Driftless Area Forest Stewardship Initiative

Upper Mississippi River Basin

The Challenge

The Driftless Area of the Upper Mississippi River Basin is a critical migration corridor for more than half of North America's bird species. Much of the steep, rugged landscape escaped development and supports some of the region's most extensive forests, providing significant bird habitat for more than 200 bird species. However, the area falls within four States, causing conservation efforts to be fragmented and uncoordinated. In addition, most of the land is privately owned, and landowners needed help developing and implementing stewardship plans to manage their forests.

The Solution

The Driftless Area Initiative (DAI), is a partnership of local, State, and national organizations led by six Resource Conservation and Development councils working across Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. It was formed to coordinate the many public and private organizations within the area.

As a member of this partnership, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry provided $295,000 through Migratory Bird Habitat Improvement grants and the Upper Mississippi Watershed Fund for projects that benefit and improve bird habitat. These projects encompass a wide range of activities, including assisting landowners in writing management plans, marking trees for harvest, timber stand improvement, invasive plant control, and tree planting. The projects also included birding and forestry workshops, field days, and seminars.

Resulting Benefits

The DAI works to educate legislators, landowners, and the public about important watershed and wildlife habitat issues within the Driftless Area. The coordinated effort to gather and merge existing information from each State creates a clearer picture of available resources, and focuses attention and funding on priority projects across state lines.

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Sharing Success

Forest management plans of special significance were written for two locations in Wisconsin: the Kickapoo Area Schools and the Norskedalen Nature and Heritage Center. The Kickapoo Area Schools plan guides teachers in using the area as an outdoor classroom and is a necessary component in registering the outdoor classroom as a "School Forest" in the State. Norskedalen is visited by rural and urban citizens alike and is an excellent venue for public outreach on the importance of forest conservation and management.

In Minnesota, the Driftless Area Initiative conducted a Forestry for Bird Habitat workshop, inviting the public to learn about forest ecology and birds in their natural habitat, forest stewardship, songbird habitat/woodland management connections, and the sustainability of forest habitats for birds.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy identified four forest management demonstration sites on private land in areas of high habitat priority for neotropical migratory birds. These sites in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota promote forest management for improving bird habitat and guide landowners in developing sustainable forest management plans.

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