

2008 State Wildlife Grant Preproposal

Project Title: Protection of Land to Conserve Arkansas Valley Prairies and Woodlands.

Project Summary:

Working with SWG project “Survey’s for grassland birds, Ornate Box Turtle, Argos Skipper, and Prairie Remnants Habitat” project managers will contact landowners of habitat mapped in the Arkansas Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) as existing or potential Arkansas River Valley prairie and woodlands and will coordinate conservation efforts on private lands in this area. Focus will be on increasing block size and/or connecting currently protected prairies and woodlands, which directly addresses WAP funding priority # 7.

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Total amount of project:

\$24,600

Amount of funding requested from SWG:

\$12,300

Duration: Two years

Source of matching funds:

Matching funds will come from The Nature Conservancy and/or the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission.

Funding Priority Addressed by Preproposal

This project is focused on increasing the block size and/or connectivity of prairies and woodlands in the Arkansas River Valley Ecoregion, directly addressing WAP funding priority # 7.

Ecoregion Where Project Will Be Conducted

The Arkansas River Valley; specifically in the Cherokee Prairies complex which includes areas near Cherokee and H.E. Flanagan Prairie Natural Areas and Presson-Oglesby Preserve in Franklin and Sebastian County.

Habitats Protected by This Proposal

Arkansas Valley prairies and woodlands.

Background

Arkansas, like many portions of eastern North America, has lost much of its grassland habitat. Despite large scale loss of grassland habitat, prairie and savanna remnants remain scattered across the state. This is particularly true in the Arkansas Valley, where relatively large tracts of prairie (e.g., Cherokee Prairie Natural Area has 584 acres) are protected and other remnant prairie tracts of unknown status occur on privately owned land. Further, prairie habitat within the Arkansas Valley is in general surrounded by a large landscape of grassland habitat managed for grazing and hayfields. The Arkansas Valley Ecoregion contained extensive areas of tallgrass prairie and savanna at the time of European settlement, which supported large populations of grassland dependent species such as Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*). Thus, this area contains great potential for habitat restoration at a scale that would benefit many grassland dependent wildlife species.

The Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) identified several tracts of native prairie and woodlands adjacent to or near conserved parcels (see Figure 1 showing currently protected areas). This proposal will identify willing landowners among those WAP identified tracts and move these parcels of native prairie and woodland into some form of conservation management. Information from a SWG grant funded during the 2007 cycle (Surveys for grassland birds, Ornate Box Turtle, Arogos Skipper and Prairie remnant habitat) will complement this project. One of four objectives of this previously funded SWG grant focuses on determining the size and status of prairie remnants in the Arkansas Valley Ecoregion and their locations relative to existing protected prairie. This will further refine the WAP, thereby helping prioritize tracts in the current project to target for conservation efforts.

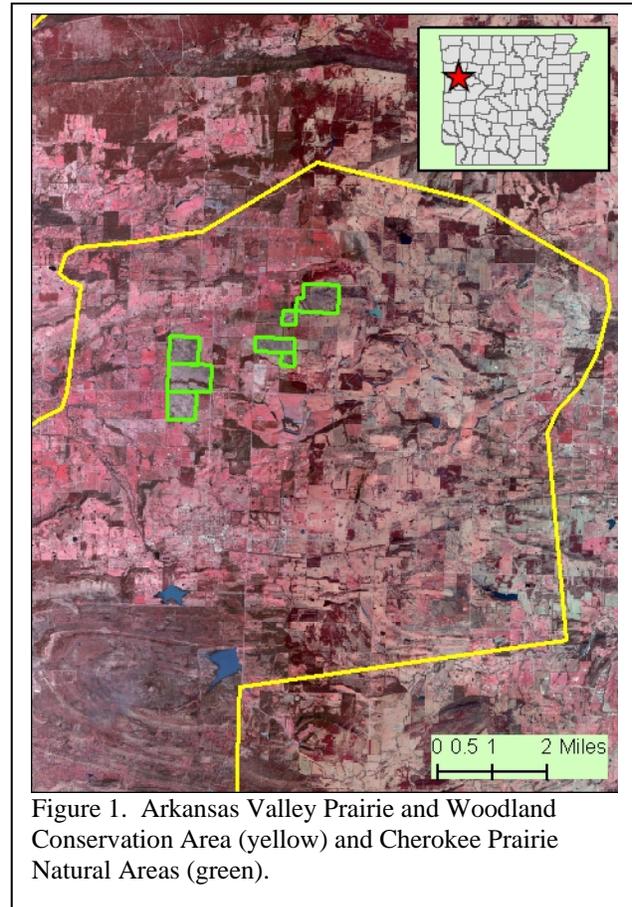


Figure 1. Arkansas Valley Prairie and Woodland Conservation Area (yellow) and Cherokee Prairie Natural Areas (green).

Species of Greatest Conservation Concern Addressed by The Project

Bachman's sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*)
Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*)
Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*)
Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*)
Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*)
Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*)
Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*)
Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)
Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*)
Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)
Ornate Box Turtle (*Terrapene ornata ornata*)
Argos Skipper (*Atrytone argos*)
Diana's fritillary (*Speyria diana*)

Objective

Increase block size and/or connect currently protected prairies and woodlands in the Arkansas River Valley Ecoregion.

Methods

1. Use ArcView to map all tracts within the Cherokees Prairie complex.
2. Use the WAP to determine those landowner tracts that contact existing or potential prairie and woodland remnants. Incorporate new data from ANHC that refines the status of prairie remnants.
3. Prioritize tracts for conservation efforts based on juxtaposition to currently protected areas and status of tracts (e.g., high quality, poor quality but restorable, not restorable).
4. Create a map of priority tracts by priority and landowner.
5. Contact all landowners and determine interest in selling tracts.
6. Direct landowners that want to sell to ANHC or TNC.
7. Direct landowners that want easements to TNC.
8. Direct landowners that want management assistance to the appropriate agency (AGFC/NRCS).

Methods 1, 2 and 3 will be completed by ANHC and TNC working with conservation planning maps and the results of the previous SWG grant ("Survey's for grassland birds, Ornate Box Turtle, Argos Skipper, and Prairie remnant habitat"). A map of landowners with prioritized tracts will be produced.

Method 4 will be developed by TNC's GIS lab. A database will be produced.

Methods 5-8 will be completed by a contractor. A status report will be produced.

Results / Outcomes

The result will be conservation of Arkansas Valley woodland and prairie habitats through protection of high priority tracts of land. Landowners willing to sell fee-title will be directed to ANHC or TNC. Landowners willing to sell easements will be directed to TNC. The project will facilitate conservation on tracts that remain in private ownership by connecting landowners with a conservation intent with appropriate wildlife a management program.

PRELIMINARY BUDGET

	Total Cost	Match	SWG Cost
Salary/Benefits	\$8,000	\$4,000	\$4,000
Operating Expenses	\$12,000	\$6,000	\$6,000
Subtotal	\$20,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Indirect Costs (25%)	\$4,600	\$2,300	\$2,300
Total	\$24,600	\$12,300	\$12,300

The Nature Conservancy has a current 23% Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate (NICRA) that is accepted by USFWS.

Qualifications of Organizations to Carry Out the Project

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has worked in the Arkansas Valley Ecosystem with our partners for over 20 years. TNC has developed a broad understanding of this at-risk ecosystem through years of scientific observation and use of adaptive management in implementation of restoration techniques. Through work with public and private landowners, we have become acutely aware of the socio-political attributes of the area. TNC maintains an excellent working relationship with the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. This relationship increases our capacity to organize core planning teams made up of experts in the field of protection and restoration of at-risk habitats. TNC also maintains science and conservation staffs that are trained in conservation action planning and implementation of strategic actions and monitoring.

The Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission (ANHC) is charged with the responsibility of establishing and maintaining a System of Natural Areas. Natural areas are those lands specifically managed to preserve, and sometimes restore, natural communities that are now rare across the state. The ANHC also maintains the Natural Heritage Inventory, the central repository for information on rare species and natural communities in Arkansas. The Natural Heritage Inventory gathers information on the location of rare species and natural communities in the form of Element Occurrence Records. Data from the Natural Heritage Inventory are commonly used as a tool in land conservation programs, environmental review/information sharing, and habitat management plans.

Bill Holimon is an Ornithologist and is Chief of Research for the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. Bill received a B.S. in biology from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and an M.S. in biology from New Mexico State University. Bill previously worked for The Nature Conservancy in Texas on conservation of two federally listed endangered bird species, the Golden-cheeked Warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*) and Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*). In addition, he has conducted extensive work on various taxa of Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) throughout North America. Bill is a native Arkansan who has published three scientific papers on rare birds of Arkansas; two on grassland birds and the third on the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*).