

State Wildlife Grant Program Pre-proposal

Project Title: Hill Prairie and Forested Lands Protection & Stewardship Through Land Acquisition.

Applicant Information:

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Project Description:

White Rock tract comprises a 483.5 (+/-) acre complex of high quality hill prairies, glades, and upland forest in the Hill Prairie Corridor COA. It hosts several state threatened/endangered species and habitat for many species in greatest need of conservation (SGNC). Illinois Audubon Society (IAS) and Clifftop will purchase and hold the tract in perpetuity and seek enrollment as a nature preserve with the INPC. This new IAS Sanctuary and Clifftop Reserve will be managed to conserve and enhance its natural area values and the site will be used for public engagement.

Type of Project: Implementation.

Match Rate: 50% federal / 50% non-federal (private)

Dollars Requested:

1st year funding: \$350,000 total federal; \$1,150,000 non-federal (private); \$1,500,000 total project cost.

Need:

Hill prairies are one of the most endangered habitats in Illinois. These habitats were far more extensive as recently as the early 20th century. Hill prairies and their adjacent woodland habitats support many rare plant and animal species. Numerous SGNC (see below) and several additional rare and endemic species depend on hill prairies for their existence. As the acreage of these habitats decline, the future of these species is placed in jeopardy. In addition to outright habitat loss, hill prairies and woodlands also are becoming more fragmented. This limits the dispersal of hill prairie and forest dependent species and increases species extinction at individual sites.

Forty percent of remaining loess hill prairies in the state and one of the largest contiguous forested areas in Illinois are in the Hill Prairie Corridor COA in Southwestern Illinois. The majority of these high quality natural areas in the COA are privately owned in rural areas of Monroe County that are experiencing development pressures.

The area is within the St. Louis Metropolitan Area that contains more than two million people. Rapid and increasing exurban growth threatens to bring development and resultant habitat destruction and fragmentation to the COA. Monroe County has experienced a 23% growth rate in the last ten years; hill prairie, glade and forested properties host attributes – bluff top views and wooded acreage – that make them among those most sought for housing development. Within areas of the COA, houses have supplanted hill prairies and adjacent forests.

Among residents of the area there is a critical lack of understanding about the significance and importance of these natural communities and their required stewardship. While there is a general appreciation of these natural habitats for hunting and recreation purposes, there is a paucity of landowner practices aimed at the natural sustainability of these lands.

The permanent protection of a significant tract in the COA by locally led non-governmental agencies will ensure the vitality of a unique ecosystem and catalyze local interest in improving private landowner stewardship practices.

White Rock currently is enrolled in a short-term Land and Water Reserve. The site contains seven acres of Grade A loess hill prairie and five acres of Grade B limestone glade intermingled with 471.5 acres of Grade C upland forest. White Rock encompasses part of two natural areas recognized by the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory. Included in the reserve are approximately 47 acres of the Monroe City Hill Prairie INAI site (#199) and approximately 50 acres of the Potato Hill Prairie INAI site (#200).

The current Land and Water Reserve registration expires in August 2010. The landowner does not wish to renew the enrollment. The tract is for sale.

Objectives:

The Illinois Audubon Society and Clifftop will acquire the site to bring it under permanent protection and stewardship.

The White Rock site prairies are “very high quality,” according to the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory assessment, indicating little historical disturbance. Hill prairies, glades, and upland forest contain a variety of typical and conservative species. Three state threatened/endangered plants are found on the property. Dry-mesic and upland forest comprises the majority of the site. The woodlands are mature second growth. Oak and hickory species, characteristic of dry-mesic forests of the Northern Ozark Natural Division, are the dominant woody species; a number of uncommon plants, including several that the INAI assessed as records for Monroe County, grow in the understory.

The site includes habitat for a number of state threatened/endangered species, including plains scorpion (*Centruroides vittatus*), flathead snake (*Tantilla gracilis*),

coachwhip snake (*Masticophis flagellum*), and great plains rat snake (*Elaphe emoryi*); the state-threatened timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) has been documented on the property. Additionally, the site includes habitat for the federally listed Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*). The site is an important area for many birds, especially those that are sensitive to habitat fragmentation. Bird population surveys conducted nearby the site have documented many forest interior birds during the breeding season. These include Kentucky warbler, pileated woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, worm-eating warbler, hooded warbler, ovenbird, Acadian flycatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo, and the state-listed cerulean warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) and black-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*).

The site is located in an area with at least 1,500 acres of contiguous forest broken only by hill prairies and glades, a 7-acre old field that is being reforested, and a few acres of cropland. The southern part of the proposed sanctuary/reserve forms an important part of an unbroken 450 acres of forest, while the northern 160 acres of the tract are part of 1,000 acres of contiguous forest.

This project will also permanently protect and conserve habitat for the following species in greatest need of conservation:

Bobcat
Woodland vole
American badger
Gray fox
American woodcock
Red-headed woodpecker
Northern flicker
Prairie warbler
Yellow-breasted chat
Field sparrow
Whip-poor-will

Approach:

The Illinois Audubon Society and Clifftop will acquire the property using financial support from private foundations and donations and by drawing on organizational funds dedicated to natural areas acquisition. The organizations will jointly and proportionately hold the property in perpetuity. The landowner's desired timeline to complete the sale precludes a direct SWG funding request for the project. Instead, this project request is aimed at reimbursing IAS and Clifftop acquisition funds dedicated to this project so that both organizations can seek other protective acquisitions in this and other COAs. Clifftop and the Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (SWIWAP) Partnership (see below) will prioritize future acquisition, conservation easement enrollments and stewardship programs for additional lands located adjacent to or near the White Rock site.

The property will be enrolled as a nature preserve with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. Clifftop will take the lead in providing active stewardship and assistance with INPC activities on the site. The SWIWAP Partnership will collectively utilize additional federal and state programs for stewardship funding for the tract.

When acquired, the tract will be used to showcase hill prairie, glade, and forestland stewardship practices. The tract also will be used as a center for COA public outreach and landowner education on best management practices for natural areas. Additionally, youth education programs will be coordinated with local school districts and youth groups. Members of the SWIWAP Partnership will conduct these outdoor classroom efforts.

Relationship to the Plan:

Illinois' Wildlife Action Plan (IWAP), released in 2005, calls for the "formation of a bluff lands protection group" to assist with overall conservation efforts in the Hill Prairie Corridor and Sinkhole Plain Conservation Opportunity Areas in Monroe, Randolph and St. Clair Counties in southwestern Illinois. Answering that call, in 2006, Clifftop -- Conserving Lands in Farm, Forest, Talus or Prairie -- was founded. Clifftop is a local, not-for-profit, landowner-based, non-governmental conservation organization, incorporated in Illinois. In 2007, Clifftop organized and facilitated the development of a Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (SWIWAP) and Partnership to specifically implement IWAP goals and recommendations for the Hill Prairie-Sinkhole Plain COA. Principal SWIWAP Partners include IDNR, INPC, NRCS, the Illinois Speleological Survey, the National Wild Turkey Federation, the University of Illinois Extension Service, the Kaskaskia Valley Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society, and two additional, local landowner-based conservation NGOs, the Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve Stewardship Committee and the Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves. Clifftop serves as the administrative agent for the SWIWAP Partnership and the local 501(c)(3) entity for its operations. Since 2007 the Partnership has worked well: \$1.8 million dollars in state, federal and NGO funding garnered for the COA for stewardship on state-managed and private-owned acreages and purchased conservation easements; the three, local NGOs in the COA have contributed 10,000 volunteer hours toward stewardship, conservation education and programs administration; outreach-recruitment and information-education programs have been attended by over 5,000 residents in the COA.

While the IWAP specifically mandates priority action for "permanent protection of available parcels of high quality community types" within the COA, adequate funding for such acquisitions remains scarce. Even as the national economic downturn results in more such parcels entering the market, the state's own fiscal crisis has reduced IDNR's ability to purchase available lands.

To meet IWAP goals and permanently protect these natural areas and wildlife habitat, a new strategy and coordination with new partners is merited. Cooperative funding using federal, state and private dollars can leverage such funds to protect even greater acreages. The Illinois Audubon Society and Clifftop will partner to raise the necessary

foundational and private funds to jointly purchase, own and hold the White Rock tract. Because the State Wildlife Grant program is specifically designed to fund IWAP objectives, we request post-acquisition reimbursement to Illinois Audubon and Clifftop of their investment share of acquisition costs so that the partners can move on to further potential acquisitions.

Anticipated Outcomes and Benefits:

Completion of this project will produce the following benefits:

- Permanent protection of and stewardship for critical natural habitats and communities within the COA.
- Establish a demonstration site for stewardship education within the COA.
- Build on the synergy and leveraging created by the SWIWAP Partnership and begin to meet the IWAP goals of permanent protection for Illinois' best natural lands.
- Illinois Audubon Society and Clifftop will be able to continue with and broaden their land acquisition efforts to ensure the sustainability of critical natural areas and wildlife habitat in Illinois.

Signatures of Applicants:

Tom Clay, Executive Director Illinois Audubon Society

Date

Pen DauBach, Clifftop Co-Coordinator

Date

Carl DauBach, Clifftop Co-Coordinator

Date