



# *The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, Inc.*

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August 28, 2013

WDNR

Diane Brusoe – LF/6

PO Box 156

Madison, WI 53707-7921

Dear Ms. Brusoe,

The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology (WSO) continues to take a vital interest in the Department of Natural Resources' efforts to develop a master plan for parcels it owns on the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant (BAAP). We previously provided comments on the DNR's Sauk Prairie Recreation Area (SPRA) Draft Regional and Property Analysis (RPA). Our interest was further demonstrated when during our 2012 annual convention, the society made the BAAP site a focal point of its field trips so that more than 80 members could observe the site and experience its remarkable birdlife directly.

WSO was organized in 1939 to encourage the study of Wisconsin birds. Our mission has since expanded to emphasize all of the many enjoyable aspects of birding and to support the research and habitat protection necessary to preserve Wisconsin birdlife. WSO strives to alert members and the public to situations and practices that threaten Wisconsin's bird populations. Our membership exceeds 1,400 from across the United States and around the world.

As noted in the draft RPA, grassland and shrubland birds, two bird communities of critical conservation concern in Wisconsin, benefit from a diversity of grassland habitat in large unfragmented tracts. Because the BAAP property presents such an extraordinary opportunity in this regard, WSO wishes to stay involved in the master planning process and to participate as needed to accomplish as much for birds on this property as we can.

We recognize that BAAP is a large area with lots of recreation potential. We also recognize the potential conflicts between habitat protection and recreational pursuits. It is our hope that the planning efforts for BAAP carefully consider the timing and location of any recreational activities, and that planning decisions are guided by sound land management and stewardship principles.

We want to reiterate the following from the Conclusion section of the RPA:

“The regional significance of the property's ecological capabilities sets the context for providing compatible recreation opportunities...”

“Within the larger Sauk Prairie Recreation Area landscape lays an incredible and unique opportunity to reestablish an example of the natural mosaic of prairie-savanna-woodland that characterized so much of the Midwest prior to Euro-American settlement, but which has since disappeared.”

“Major opportunities exist at SPRA with regard to breeding birds, as a result of the site’s rich avifauna, large size, extensive grasslands, public ownership, proximity to other significant public and private properties, and accessibility for research, education, and recreation. The property already has one of the most significant grassland bird populations in the state. It has been said that if grassland bird populations are ever to recover in the Midwest, it is essential that we learn how farming and wildlife can once again coexist. The SPRA in its entirety offers this opportunity.”

The Conclusion section also highlighted the key management goals identified by the Natural Resources Board in 2002 regarding the SPRA:

1. Maximize the potential for grassland and oak savanna restoration and public recreation.
2. Preserve and enhance the transition zone between the Baraboo Hills and the Badger prairie lands.
3. Preserve and enhance the ecological corridor from the Baraboo Hills to the Wisconsin River.

And finally:

“Based on this report’s findings, the best overall functional role for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area is to fulfill the highlighted ecological opportunities available while maximizing compatible recreation opportunities.

With intensive agricultural practices in the USDA portion of the property and the uncertainty pertaining to ownership and future management of the Ho Chunk portion, habitat protection on the DNR portion of BAAP is critical.

The RPA states that the BAAP site “has one of the most significant grassland bird populations in the state.” The conversion of Badger to the SPRA is a unique opportunity to preserve and further enhance the remarkable grassland bird habitat at this site. We doubt the opportunity to restore or preserve a grassland of this size exists anywhere else in southern Wisconsin.

The RPA also identifies high quality shrubland areas (RPA Figure 2), prairie/savanna areas (area SPRA01, RPA pages 39-41) and the northern transition area into the bluffs (area SPRA02, RPA pages 36-37) as being high value resources. WSO considers all of these areas high value resources worthy of protection and enhancement.

The Conclusion of the RPA begins with the statement that “[t]he regional significance of the property’s ecological capabilities sets the context for providing compatible recreation opportunities.” The term “compatible” is critical. Recreational activities affect the landscape in many ways and no two activities have the same impact. WSO believes a planning priority should be to carefully design recreational activities in areas with exceptional natural resources, such as the high priority grasslands and shrubland parcels, the north transition area into the bluffs, the prairie/savanna area in the Magazine Area.

Unfortunately, as was the case with the RPA, the Draft Conceptual Alternatives contain no information on the potential impacts of the differing recreational options. Two possible activities, motorized recreation and a shooting range, however, are not likely compatible with preserving and enhancing the areas’ grassland birds. The lack of specific information prevents us from making any meaningful comments on the extent of their impacts to this important bird habitat.

As we noted in our comments on the RPA, birding and other nature studies activities is an important recreational pursuit for Wisconsin citizens. WSO would like to emphasize the great potential for the SPRA to become a major birding destination. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that 26 percent of Wisconsin’s residents enjoy birding as a recreational pursuit. During 2006, about 1,434,000 people were estimated to have engaged in some form of birding in Wisconsin and almost one-fifth of those birders were visitors from out-of-state.<sup>1</sup>

As a final note, we want to reiterate that conversion of Badger to the SPRA is a unique opportunity to preserve and further enhance the remarkable grassland bird habitat at this site and we doubt the opportunity to restore or preserve a grassland of this size exists anywhere else in southern Wisconsin. Please emphasize recreational activities that are compatible with this areas’ remarkable resources.

Sincerely,

*Michael John Jaeger*

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2009, Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis, Addendum to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. Report 2006-4