

THE BELWIN CONSERVANCY and our members are working to protect the Saint Croix Valley through conservation, scientific ecological restoration, and by inspiring our connection to the natural world.

Our preserve is nearly 1,400 acres in size and includes oak savannas and woodlands, tallgrass prairie, wetlands and fens. It is home to numerous rare and threatened plants and animals.

The Belwin Conservancy is a nonprofit organization and urgently needs your support so that we are able to continue our work conserving and restoring native landscapes like this one. You can join the Belwin Conservancy any time on our website: www.belwin.org.

Membership dollars directly support our work here on the Stagecoach Prairies Natural Area and elsewhere on our preserve. Join today and help us protect what you love about where you live.



**BELWIN
CONSERVANCY**

Inspiring through Nature

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Stagecoach Prairies Natural Area Walking Trails



BELWIN CONSERVANCY

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Welcome

Welcome to the Belwin Conservancy's Stagecoach Prairies Natural Area. This 280-acre property has over four and a half miles of trails ready for you to explore any time of the year on foot or on skis.

This is just one part of the Belwin Conservancy's preserve, currently nearly 1,400 acres in size.

Whether you're taking a walk in the summer or cross-country skiing in the winter, enjoy your time here. This is a unique place. It is a place for you to reconnect with nature and enjoy the peace and quiet that comes with it.

Rules

The Stagecoach Prairies Natural Area is irreplaceable and is protected and managed principally for the plants and animals that call this place home. The Belwin Conservancy puts considerable effort into preserving and restoring the woodlands, wetlands and prairies found here. We therefore ask that you observe these rules and help us protect what makes this place special.

Unless otherwise posted, the Stagecoach Prairies Natural Area is **open during daylight hours every day of the year**. The only permitted entrance is from the parking area located on 11th Street. Please only park in the designated parking area.

For the enjoyment of everyone, the following are never allowed: **Littering, Fires, Camping, Hunting, Biking, Horses, Motorized Vehicles, Picnicking, Weapons, Removal of Vegetation or Picking of Flowers.**

Dogs are permitted so long as they are leashed at all times. Dogs are very disruptive to the ground-nesting birds that live in the prairie—many of which are threatened. **Pick up all dog waste and dispose of it off-site.** There are no facilities here.

If you have any questions, or would like to let us know about a problem, please contact us.

"Take only Pictures, Leave only Footprints"

Something for Every Season

Winter

During the winter months, watch for signs of animal life. Tracks in the snow, scat and browse can all be found if you look carefully.

When the ground is frozen solid, sometimes we will use the opportunity to do large restoration projects.



Spring

As the snow retreats, life returns to the prairie. The calls of frogs and migratory birds herald the return of spring.

During the springtime, the Belwin Conservancy routinely conducts prescribed burns around our preserve. Look for newly burned prairies and watch as they regenerate.



Summer

This is wildflower season. Enjoy the riot of colors as different species of plants come into bloom throughout the summer.

During the summer, we are typically active hand pulling and using mechanical means to control invasive species.



Fall

The colors of fall are well represented here. Look not only at the trees, but enjoy the changing colors of the prairie grasses.

You may encounter us this time of year on our combine. We use it to harvest prairie seed which we plant here and elsewhere on the preserve.



Map & Guide

1 Before you stands a small grove of Bur Oaks standing watch over a 30 acre prairie. This quote from Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* perfectly explains these prairie sentinels:

"Have you ever wondered why a thick crust of corky bark covers the whole tree, even to the smallest twig? This cork is armor. Bur oaks were the shock troops sent by the invading forest to storm the prairie: fire is what they had to fight. Each April before the new grasses had covered the prairie with unburnable greenery, fires ran at will over the land sparing only such old oaks as had grown bark too thick to scorch."

These were the last of the familiar forest trees as homesteaders headed to the wide-open landscape of the prairie.

2 When this property was under active agricultural production, runoff from rainwater created large gullies. Years of erosion and soil loss from the field above filled in this small wetland. Look for the gullies leading towards this small wetland as you walk through this low area.

3 Please sit and enjoy the sights and sounds that nature has to offer.

"The prairie, although plain, inspires awe. It teaches us that grandeur can be wide as well as tall. Young prairie plants put down deep roots first; only when these have been established do the plants invest much energy in growth above ground. They teach us that the work that matters doesn't always show."

— Paul Gruchow, *Grass Roots*

4 This large 34-acre prairie was purchased by the Belwin Conservancy in 1995 and restored in 1997. A healthy prairie is balanced between grasses and flowers although the makeup of all prairies change from year to year, particularly following prescribed burns. The Belwin Conservancy aims to burn every prairie on a three-year cycle.

5 Stop and enjoy the view from this high vantage point. Look at the three thermometers here. They are placed 0, 3, and 18 inches below ground. Soil temperatures change as the ground is warmed by the sun. Deeper soil temperatures fluctuate monthly or seasonally, surface temperatures change throughout the day. This spot receives direct sunlight all day long, yet note how the temperatures differ.

Soil temperature is critical to the health and productivity of prairie. It affects plant growth; bud burst; leaf fall; rates of decomposition; and chemical, physical, and biological processes in the soil.

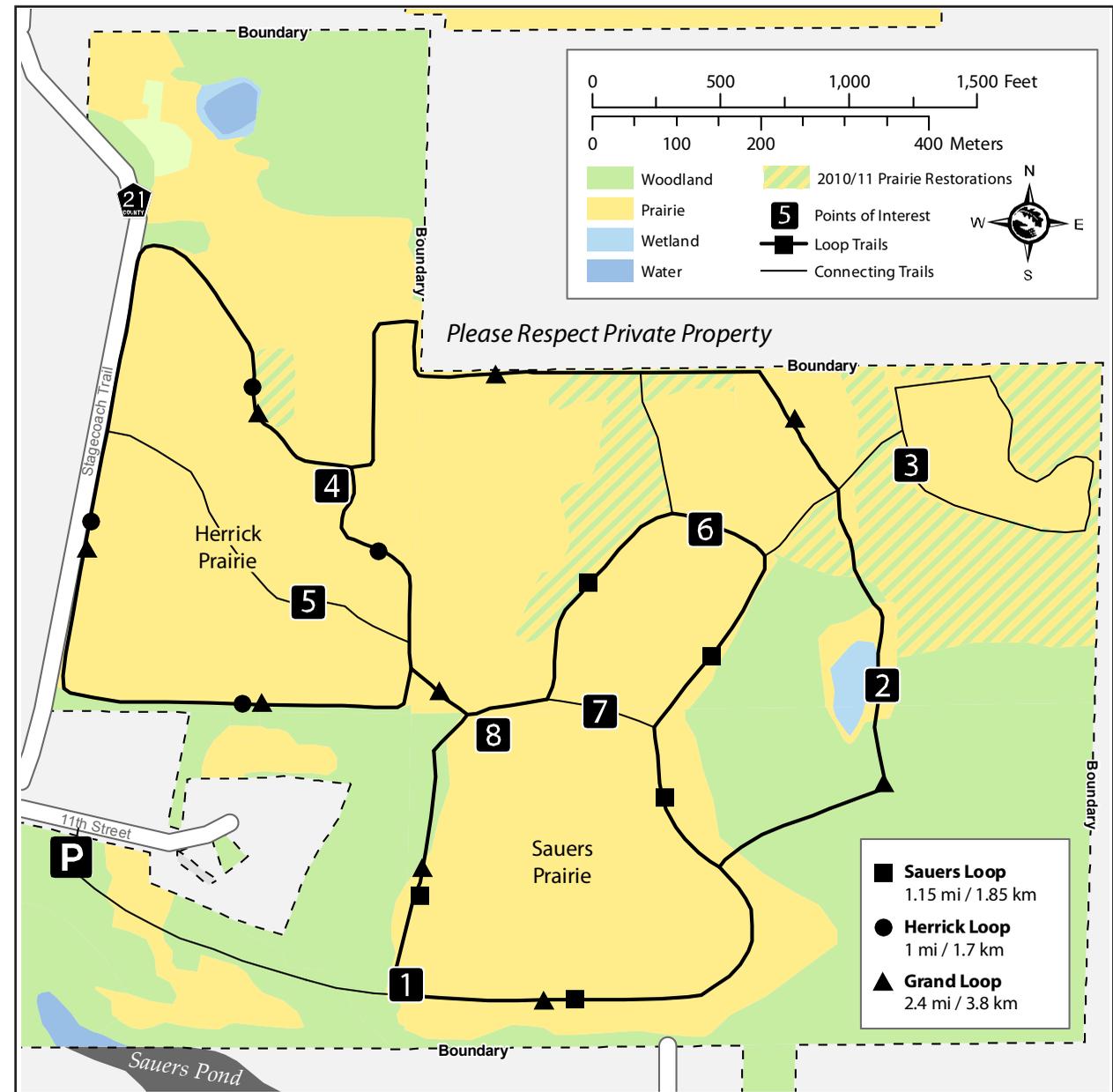
6 Farmers in this area mitigated massive soil losses by establishing plantations of Red and White Pine. Today, these trees grow tall and provide a cool and open environment that we enjoy. Sadly, these species of trees are not native to this part of Minnesota. They provide almost no food or habitat for the plants and animals that live here.

The Belwin Conservancy is working to replace these stands of non-native trees with restored prairie that does provide for our native species. Beginning in 2010, the plantations in this section of the Stagecoach Prairies Natural Area were removed. Since then, we have been working to re-establish native prairie in their place.

7 At this spot in the midst of the prairie, stop, look and listen for grassland birds. These small, secretive birds are voracious eaters of insects and seeds. Through their droppings they are also important dispersers of seed.

As their prairie habitat has been lost, so too have many species of grassland birds become threatened. Many of these birds are ground nesters and ground feeders, thus they are vulnerable to a wide variety of threats.

The prairies at the Belwin Conservancy provide a critical home for these birds. Look for them perching on the grass, calling, flying and diving around you. You may see Clay-Colored Sparrows, Bluebirds, Field Sparrows, Swallows, Song Sparrows and more.



8 The area known as Stagecoach Prairie began to take shape in 1990 with the acquisition of 200 acres from the Sauer family. In 1995 Belwin bought the adjoining 79 acres from the Herrick family. At that time, a century of farming had taken its toll on this landscape. The plants and animals that depend on the prairie had vanished, small

wetlands on the landscape were filled in and trees grew up around the edges.

Active restoration of this prairie began in 1994. What you see today is the product of years of careful management including prescribed burns, seed plantings and ongoing invasive species control.