Final Report
Audubon Chicago Region
State Wildlife Grant
Activity through 6/30/11
Submitted by Judy Pollock

PROJECT TITLE: Model Wildlife Action Plan Implementation through IBA Conservation Actions in Chicago Wilderness.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the project is to use the Important Bird Areas program to focus the attention of the public, landowners, and planners on achieving population targets set by the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan for grassland and shrubland bird species in greatest need of conservation. With our partner, Kane County Forest Preserve District, Audubon will develop and begin to implement a model grassland and shrubland bird conservation plan for county holdings. Audubon will organize broad public outreach through trips and press coverage to IBAs in the Chicago Region.

The species chosen are those grassland and shrubland birds designated by the status objectives in Appendix II of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan as "Species in Greatest Need of Conservation" that breed in significant numbers in the CW region. Our plan will address status objectives found in Appendix II of doubling populations of American Woodcock, bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, Henslow's sparrow, field sparrow, and increasing by 50% willow flycatcher, sedge wren, flicker, yellow-and black-billed cuckoo. Plans will be developed for the 16,000 acres of Kane County FPD lands and within at least three of the identified IBAs of Chicago Wilderness.

The project involves analyzing Kane County Forest Preserve District's holdings and planning to increase numbers of target bird species; implementing a part of the plan by converting cropland to prairie; and publicizing the plan and its results.

The Muirhead Springs Preserve is a 780 acre preserve located in the north central portion of Plato Township between Bahr Road and Rohrson Road. A portion of the preserve was taken out of crop production under a former grant from the SWG program, and the rest is leased to local farmers for crop production. One hundred acres of pioneer native prairie species have been established and the prairie is now inhabited by meadowlarks, bobolinks and dickcissels. This project will replace 60 acres of row crop with native prairie that will provide structure for grassland bird habitat.

This proposal represents a partnership between Audubon Chicago Region and the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, in collaboration with the state.

APPROACH:

Job 1: Within the first nine months, analyze county holdings and develop a plan to achieve population targets for grassland and shrubland birds in all KCFPD lands.

1.1 Gather the best available research on grassland and shrubland bird habitat. Illinois has excellent researchers addressing these questions. *Completed.*

1.2 Use existing citizen science data from the preserves' active bird monitoring program, the BCN Census, to map places where birds of Conservation Concern occur in the KCFPD holdings *Completed.*

1.3 Analyze acreages of existing and potential grassland and shrubland habitat in the KCFPD holdings in light of best practice recommendations, and develop a prioritized list of habitat restoration activities to meet population targets for the birds listed above. Identify sites where management techniques can increase functional grassland and shrubland bird habitat. Removal of fragmentation, removal of invasive woody vegetation or invasive herbaceous vegetation, prescribed burns, and seeding in of new prairie are techniques that would be considered for grassland birds, and instituting a phased rotational disturbance schedule, modifying an existing management schedule and/or planting native shrubs would be considered for shrubland birds. *Completed for seventeen preserves that contain birds of concern.*

1.4 Based on our analysis and feedback from knowledgeable advisors, we will develop a grassland bird conservation plan which includes a prioritized list of habitat restoration activities (and an accompanying map) designed to at least double populations of American woodcock, northern bobwhite, bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, loggerhead shrike, Henslow's sparrow, field sparrow, and increase by 50% populations of willow flycatcher, sedge wren, flicker, yellow- and black-billed cuckoo in Kane County preserves. We will send the plan to scientific advisors and key monitors for review before finalizing it. *Completed. Loggerhead shrike and northern bobwhite are no longer present or very rare, so we have not included them in the planning.*

1.5 Use our grassland plan to predict increases that will result from the restoration of 260 acres at Muirhead Springs Preserve demonstration site (60 acres through this project) (increases are expected at this site in 4- 6 of our target species). *Not Completed. We neglected to add monitoring points in the new section of the site. We will follow up this year and add this information to the report.*

Job 2: Plant 60 acres of former crop field with a diverse native tallgrass mesic prairie seed mix designed to produce structure suitable for grassland bird nesting (one that will not produce a monoculture of tall grasses.) We will strive for one quick, dramatic change in one targeted bird community (grassland birds, which includes 3 of our target species) with our model project at Muirhead Springs, newly acquired agricultural land in an agricultural matrix

2.1 Plant 30 acres of mesic prairie grasses (between 30 and 50 species) in spring 2009. Prairie mix suitable for grassland bird habitat will be planted in strategic locations adjacent to existing habitat on the preserve to create the biggest gains in bird populations. The goal of this planting will be to create the maximum amount of sustainable native prairie bird habitat rather than to achieve a species mix comparable to high quality prairie. *Completed.*

2.2 Spot spray Canada thistle and other noxious weeds over 30 acres that threaten the quality of the grassland in summer 2009, and mow weeds as needed at the time that is most effective for weed control (this varies according to the plant; generally when the lowest leaves have dried up and fallen off.) Contractors will be hired to spray and/or mow large infestations, and District staff will control smaller infestations. *Completed.*

2.3 Plant 30 acres of mesic prairie grasses (between 30 and 50 species) in spring 2010, as in 2.1. *Completed.*

2.4 Spot spray Canada thistle and other noxious weeds over 60 acres that threaten the quality of the grassland in summer 2010, as in 2.2. *Completed.*

2.5 Compare predictions of plan to results as a test of the plan; develop a description of the impacts of the seeding and herbiciding and other management activities carried out according to the plan on the bird populations at the demonstration site using before and after monitoring data. *Not Completed.*

Job 3: In the final 9 months, share the grassland plan and results of the activity at the demonstration site publicly and with key stakeholders including landowners and local citizen conservationists in Chicago Wilderness and in Important Bird Areas.

3.1 Mail information about the plan and demonstration site results to all grassland and shrubland IBA landowners and associated local groups. Invite partnerships to plan new conservation actions and/or publicize recent successes, with support from Audubon. These IBAs include such sites as Pratt's Wayne Woods and James "Pate" Philip State Park, Goose Lake Prairie, Bartel Grassland, and others. Illinois' Important Bird Area project is concluding its identification phase and moving into the conservation action phase. There are now 66 IBAs in the state. Some sites have significant threats. Information will be shared with landowners and stakeholders at these IBAs about the grassland and shrubland bird targets in the IWAP and how to achieve them. Audubon will offer to partner by assisting with developing or reviewing plans to improve grassland habitat or engaging in activities to publicize successes such as IBA dedication ceremonies or developing and promoting news stories.. *Completed. The executive summary was mailed with a link to the complete report on the website.*

3.2 Organize a campaign consisting of one press release, two public events and two tours – at sites including the Muirhead Springs demonstration site and other grassland Important Bird Areas in the Chicago region. The goal will be to inform neighbors, citizens and local officials about the serious situation of these bird populations and the impressive gains that good management can bring about. *Partially completed - One press release was distributed and one talk was held in Kane County. Two other presentations are scheduled - one for the Kane County Audubon Society and one for the Kane County Forest Preserve stewards.*

3.3 Share methods from the grassland plan, the demonstration site and other successful results of similar projects widely in the Chicago Wilderness region though the CW coalition, the IBA program and through Audubon's Habitat Project which provides training opportunities for volunteer land stewards and bird monitors. Outreach would include the 12 IBAs in the Chicago Wilderness region that have nesting grassland and shrubland birds. At least four presentations will be made at venues such as meetings of Chicago Wilderness coalition members, a volunteer conference such as the Wild Things conference, and meetings of volunteers such as bird conservationists or IBA stewards. A description of the plan will be submitted to the Chicago Wilderness Journal for publication. *Presentations were made at the Wild Things conference, the Chicago Wilderness wildlife managers' task force and the Bird Conservation Network quarterly meeting. Another presentation is scheduled for the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan: Farmland Campaign. The Chicago Wilderness Journal no longer exists, but the plan is published on the web at* http://www.habitatproject.org/webdocs/birds/KanePlan2011.pdf.

PROJECT SCHEDULE:

C=completed, pc= partially completed, x= next year

Objectives	Year 1	Fall 09	Winter 10	Spring 10	Summer 10	Fall 10	Winter 11	Spring 11
1.1 gather the best available research on grassland and shrubland bird habitat	c							
1.2 compile existing data from the preserves' active bird monitoring program	c							
1.3 analyze acreages of existing and potential grassland and shrubland habitat in the KCFPD holdings in order to identify sites where management techniques can increase functional grassland and shrubland bird habitat			c					
1.4 develop a prioritized list of habitat activities to double populations of American Woodcock, northern bobwhite, bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, loggerhead Shrike, Henslow's sparrow, field sparrow, and increase by 50% populations of Willow flycatcher, sedge wren, flicker, yellow- and black-billed cuckoo.	c							
1.5 Use our grassland plan to predict increases that will result from the restoration of 260 acres at Muirhead Springs Preserve (60 acres through this project)	c							
2.1, 2.3 Plant 30 acres each year of mesic prairie grasses (approximately 30 species) in the spring 2009, 2010	c							
2.2, 2.4 Spot spray Canada thistle and other noxious weeds that threaten the quality of the grassland in summer 2009, 2010					c			
2.5 Compare predictions of the plan to the result as a test of the plan.								nc
3.1 Mail information about the plan to all grassland and shrubland IBA landowners and associated local groups. Invite partnerships								c
3.2 Organize a campaign consisting of one press release, two public events and two tours								pc
3.2 Make at least 4 presentations to share successful methods from grassland plan widely in the Chicago Wilderness region though the CW coalition, the IBA program and through Audubon's Habitat Project								c

Note regarding budget: Audubon applied for a C2000 grant in '07 and again in '08, and hoped to use that for match. We did not receive funding in either cycle, so we substituted $20,050 that we will be received from CorLands for work planning habitat for Species of Conservation Concern and doing community

outreach to support habitat restoration at Bartel Grasslands, and the remainder from Grand Victoria Foundation support for engaging local landowners, volunteers and other stakeholders in best management practices for grasslands and woodlands.

PERSONNEL:

Audubon's Director of Bird Conservation (Judy Pollock) is the principal staff for this project. Erin Jones, Audubon project coordinator, made the planning maps. Collaborators from the Forest Preserve District include Drew Ullberg. Volunteer leaders play significant roles in monitoring and sharing information.

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