

## Heron Lake Important Bird Area

As we know, southwestern MN is a “working landscape”. Most of the original landscape has been altered and converted. However, there are remaining areas of conservation lands (public & private) that are focus areas and building blocks for further conservation & restoration----for wildlife, ecosystems/watershed health, and for recreation. And it’s no surprise that both the greater Heron Lake area and the Des Moines River corridor are among those key areas. The focus of the IBA initiative is of course on birds.

The state IBA committee accepts nominations for consideration and also has been proactive where there seems a need for certain areas that appear to be likely candidates to meet IBA criteria (see attached nomination form). Knowledgeable individuals & organizations worked together to compile the necessary documentation. (I was one of the contributors for the HLIBA although I’m not on the state IBA committee itself). After a site has been accepted as an IBA, then Audubon Minnesota posts on their website the background information for each IBA.

For example, for the Heron Lake IBA, see:

<http://mn.audubon.org/conservation/minnesota-important-bird-areas> (Brief IBA narratives plus links to further details)

<http://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=3b3d225539f8449daf84be6aa89eab50>

<http://netapp.audubon.org/iba/Site/5017> - Detailed report for Heron Lake IBA

The reason that the Heron Lake IBA and Des Moines River IBA are separate is because they really are different habitats and primarily serve different suites of bird species.

As described earlier, the MN IBA program is designed to be **proactive, voluntary, non-regulatory, participatory and science-based** and is part of an international conservation effort.

The program relies on participation of private landowners, public land managers, and community members to:

\***identify** the most essential habitats for birds and designates Important Bird Areas in Minnesota

\***monitor** these areas for changes to birds and their habitats

\***conserve** these areas for long-term protection of birds

IBA designation is a way to recognize areas with significant value to birds and a way to help focus attention on the importance of these areas.

This designation can be used to provide additional support for e.g. conservation measures (including funding proposals), monitoring efforts, etc. Collectively, partners can discuss ideas, opportunities and challenges for this IBA.

**Birds and IBAs are one piece of a much larger “puzzle”. So what are some potential opportunities or considerations? Here are just a few examples:**

-What opportunities are there for the NHL Watershed & its partners to conserve & restore native bird habitat (wetland & grassland)?

-Where can conservation & management of the watershed dovetail with other initiatives such as these:

\***MN Wildlife Action Plan (MNWAP)** <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/cwcs/index.html>. The plan emphasizes conservation actions that will benefit MN wildlife Species in Greatest Conservation Need and their key habitats. It also aims to improve landscape level connectivity and ecosystem

resiliency. More details to come & will be posted on the DNR website. However, for now please see the attached maps depicting the plan's Wildlife Action Network. Many data layers were used to help devise this network including IBAs and the MN Prairie Conservation Plan priority areas. This is a guiding document for the Nongame Wildlife Program but also potentially for many others as it will take conservation partners working together to implement this plan. [\*\*\*\*] This plan has just been majorly revised & updated for 2015-2025. Stay tuned for the updated version and related online "tools" to be posted on the DNR webpage!]

\* **MN Prairie Conservation Plan** <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/prairieplan/index.html> (the NHL Watershed would be covered by the Plan's Red Rock Local Technical Team [LTT] For more information about getting involved with that contact: Steven Burdick | Coordinating Wildlife Biologist, Pheasants Forever, Inc. and Quail Forever p. (701) 200-3588 | [sburdick@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:sburdick@pheasantsforever.org)

\* **Watershed Health Assessment Framework** <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/whaf/index.html> & the related One Watershed-One Plan initiative (contact [Brian.Nyborg@state.mn.us](mailto:Brian.Nyborg@state.mn.us) )

There are certainly other plans such as the state duck plan, pheasant plans, etc. Although each of these has different focus, there are opportunities where there are compatible objectives. Where partners can pool expertise and resources to achieve more together than we can separately. For example, conserving & restoring grasslands in the headwaters is a smart conservation strategy for watersheds from a water quality & hydrology standpoint. It can also benefit wildlife Species in Greatest Conservation Need if their habitat requirements are addressed in the management strategy -- including birds as well as pollinators and other species.

Besides on-the-ground conservation, there is a need for monitoring to determine whether all of our collective (& hopefully coordinated) actions are effective, e.g. to name a few:

- periodic surveys of the bird populations (or other priority species) to assess status.
- Habitat quality assessments.
- In some cases, there may be a need to conduct surveys before & after management to assess how sensitive species respond to management (not all species respond the same way so may need to modify management to ensure that our rarest & most sensitive species are sustained and recovered)

In a perfect world, the DNR's Nongame Wildlife Program would be able to conduct all of the needed surveys & monitoring in our region. In reality, the DNR Southern Region has only 2 nongame wildlife specialists to cover 32 counties for a wide range of duties, conservation issues, and a growing list of nongame species (currently >300 species including birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates). Further, the Nongame Wildlife Program is largely funded by voluntary contributions meaning we have especially limited funding resources. Likewise the DNR's MN Biological Survey (MBS) also has limited staff & funding. So that means that survey & monitoring really need to be prioritized and focused.

It also means that assistance from other partners will be needed. "It takes a village..." as they say! Some monitoring will require special skills and may be best conducted by DNR staff. Others might be suitable for citizen science or interns. Even informal monitoring can be helpful in the sense that local partners/residents can let the DNR know if there are new concerns or threats --- such as a perceived decline in certain waterbird or grassland bird species.