



MINNESOTA NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM SUMMARY

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Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

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Minnesota's 1982 Nongame Wildlife Program:

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INTRODUCTION

Across the state of Minnesota, new things began happening in 1982 as Minnesota's first donations to the Nongame Wildlife Checkoff were converted to actions for wildlife: The diverse projects involved species ranging from cricket frogs and Piping Plovers to Trumpeter Swans (See Figure 1).

Over 50 activities are now occurring in Minnesota using the \$569,277.78 which was donated in the state's first checkoff season. This is the largest amount received by any state in the first year of a nongame checkoff and it represented donations from 170,177 people.

Joan Galli, formerly a nongame biologist with the New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife, has been hired to write a comprehensive long range plan for Minnesota's Nongame Wildlife Program. This is a high priority project which will give direction and priorities for future activities. After completing the plan, Ms. Galli will assume the duties as regional nongame specialist for the metropolitan area and southeastern Minnesota.

Staff zoologist Lee Pfanmuller has coordinated surveys on rare and uncommon nongame vertebrates. Status surveys were carried out for Blanchard's Cricket Frog, Pickerel Frog, and Red-shouldered Hawk in southeastern Minnesota, Prairie Chicken and Sandhill Crane in Wadena County, Rock Vole in the northeast, and small mammals in the southwest. Also studied were Yellow Rails and Sharp-tailed Sparrows in north central Minnesota, prairie songbirds on our northwestern prairies, and Mink Frogs in Itasca County. Most of these projects were accomplished through contracts with private individuals or educational institutions.

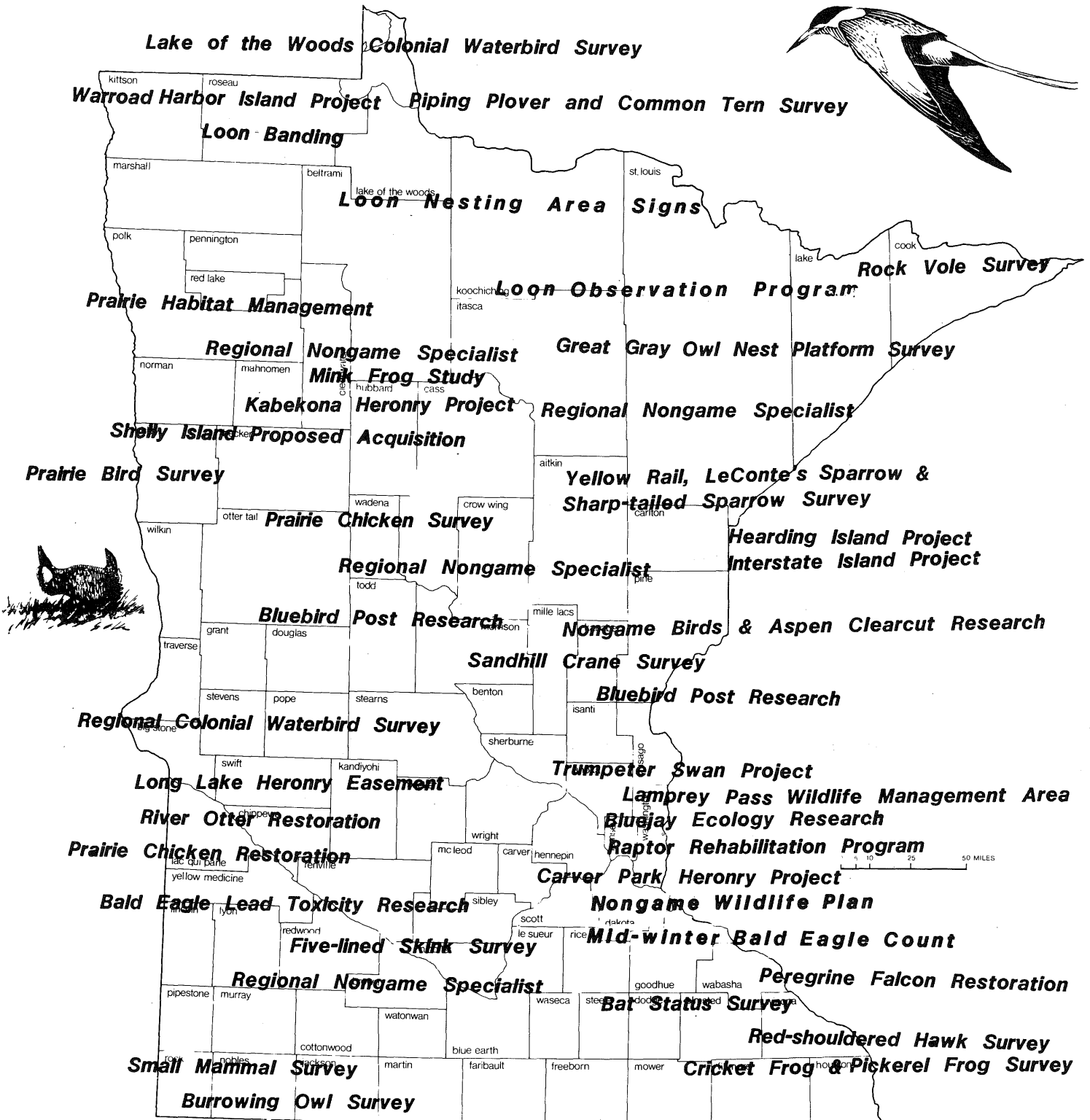


Figure 1. These are some of the projects being funded wholly or in part by donations to the Nongame Wildlife Checkoff.

Research supervised by Ms. Pfanmuller included a landmark study by Dr. Francesca Cuthbert and graduate student Terry Weins of the University of Minnesota in Duluth on the status and ecology of Piping Plovers in Lake of the Woods. The 12 nests they found this summer comprise the largest colony remaining in the Great Lakes region. It is likely that this rare shorebird will be designated as a federally endangered species in the coming year. Encroachment by humans, pets and motorized recreational vehicles on the sandy beaches where the Piping Plover nests threaten its survival. Fortunately, the area occupied by plovers in Lake of the Woods has recently become protected through designation as a Scientific and Natural Area. The information gathered by Weins and Dr. Cuthbert will be invaluable for planning future protection of this species.

A research project by Dr. Jeff Lang of the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks focused on a geographically isolated population of Five-lined Skinks along the Minnesota River valley in west-central Minnesota. These rare lizards only occur on granite outcrops. Dr. Lang discovered that their specialized habitat is being slowly eliminated by encroachment of Eastern Red Cedars on the outcrops. Control of the cedars may be necessary to preserve the skinks.

Other research projects investigated the effects of the size of aspen clearcuts on nongame birds, the feeding ecology of Trumpeter Swan cygnets, the behavioral ecology of Bluejays, lead poisoning in Bald Eagles and the feasibility of placing Great Gray Owl nesting platforms in potential habitat to monitor the owl's population status. One pair of Great Gray Owls initiated nesting on one of our 24 platforms, but the nest was later abandoned. A survey of bats has also been started in southeastern Minnesota.

The DNR waterfowl research banding crew from Bemidji banded a record 40 loons in 1982. This brings the total number banded in the past three years to over 100 loons. This is the largest banding effort that has ever been

conducted on this species.

Four regional nongame wildlife specialists have been hired. They include Jack Mooty in Grand Rapids, Katie Hirsch in Bemidji, Pam Skoog in Brainerd, and John Schladweiler in New Ulm. Many of their activities will involve habitat management work in coordination with county, state, and federal natural resource managers and private citizens. Other responsibilities will include wildlife surveys, and educational efforts.

Katie Hirsch, for example, is working with plans developed by the Army Corps of Engineers to create a new dredge-spoil island in the Warroad harbor of Lake of the Woods. Landscaping of the island is designed to accommodate nesting by Common Terns and Piping Plovers. Meanwhile, Jack Mooty is coordinating efforts to bulldoze brush on the Hearing Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in the Duluth harbor of Lake Superior. This work is also designed to create potential Piping Plover and Common Tern nesting habitat. This 37-acre Island is the first WMA to be designated in Minnesota primarily for the benefit of nongame species. It is unique because it is also the only urban Wildlife Management Area in the state.

Pam Skoog has undertaken projects involving coordination of nongame wildlife management information with state foresters, developing educational materials with Pam Landers of the Minnesota Environmental Education Board, and writing a wildlife column for a regional newsletter.

A large heronry comprised mainly of Slippery Elm trees in the Hennepin County Park Reserve District is being treated to prevent Dutch Elm Disease through a grant to the Park Reserve District. The heronry on the Kabekona Wildlife Management Area in Hubbard County will be augmented with cedar power poles and nesting platforms this winter to help preserve that site. A management plan is also being developed for the Lamprey Pass WMA near

Forest Lake. The plan will likely involve water level regulation, prairie restoration, food plots, cover plantings, and sanctuary status for the heronry there. Free easements have also been obtained from 6 of 8 owners of the 2400-nest Long Lake heronry near Willmar for the DNR to post and protect that site.

The Lamprey Pass WMA was dedicated by DNR Commissioner Joseph Alexander on September 7 before a gathering of nearly 80 people. The 1,300-acre area was purchased in 1981 with \$200,000 in checkoff funds and \$196,000 in state game and fish funds. Without the checkoff money, the area would have been lost to a developer and converted to a recreational vehicle park and golf course. The area contains a 1,025 nest heronry of Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, and Double-crested Cormorants.

A novel approach for helping Eastern Bluebirds has been developed in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Transportation. DOT biologist Ron Peterson worked with the Nongame Wildlife Program to perfect a design whereby a large drill was used to create cavities in the tops of wooden fence posts along Interstate Highway rights-of-way. Our initial effort resulted in 9 bluebird pairs and 70 tree swallow pairs in 93 posts.

Efforts are currently underway to acquire 107-acre Shelley Island in Cotton Lake in Becker County. The island has a diversity of habitats and a history of use by nesting Great Blue Herons and Red-necked Grebes. The wildlife habitat value is increased by the presence of a 30-acre pond on the island and a sheltered bay containing wild rice. Indian burial sites also enhance the significance of the island. The Minnesota Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and the Minnesota Wildlife Heritage Foundation are cooperating in the preservation effort. The MWHF is raising \$25,000 toward the purchase price of \$75,000 and the Checkoff would provide the balance of the cost.

The Raptor Research and Rehabilitation Program at the University of Minnesota continues to receive \$25,000 yearly to support much of their work on Bald Eagles and other birds of prey. They handle about 400 injured birds of prey every year. On January 30, three rehabilitated Bald Eagles were released along the St. Croix river near Prescott, Wisconsin in conjunction with a promotion for the Year of the Bald Eagle. Nearly 100 citizens and several television crews showed up in -20° F weather to watch the eagles regain their freedom.

Otter restoration efforts in the Minnesota River valley have been completed with the release of 22 otters. Future efforts will be made to evaluate the success of the project.

On June 2, eight Trumpeter Swan eggs were obtained from the Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota and flown to incubator facilities at the DNR's Carlos Avery Wildlife Refuge. Five eggs were viable and hatched. The rearing of the five cygnets represents the first step in a project to reintroduce Trumpeter Swans to suitable habitat in outstate Minnesota.

Another exciting project this summer was the release of five Peregrine Falcon chicks near Kellogg along the Mississippi River. This is a cooperative effort funded by donors of the Minnesota Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, the Peregrine Project of the Bell Museum of Natural History at the University of Minnesota, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Nongame Wildlife Checkoff. Three chicks were successfully fledged, one was injured and will be released next year, and one was eaten by a Great Horned Owl. Future plans call for up to 20 peregrine chicks to be released annually until the falcons are re-established on their historic nesting cliffs along the Mississippi River. Dr. Patrick Redig of the Raptor Research and Rehabilitation Program is the project director.

New information and education efforts for the Nongame Program included production of a semi-annual newsletter called "The Blazing Star". The newsletter is jointly produced with the Scientific and Natural Areas Program and Natural Heritage Program in the Section of Wildlife. Free subscriptions are available on request. Recently 1,000 aluminum "Loon Nesting Area" signs were printed for posting at public accesses on lakes where loons nest. The signs advise boaters not to approach loon nests, not to approach loon families, and that loons are protected by law. A poster has also been printed for distribution to trappers. It should help prevent Bald Eagles and other birds of prey from being accidentally trapped. The poster advises trappers that open-bait sets are illegal, and it tells them what to do if a bird of prey is accidentally caught. It also explains how to make an alternative trap set which does not attract birds of prey. A 30-second public service ad was also produced and distributed to radio stations in southwest Minnesota. It explained the importance of preserving roadside habitat for wildlife.

A variety of administrative activities have occurred in the St. Paul DNR office which have had significant benefits for wildlife. Nongame staff members helped review a list of lands that were being made available free to the DNR by the Bureau of Land Management. Many of the parcels were islands with colonies of nongame birds like Herring Gulls and Great Blue Herons. Other areas contained bald eagle nests. In all, over 1,055 parcels totaling more than 7,000 acres were transferred to the DNR in October, 1982. Most will be administered as Wildlife Management Areas, and some will become Scientific and Natural Areas. The Nongame Program is also involved with development of a new list of state threatened and endangered species. The new list will be finalized in 1983 and will identify the wildlife species most in need of help through the Nongame Program. Other activities have included data management for nongame distribution and abundance information,

and review of environmental impact statements to minimize impacts of development projects on nongame wildlife.

It is my hope that the Nongame Wildlife Program can continue to improve with each passing year. The enthusiasm of Minnesota citizens for nongame projects continues to increase as citizens see their donations converted to actions for wildlife. In the second year of our checkoff, the number of donations increased from about 170,000 to 197,000! And the amount of money contributed has increased from about \$569,000 to \$631,000! It is gratifying to see so much public enthusiasm generated for helping wildlife in such economically difficult times.

I sincerely appreciate your support for the Nongame Wildlife Checkoff.

