

BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO PRAIRIE AND SAVANNA CONSERVATION IN IOWA'S LITTLE SIOUX VALLEY

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Abstract: Outside of the Loess Hills, the largest concentrations of prairie remnant left in Iowa occur on the slopes and ridge tops of the Little Sioux Valley of northwestern Iowa. Prairie, river and wetland systems comprise much of this area which includes such unique habitats as oak savanna, glacial kettle lakes and rare calcareous fens. Conservation organizations have been active in this landscape for the past 20 years, and recognized a need for a unified conservation vision to enable each organization to achieve their own missions, while contributing to greater conservation at a large landscape scale, across multiple habitats. In 2009, The Nature Conservancy began facilitating the development of a Conservation Action Plan with staff from nine partner organizations. We began with an assessment of the viability of our focal conservation targets, including prairies and savannas. The team struggled with a paucity of data to assess the current health of savanna in the landscape. To address this issue, we attempted an innovative method to do a rapid assessment of savanna in the Little Sioux, with a secondary goal of team building with partners and landowners. On June 2, 2010, 30 experts from across Iowa came together with local landowners for a “working field day” to gather baseline data from four savannas of varying quality on public and private lands. In addition to quantitative viability data, special attention was given to collecting qualitative data on the usefulness of various floral and faunal measures to indicate savanna condition. Results will be presented along with a discussion on lessons learned.