



Critical corridor

Mississippi River headwaters habitat, recreational resource gain protection

Twin Cities' drinking water supply benefits, too, from \$8.5 million in Outdoor Heritage Fund projects involving landowners' work with the Mississippi Headwaters Board, 8 SWCDs, BWSR, Trust for Public Land



CROW WING COUNTY — Bobcats turn up on the trail camera. Timber wolves roam here. Deer abound.

Along his secluded stretch of riverfront, Dick Schuh has encountered bears, caught five different species in three hours of fishing off the dock, and watched a massive insect hatch rise like fog from the Mississippi River.

“This is just pristine, and we’d like to keep it that way,” Dick said as he worked on his dock, where the view is all water and trees. The nearest houses are a mile in one direction, a half-mile in the other.

By protecting more than a half-mile of



shoreline and 166 acres from development with a Reinvest in Minnesota easement, Dick and Barb Schuh have preserved the habitat that inspired them to buy the property 11 years ago. By linking public lands, their easement maintains a high-quality fish and wildlife corridor.

Dick and Barb Schuh, below, protected a stretch of Mississippi River in Crow Wing County through a Reinvest in Minnesota easement administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. It's part of the Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project, coordinated by the Mississippi Headwaters Board. MHHCP has protected 13 miles of shoreline. Counties within the 400-mile-long corridor are Aitkin, Beltrami, Cass, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca and Morrison. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy provided support.

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Ann Wessel,
BWSR

The Crow Wing County property is exactly the sort of critical habitat the Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project aims to protect through RIM easements and fee-title acquisitions. The project draws from three Outdoor Heritage Fund awards totaling more than \$8.5 million.

The eight-county, 400-mile headwaters reach runs from Itasca State Park through Morrison County.

The unbroken tracts vital to fish, mammals, migratory waterfowl and nesting birds also attract anglers, hunters, and people simply seeking seclusion with a water view.

In Crow Wing County, a two-hour drive from the Twin Cities, shoreland properties accounted for 53 percent of the total value of taxes payable in 2018. The county ranked No. 1 in Minnesota for cabin ownership in 2018, as defined by the Minnesota Department of Revenue as non-commercial, seasonal recreational residential parcels valued at \$10,000 or more. Cass County, which is more than twice the size, ranked No. 2.

Tim Terrill, the Mississippi Headwaters Board's executive director, has seen the progression: Property owners convert seasonal cabins to year-round residences. Houses pop up — first around the larger lakes, and then the smaller lakes, and then the rivers.

Development breaks up the contiguous habitat some animals require to hunt, forage, spawn, mate or nest.

"Habitat will fragment way before water quality will degrade. They'll both happen eventually. But the wildlife will (be affected first)



Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project Coordinator Paula West, center, shows a map to (from left) Tim Terrill, executive director of the Mississippi Headwaters Board; landowners Barb and Dick Schuh; and Dan Steward of the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources.

“When you live in this place, you want to see trees. You want to keep seeing trees.”

— Tim Terrill, executive director, Mississippi Headwaters Board

because it wants to follow the river,” said Dan Steward, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ forestry management coordinator.

BWSR administers the RIM easements, with ownership remaining in private hands and on the tax rolls. The Trust for Public Land handles fee-title acquisitions, with final ownership by the local county or the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The Mississippi Headwaters Board serves as the project coordinator. Staff from the eight county soil and water conservation districts make initial landowner contacts, and help process RIM easements.

Participation is voluntary; landowners choose which option to pursue.

So far, landowners working through the MHHCP have protected 13 miles of shoreline and 1,802 acres through 10 easements and

three fee-title acquisitions. Nearly 65 percent of the 400-mile-long, 500-foot-wide corridor is protected — mostly through publicly owned local, state or federal land.

MHHCP efforts started with GIS mapping, which showed parcels with the biggest potential to protect habitat.

GIS mapping initially identified 6,842 privately owned parcels of 20 acres or more — the minimum acreage required — within the eight-county area. Parcels with high-value habitat surrounded by public or protected land scored highest in the ranking system. The screening process left 1,191 priority parcels involving 315 landowners.

Eligible lands may border the Mississippi River, its major tributaries or reservoirs along the 400-mile stretch.

“The primary purpose of the program — the reason it’s

At a Glance

MISSISSIPPI HEADWATERS BOARD:

The Mississippi Headwaters Board was started in 1980 to establish consistent zoning ordinances and provide local control along the 400-mile stretch. Its mission has evolved as it emphasizes voluntary conservation. MHB has become a state model for working with local officials on fee-title acquisitions. Its approach: Contact the local government first, make sure plans mesh with long-term planning goals, and keep officials informed throughout the process.

MHB'S LARGER ROLE:

“The Upper Mississippi is the only basin entirely within Minnesota. All the other ones are shared with other states. Everything that happens to the Mississippi we did to it,” Steward said of the MHB’s national role. “A more regional responsibility is the Twin Cities drinking water supply. I think those trump everything. But it’s also outstanding habitat, and we’re trying to hold that together.”

RANKING ELIGIBLE LAND: Maps identify high-quality habitat, indicating if a property is riparian or adjacent to public or otherwise protected land. More weight is given if wild rice habitat, shallow lakes, or endangered species or species of greatest concern are present. The ranking system allows planners to complete a cost analysis.



Through permanent land protection via RIM easements and fee-title acquisitions, the Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project aims to protect critical fish and wildlife habitat along the first 400 miles of the Mississippi River. The headwaters region runs from Itasca State Park through Morrison County.

funded by (the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council) — is to protect critical fish and wildlife habitat along the first 400 miles of the river. Whenever you protect habitat, you're going to get clean-water benefits and vice versa," said Paula West, Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project coordinator.

Migratory waterfowl and neotropical birds rely on the Mississippi River flyway. Downstream cities rely on the Mississippi River as a drinking water source.

"When we protect some habitat along the river, which is the primary goal of the funding, we also are helping protect Minneapolis-St. Paul's source water. That is by far the state's largest source water," Steward said.

Minneapolis' Water Treatment Distribution Services pumps 21 billion gallons of water from the Mississippi River a year, according to a 2017 public works department report. About 62 percent of it provides drinking water to residents of Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs.

The Mississippi Headwaters Board follows a DNR water-quality guideline that generally applies to lakes: 75

Recent Acquisitions

Acquisitions include a 358-acre addition to the Crow Wing State Forest with 8,210 feet of Mississippi River shoreline in Crow Wing County; creation of 292-acre Indian Jack Lake Wildlife Management Area with 12,300 feet of lakeshore and 75 feet of Mississippi River frontage, adjacent to public land in Crow Wing County; and a 158-acre Savanna State Forest addition with 6,600 feet of Mississippi riverfront in Aitkin County.

percent of a lake's watershed should be protected to maintain its quality.

One of the MHB's greatest successes to date was in a 3,420-acre subwatershed northwest of Crosby, where the amount of protected land has increased from 35 percent to 73 percent over the past few years — primarily through fee-title acquisitions, RIM easements and Sustainable Forest Incentive Act enrollments.

"Moving the needle — what that does is it helps from a water-quality perspective, knowing where we should work and where we shouldn't," Terrill said.

Recent acquisitions included two in Crow Wing County and one in Aitkin County.

Sheila Boldt works directly with landowners in her Crow Wing SWCD outreach role. She's noticed the program tends to appeal to landowners

for one of two reasons.

"They might have children and they actually don't want to see part of the property ever developed. So they want it preserved. They don't want their kids to think about developing," Boldt said. "Another side is the ones that genuinely are already using the property for just hiking and hunting, and they've got forest management already."

Steward elaborated: "They're not heading towards development. There are people that are. This doesn't appeal to them. We appeal to the ones that are not heading there, and really own it for conservation — it might be hunting, it might be just a getaway."

Plus, West noted, the money can be a good incentive.

The easement option made sense for the Schuhs, who were seeking hunting land when friends of a friend

emailed the riverfront listing. It was more land than they'd planned to buy. But they were captivated by the quiet and the scenery. Riverfront property was less expensive than lakefront property. A nephew purchased part of the land.

Crow Wing SWCD staff approached the Schuhs about the easement.

"We were not planning on building. So if they're going to pay us not to build — if they want to preserve the area, that's very much fine with us because we're never looking to expand or sell off or anything. That was not our goal," Dick said.

"We love nature and we think this is the way the Mississippi should be kept — as natural as possible," Barb said.



The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' mission is to improve and protect Minnesota's water and soil resources, working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners.
www.bwsr.state.mn.us