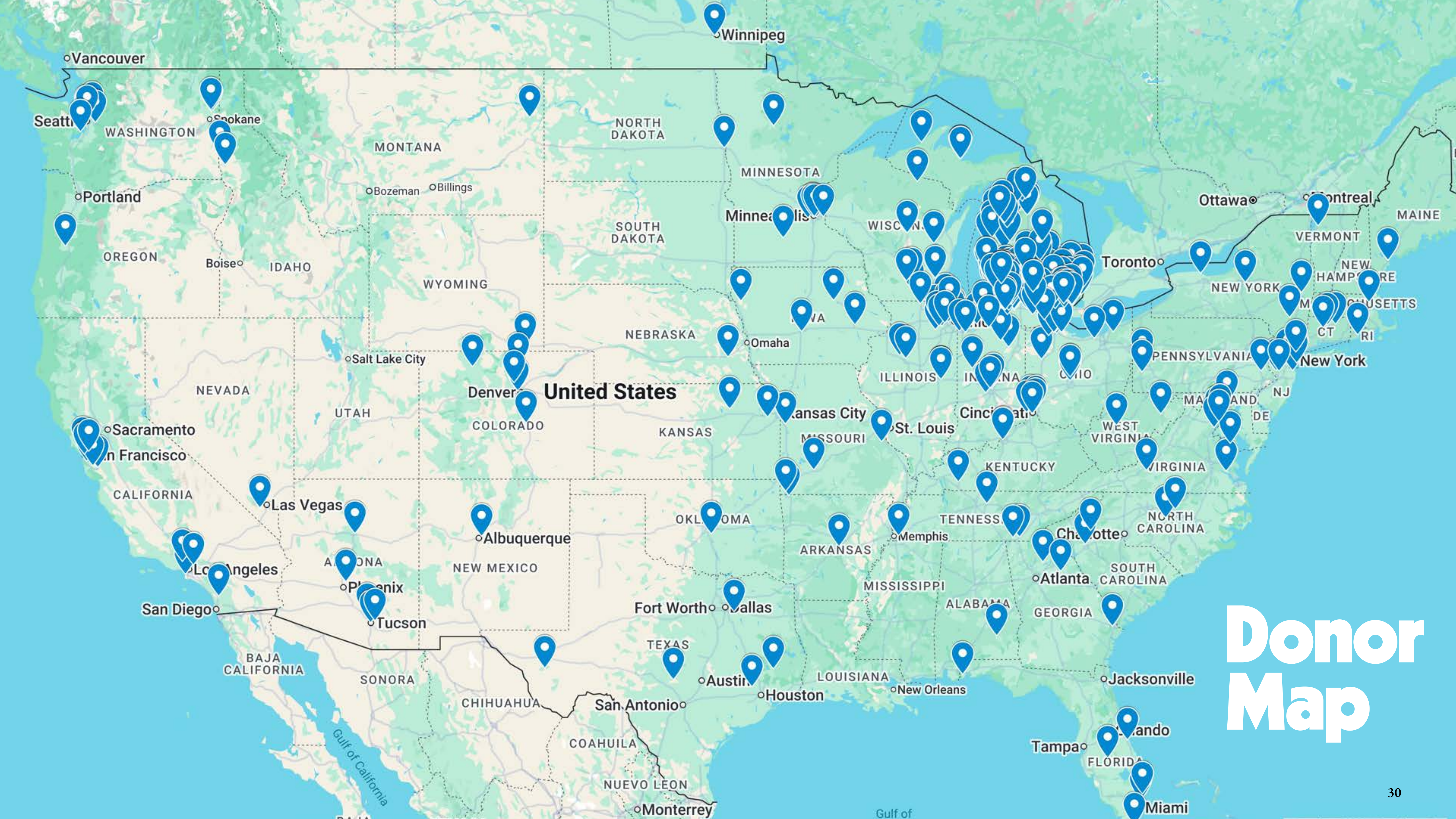
“To love a place is not enough. We must find ways to heal it.”

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (2013)

As ecologically unique as this land is, its location is what makes this opportunity so compelling. If this property were elsewhere, preservation would be important—but here, it is imperative. Southeast Michigan has paid dearly for the price of progress. Its plants deserve a place to grow. Its wildlife deserves a place to live. Its people deserve a place to experience nature. And its land deserves a chance to heal.



The Save Sibley Prairie Coalition—made up of thirteen leading conservation and advocacy organizations— has already raised more than \$600,000 in early gifts and pledges from 1,200 donors, including more than \$100,000 from Michigan Botanical Society members, a \$30,000 commitment from the Detroit Bird Alliance, and a \$50,000 pledge from The Nature Conservancy. But the challenge is immense—and achievable only through broad support from individuals, foundations, and corporations who see the value in saving something that cannot be replaced.



Donor Map

Your gift to save Sibley Prairie will:



Protect 440 acres of irreplaceable land—woods, wetlands, and the largest and best example of lakeplain prairie left in Michigan



Preserve habitat for rare plant and animal species, including eastern prairie fringed orchid, tall green milkweed, prairie Indian-plantain, Duke's skipper butterfly, bobolinks, meadowlarks, and many more.



Create new outdoor opportunities and access in Wayne County, just 15 miles from downtown Detroit—where natural open space is scarce yet urgently needed.



Steward a living legacy, a landscape as ecologically rich as any rainforest or renowned botanical garden—except this one is wild, local, and an irreplaceable part of Michigan's natural heritage.



Save the planet through ecological services to combat climate change, store carbon, protect water quality, clean the air, mitigate heat island effects, and reduce flood risks.



Photo by Noah Elliott Morrison

A significant gift to save Sibley Prairie is a philanthropic investment that will pay dividends forever.

Whether your passion is endangered prairie flowers, threatened birds or butterflies, nature as medicine for people, or combating climate change, hope is on the horizon and a magical garden awaits because saving Sibley Prairie starts with you.

The Save Sibley Prairie Coalition invites you to dig as deep as the prairie roots and give a gift that will benefit you and generations to come. Let your contribution be the spark that lights the prairie fire, beginning a cycle of renewal, regrowth, and regeneration. Join hundreds of other donors, stewards, volunteers, scientists, environmentalists, native plant advocates, birdwatchers, business people, hikers, hunters, outdoor enthusiasts, home gardeners, students, and children in preserving and protecting the tallgrass prairie in Detroit's backyard.



Thank you!

We thank YOU for considering a meaningful gift to Save Sibley Prairie. With your leadership, this rare and irreplaceable landscape can be preserved—ensuring that its beauty, biodiversity, and benefits endure for generations to come. Your support will ensure that Sibley Prairie is saved, not paved, protecting it forever.



Photo courtesy of Friends of the Rouge

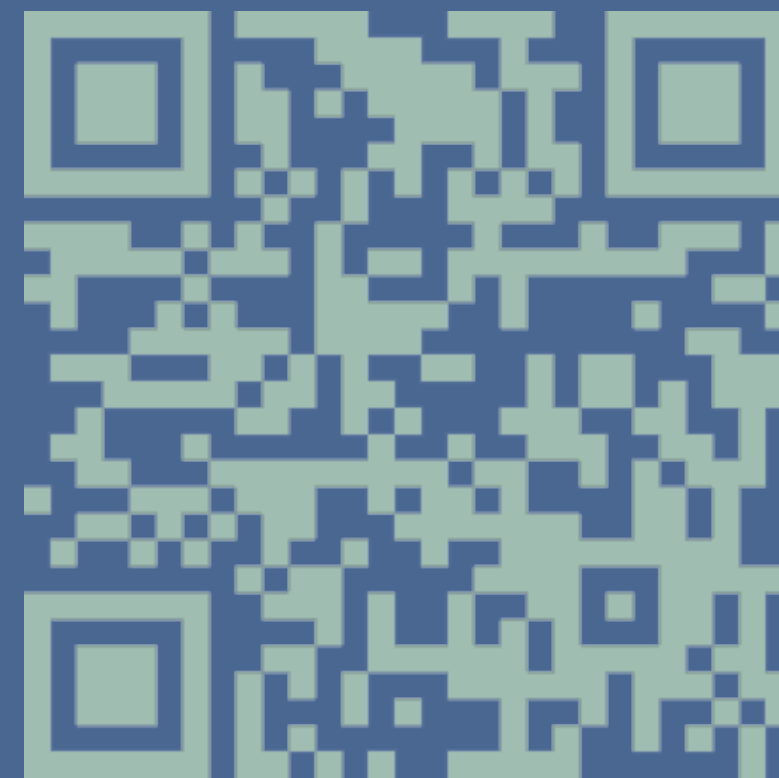


How to Give

For information on how to make a gift, please contact:

Jack R. Smiley
President, Michigan Land Conservancy

734-260-4065
jackrsmiley@gmail.com
savesibleyprairie.org



Scan to make a donation today!

Gifts to the Save Sibley Prairie Coalition are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and should be directed to the Michigan Land Conservancy, a coalition member serving as the lead organization for individual contributions. Online gifts may be made at SaveSibleyPrairie.org and checks may be made payable to Michigan Land Conservancy, note "For Sibley Prairie" in the check's memo and mailed to:

Michigan Land Conservancy
10325 Cherry Hill Road
Superior Township, MI 48198

EIN: 46-2023510



For Flora

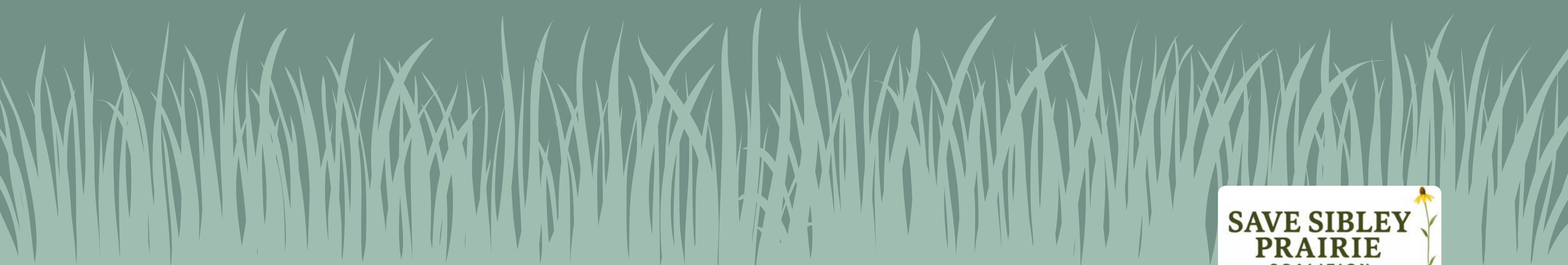
For Fauna

For People

For Planet



Appendix



Coalition Member Organizations

The following thirteen organizations have joined to form a coalition dedicated to the preservation of Sibley Prairie: a broad alliance of leading conservation, ecological, and community groups united by the urgency of protecting this globally rare ecosystem. Together, these partners are combining their expertise, networks, and resources to ensure that these woods, wetlands, and the largest remaining lakeplain prairie in Michigan are permanently safeguarded for future generations.



Coalition Steering Committee

Dennis A. Albert

Wetland Research Faculty, Oregon State University, and former Lead Ecologist for the Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI)

Robert Ayotte

President, Michigan Botanical Society

Andrew Berg

Principal, Norse Prairie Philanthropy, and Director of Development, Friends of the Rouge

Peter Blank

Program Manager, The Nature Conservancy

Connie Boris, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Wayne County Conservation District

Robert "Bob" Bucala

Adjunct Professor, Henry Ford College, and Board Director, Wayne County Conservation District

James N. Bull

Board Director & Past President, Detroit Bird Alliance; Biology and Environmental Science Professor, WCCC and Secretary, the Kirtland's Warbler Alliance

Diane Cheklich

Founding Partner, D2 Solar, and Board President, Detroit Bird Alliance

William Collins

Executive Director, Thumb Land Conservancy

Matt Conrad

Biologist, Ducks Unlimited

Antonio Cosme

Co-Founder and Program Lead, Black to the Land Coalition, and Land Stewardship Manager, Friends of Rouge Park

Lisa Denys

Vice President, Wild Ones Wayne County

Erin H. Dobbins

Rotary Club of Livonia AM

Bob Hauser

President, Wild Ones Wayne County

Ken Jacobsen

Board Member and Chair of Outings and Wildlands & Wildlife Committees, Southeast Michigan Group of The Sierra Club

Patricia Kopacz

Stewardship Volunteer, Thumb Land Conservancy

Madison Leigh

Board Director, Michigan Botanical Society

Jill Lewis

Executive Director, Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy

Nicky Marcot

Freelance Strategist, Rhizome Services, and Board Director, Wayne County Conservation District

Sally Petrella

Watershed Ecologist, Friends of the Rouge

Evan Rosin

Board Director, Wayne County Conservation District

Cyndi Ross

Restoration Manager, Friends of the Rouge

Jack Smiley

President, Michigan Land Conservancy

Sara Cole Srinivasan

Board Director, Detroit Bird Alliance

Doug Thiel

Land Acquisition Chairperson, Grosse Ile Nature & Land Conservancy

Jeff Vornhagen

Board Director, Huron Valley Chapter, and Chair, Conservation Advocacy Committee, Michigan Botanical Society

James T. Weiner

Attorney, James T. Weiner & Associates, P.C., Board Director and Chair of the Land Protection Committee, Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy

Theodore J. Wiley

Program Director, Thumb Land Conservancy

Tom Woiwode

Founder, Fund for the Environment

Jay Wright

Director of Conservation Science, Metroparks Toledo

Coalition Fundraising Committee

Committee Chair:
Jeff Vornhagen

Michigan Botanical Society

Andrew Berg

Norse Prairie Philanthropy,
Friends of the Rouge

Connie Boris, Ph.D.

Wayne County
Conservation District

Christi Brockway

Freelance Fundraiser

James Bull

Detroit Bird Alliance

Antonio Cosme

Black to the Land Coalition
and Friends of Rouge Park

Nancy Darga

Rotary Club of Livonia AM
and Rebuild Rotary Park

Erin H. Dobbins

Rotary Club of Livonia AM

Ken Jacobsen

Southeast Michigan Group,
Sierra Club

Madison Leigh

Michigan Botanical Society

Nicky Marcot

Rhizome and Wayne County
Conservation District

Jack Smiley

Michigan Land Conservancy



QUOTES AND TESTIMONIALS OF SUPPORT

“The Nature Conservancy has recognized the importance of the Sibley Road Prairie for more than three decades, and this collaborative effort to protect the Fritz tract represents the best opportunity in all that time.”

- **The Nature Conservancy**

“I think this may be our last opportunity to protect and restore Sibley Prairie.”

- **Dennis Albert, ecology professor at Oregon State University, and former lead ecologist for the Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI)**

“All it takes is one visionary donor to make the difference. Someone ready to create a living legacy that will safeguard Sibley Prairie forever.”

- **Jack Smiley, President, Michigan Land Conservancy**

“This project represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to preserve Michigan’s largest and highest-quality lakeplain prairie remnant—an ecosystem of exceptional rarity and ecological value”

- **The Michigan Botanical Society**

“This project will protect a rare lakeplain prairie and wetland ecosystem of statewide significance while improving water quality, enhancing biodiversity, and strengthening climate resilience in the Detroit River watershed.”

- **Sierra Club, Southeast Michigan Group**

“The benefits to wildlife and the public are immeasurable given that it is located in a landscape mosaic of industrial enterprises, rural lands, and residential neighborhoods. Historically, development pressure here has been high. To be able to protect such a large tract of contiguous land is not only rare in southeast Michigan but invaluable to southeast Michigan residents and visitors.”

- **Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy**

“Grosse Ile Nature & Land Conservancy is called to help protect Sibley Prairie because its rare remnant ecosystems are part of the same regional natural heritage we are committed to safeguarding. Supporting its preservation directly advances our mission to promote the stewardship and understanding of the natural resources of Grosse Ile and the surrounding area, ensuring that these irreplaceable landscapes endure for public benefit and future generations.”

- **Grosse Ile Nature & Land Conservancy**

“Brownstown Township’s Sibley Prairie is one of Michigan’s true jewels. I write to enthusiastically support efforts to acquire and protect 440 acres of this rare and extremely valuable ecosystem. Purchase of this site would permanently protect a major portion of these lakeplain prairie remnants and allow for active restoration of this rare but remarkably resilient ecosystem. This is certainly an extraordinary opportunity to protect a key part of Southeast Michigan’s great natural landscape heritage for the future!”

- **Robert E. Grese, Professor-Emeritus, School for Environment and Sustainability, University of Michigan**

“If the public would like to experience what parts of the Detroit area were like before most of it was developed, Sibley Prairie is it; an irreplaceable natural heritage for us, future generations, and the many wonderful and increasingly rare species that occur in few other places of the world. If Sibley Prairie is not worth protecting, then we don’t know what is.”

- **Thumb Land Conservancy**

“As a Native plant producer in Michigan and an Anishinaabe tribal member, I deeply understand the ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance of native landscapes like Sibley Prairie. This prairie represents not only a rare remnant of Michigan’s original ecosystems but also a living connection to the traditions and knowledge of Indigenous communities.”

- **Angela J Nelson, Owner/Horticulturist, East Michigan Native Plants, LLC**

“We recognize prairies like Sibley not only as rare ecological treasures, but as living classrooms and climate-resilient landscapes that benefit the entire region.”

- **Friends of Rouge Park**

“We uphold, above all, community self-determination and community leadership in forging climate solutions and believe that projects like that to save the Sibley Prairie exemplify ingenious grassroots leadership.”

- **Environmental Action East Michigan Council**

“As land stewards, educators, and advocates, Michigan Garden Clubs, Inc., wholeheartedly endorses the Save Sibley Prairie Coalition’s efforts to preserve and protect 440 acres of lakeplain prairie, woods, and wetlands in Wayne County, Michigan. We encourage private individuals and institutions as well as government agencies to provide the necessary funds, support, and services to purchase, preserve, and protect Sibley Prairie.”

- **Michigan Garden Clubs, Inc.**

References and Additional Resources

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- Map for Grasslands, Center for Conservation Media at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the coalition members of Act for Grasslands
- Monarchs in Decline, Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation
- The Tallgrass Prairie Center at the University of Northern Iowa



Credits

- *Written, edited, and art directed by **Andrew Berg**, Norse Prairie Philanthropy and Friends of the Rouge*
- *Concept, edits, and contributions by **Jack Smiley**, Michigan Land Conservancy*

Edits, comments, and/or contributions by:

- **Connie Boris**, Wayne County Conservation District
- **James Bull**, Detroit Bird Alliance
- **Ken Jacobsen**, Southeast Michigan Group Sierra Club
- **Katy LaBarrie**, Otter Consulting
- **Madison Leigh**, Michigan Botanical Society
- **Nicky Marcot**, Rhizome and Wayne County Conservation District
- **Alex Moore**, Experiential Education Designer
- **Jeff Vornhagen**, Michigan Botanical Society

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- **Monica Dubray**, Creative Director, Boilerplate Creative

Illustrations courtesy of:

- **Mel Bryant**, Melbry Arts
- **Steve Dennis**, Steve Dennis Event Design, and Steve Dennis Artist
- **Ducks Unlimited**
- **The Tallgrass Restoration Handbook**, Princeton Press
- **World Resources Institute**

Photos courtesy of:

- **Black to the Land Coalition**
- **Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*)** by **Brad Imhoff**; Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library
- **Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*)** by **Jim Hudgins**, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- **Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)** by **Jerome Jourdan**; Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library”
- **“Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) in a field of Fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*)** by **Diane Cheklich**, Detroit Bird Alliance
- **Noah Elliot Morrison**, Emmy Award-winning Filmmaker, Cinematographer, and Photographer
- **Jack Smiley**, Michigan Land Conservancy
- **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**

Maps courtesy of:

- **Michigan Natural Features Inventory**
- **Living in the Oak Openings Guide 3rd Edition 2016**
- **The Nature Conservancy**
- **Fred and Barbara Erb Foundation**



Acknowledgements

The Save Sibley Prairie Coalition is grateful for the coalition member organizations, coalition committee members, volunteers, donors, advocates, and supporters whose collective efforts have made this initiative possible. Thank you to the editors, authors,

and creatives whose work has contributed to the content of this document. We honor the generations of land stewards who have come before us and do this work for the generations that will follow.



