

Area Landowners to receive “Bird Conservation Area” Benefits

October 24th the Wildlife Division of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources held a public meeting in Coon Rapids where it announced a plan to designate a large area between Coon Rapids and Guthrie Center as the state’s 10th nationally-registered Bird Conservation Area (BCA).

The Raccoon River Savanna BCA will be built around the protected areas of Whiterock Conservancy (4,300 acres) and Springbrook State Recreation and Wildlife Area (1,300 acres), and will stretch from Coon Rapids 20 miles into Guthrie County along the Middle Raccoon River.

This designation will enable private landowners located within its boundaries to get priority access to DNR support for habitat improvements, including scarce funding from the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) funding and DNR’s Landowners Incentive Program (LIP). LIP funds can help pay for conservation easements, some land acquisitions, and land improvements ranging from removing invasive plants to timber-stand improvements. BCA landowners will also get priority access to technical support from DNR’s private lands biologists. Other incentives may be possible in the future.

Participation in any of these initiatives is voluntary. No restrictions or requirements will be placed on private landowners and the usual public hunting areas will remain open.

Whiterock Conservancy has already embarked on an extensive habitat improvement program. The expected rebound in native bird populations will help counteract the alarming declines in state-wide bird counts for dozens of native species. .

“Having BCA designation is an exciting prospect for the Middle Raccoon River watershed”, says Tolif Hunt, Whiterock Executive Director. “We and our neighbors will have better access to programs that benefit wildlife and water quality and this will increase our ‘watchable wildlife’ potential. Importantly, the BCA designation will help the Coon Rapids area take advantage of the economic benefits of eco-tourism. It’s a ready-made eco-tourism marketing tool.”

Coon Rapids was designated an Iowa Great Place in October 2005, on the basis of a plan to use Whiterock Conservancy as the centerpiece of community-wide effort to transform the area into a rural tourism destination. To date, Great Places has yielded over \$1.5 million in state and federal support, to be invested in trail development and to improve public use facilities in and around Coon Rapids.

Bird watchers have already been identified as a prime market for this effort. In 2005 hundreds of bird watchers flocked to Whiterock to see a Vermillion Flycatcher (the fifth one ever seen in Iowa), and in 2006 the nonprofit Saving Our Avian Resources (SOAR) began an Osprey reintroduction program on Whiterock land.

The BCA designation, by helping to improve area-wide wildlife habitat, will be a critical support for this rural tourism effort. As rare bird populations increase, bird-watchers will follow

(traveling from even hundreds of miles away), with economic gain for motels, restaurants gas stations, and other area businesses in the Coon Rapids, Guthrie Center, Panora, and Audubon areas.

Bird Conservation Areas are built around a model of trying to protect large habitat blocks needed by key native species. Along the Middle Raccoon, the most important habitat protected will be rare Oak Savannah, which are grassland areas containing scattered, spreading oak trees. Savannah is prime habitat for red-headed woodpeckers and barn owls, among many other species.

The proposed area also contains the grasslands needed by bobolinks and grasshopper sparrows, and some large woodland blocks required by bald eagles, wood thrushes, and a variety of other neo-tropical migratory birds. Of course other many other wildlife species, not just birds, will also benefit.

Since the concept is focused on native species conservation at a landscape scale, each BCA must contain at least 10,000 acres, of which a core 20% must consist of permanently protected bird habitat, surrounded by 80% of privately owned land with current or future habitat potential.

The DNR has definitely decided to move forward with the Raccoon River Savannah BCA, but is still working out the exact size and boundaries. Their goal is to keep a ratio of at least 20% protected lands, defined as lands owned by the state or on which the owner has a conservation easement or other plan to prevent future bird habitat loss.

Discussion at the October 24th meeting focused on how to identify additional protected lands to be able to increase the overall size of the designated area. Participants proposed including Carroll County's Riverside Park, on the east side of Coon Rapids, not just for habitat purposes but also as an important public access point.

Another proposed option was to extend the proposed boundary to the southwest to pick up the 1,600-acre Elk Grove Wildlife Area, adjacent to another 750 acre Whiterock property, locally known as the Owens (292) and Pingrey farms.

These details will be worked out within the next weeks and the official designation made near the end of the year. If you know of any other protected lands in the area, or wish to put a conservation easement on your own land to protect its natural features from future development, please contact Tolif Hunt at tolif@iowatelecom.net, tel. 712-684-2697.

For general information on landowner protection options, visit the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation at www.inhf.org or call them at 800-475-1846 or 515-288-1846.

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