

SILOAM SPRINGS SWG PROJECT - ANNUAL REPORT FY2009
State Wildlife Grant T-41 D-1

The overall purpose of this project is to create connecting corridors of grassland and forest habitat for grassland and forest wildlife with an emphasis on Species of Greatest Conservation Concern (SGCC). Goals for the project are to create or restore a minimum of 100 acres of wildlife habitat through the planting of native trees and grasslands and to enhance a minimum of 200 acres of existing habitat. In fiscal year 2009 (FY09) an additional 20 acres of grassland were planted as part of the CRP (CP-33) quail border. Approximately 200 acres of timber stand improvement was conducted as part of USDA programs to thin out undesirable tree species to restore the health of the oak woodland communities. Exotic/invasive plant control was conducted on 34 acres and prescribed burns were conducted on 140 acres utilizing funds and services from this grant project.

This grant included 5 primary goals for achieving wildlife habitat restoration and enhancement in the Siloam Springs Area. These goals included: Goal #1 planting 10-15 acres of trees per year with a total goal of 50 acres of tree plantings; Goal #2 seeding of 15 acres of grassland per year with a total goal of 50 acres of grassland plantings (total of 100 acres of new plantings of trees or native grasses); Goal #3 control of exotic and invasive plant species on 15-20 acres per year; Goal #4 conduct prescribed burns on 30 acres per year with a total goal of 200 acres of existing habitat enhanced (through exotic/invasive control and burning); and Goal #5 to enroll one landowner in a management agreement per year with a total goal of 3 management agreements with private landowners. To date all of these goals are on track for completion at the end of this grant period. Another principal goal of this grant was to create a minimum of 10 new habitat connection corridors within the project area. Over the past decade the use of agricultural programs such as CREP and CRP have encouraged the vast majority of landowners with eligible land in this area to enroll in these program which often permanently convert crop lands into wildlife habitat (forest or native grasslands). Information is still be collected by these USDA programs combined with the efforts of this grant will likely result in the creation of a minimum of 10-20 forest or grassland corridors.

There have been a few unanticipated delays with this grant that may have an impact on the final results of the project. These include having to go through the state Central Management Services to approve large contracts to hire crews to do exotic/invasive control on public and private lands. The first private landowner with whom we negotiated a 10-year management agreement to do work on his property sold the area in which the contractor was working in the middle of the contract. This resulted in the need to halt work and negotiate a new contract with the new owner of this property. As a result we have two separate 10-year management agreements with private landowners signed for the same tract of land. While the initial work done while under the ownership of the original owner involves a different area than the work done under the agreement signed by the new owner the work is being done on the same tract of land. Future plans are underway to negotiate another 10-year agreement with a 3rd landowner of a 2nd tract of land. Time and resources will likely not allow for negotiation of a new agreement with a 4th landowner. Although the original goals for the grant call for landowner agreement with 3 private landowners will technically be meet the work done on private land through direct funds provided by this grant will involve work on only 2 private tracts of land. Additional habitat creation and enhancement is being conducted on other private lands in the area through the USDA programs

but through direct funding from this grant.

While some of the habitat creation (through the use of agricultural set-aside programs, not directly associated with this project) has occurred prior to the start of this grant, efforts focused on this area as a result of this grant has created additional support from the community and created new partnerships between federal and state agencies and private landowners with the shared goal of improving wildlife habitat in this area of western Illinois. The original plans laid out in this grant called for using SWG funds to supply plant materials and provide for planting expenses. Since the creation of new habitat through planting native trees and grasslands is already being accomplished through the USDA programs, it was later determined in the course of implementing this grant that the SWG funds would be better utilized for control of exotic and invasive plant species (primarily brush clearing to improve the quality of hill prairie, savanna, barrens and woodland communities). In focusing funds on exotic/invasive plant control state biologists have been able to locate new high quality hill prairie and barrens remnants and new populations of state-listed plants and birds (including Henslow's Sparrow, Cerulean Warbler and savanna blazingstar).

With one year remaining in this grant 71 acres of new trees and grasslands have been restored through the use of agricultural set-aside programs including Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). An additional 400 acres of existing habitat has been enhanced through timber stand improvement (through the use of agricultural programs), exotic/invasive control and prescribed burning (through funds and services provided as part of this grant).

An annual breeding bird road census was established in 2007 and repeated in 2008 and 2009. The census route covers 27 miles and runs along the northern edge and through the central portion of the project area through various tracts of forest, grassland and agricultural lands. An average of 72 bird species were reported for all 3 years with 18 Species of Greatest Need of Conservation (SGNC) seen/heard on these surveys. Preliminary results indicate that the area provides habitat for a wide variety of habitat-sensitive forest and grassland birds. Of the original 28 SGNC identified as potentially utilizing the area in the grant proposal, 13 have been seen or heard during these monitoring efforts plus an additional 5 species not previously known to occur in this area. Some of the species from the original list of 28 were likely not reported due to the timing and methods of the surveys. The bird surveys are conducted in mid-June to early July when migratory bird species are missed. Since the monitoring was conducted primarily as a road survey, with walks through the work sites, secretive and nocturnal species such as pickerel frog, bobcat and whip-poor-will would have also been missed.