

Wisconsin annual impact report 2025

From the director

I joined TNC in 2000 as an English major with non-profit arts experience and a lot to learn about conservation. And while I was light on science experience, I knew I loved nature—the animals, trees, water and wonder—and knew I wanted to protect it. Now, in my role as state director, I still feel that same sense of awe, and I have witnessed decades of the purposeful planning, hard work and collective action it takes to make meaningful strides for the planet. We all have a role to play, and we can all be conservation champions.

Lately, I'm increasingly reminded of our coexistence with so many other species, which are dependent on one another and essential to the health and balance of our natural systems. I think of pollinators living their sunny, pollen-coated lives, helping to create food for people and supporting myriad plants on which other species rely. And I think of inspiring creatures like orangutans, who build daily nests that have positive cascading benefits in the forests they call home. We humans have always had a profound impact on the world around us, and it is our responsibility to do our part in supporting the health, balance and vitality of the systems we interact with—and from which we benefit. We can learn a lot from the bees and orangutans.

I'll admit that challenges like climate change, the spread of invasive species, and other human-caused nature problems can feel frustrating and overwhelming at times, but I have hope. I believe that TNC's people—like you!—our networks, innovative ideas, and consistent, strategic hard work will help our planet heal and ensure that people and nature thrive. I'm grateful for your actions, talents, expertise and charitable gifts to help achieve incredible outcomes for our planet.

While the challenges are great, it's important to celebrate our victories and find inspiration for the next paths we'll pursue. I hope this report provides an inspiring glimpse into the many ways our collective efforts are paying off for nature in Wisconsin and beyond.

Thank you for sharing this responsibility with The Nature Conservancy. May the nature we love bring us peace and the energy to keep doing our part.



Elizabeth A. Koehler
Wisconsin State Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth A. Koehler".



***"While the challenges are great, it's important to celebrate our victories
and find inspiration for the next paths we'll pursue."***



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Wisconsin

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The Nature Conservancy's global 2030 goals

In collaboration with partners throughout the world, TNC is protecting biodiversity and addressing climate change. The following are our 2030 goals and how TNC in the Upper Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin) is helping build a future where people and nature will thrive. **Together, we find a way.**



**Climate
mitigation**

3Gt

We will avoid or sequester **3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions** (CO₂e) annually: the same as taking approximately 650 million cars off the road every year.

In the Upper Midwest: Our science-based “3C” approach—which considers climate, conservation and communities—can reduce the amount of land needed for clean energy installations by half while ensuring that solar and wind projects are sited in areas with the least impact, accelerating the renewable energy transition throughout the Midwest.



**Climate
adaptation**

100M

We will help **100 million people** at severe risk of climate-related emergencies, such as floods, fires and drought.

In the Upper Midwest: Our work grounded in nature-based solutions, such as supporting city greenspaces and restoring floodplains and stream corridors, is helping both urban and rural communities throughout the Midwest become more resilient to climate impacts, such as flooding and heat waves.



**Healthy
lands**

1.6B

We will conserve **1.6 billion acres of lands**, such as forests and grasslands—an area twice the size of India.

In the Upper Midwest: Through collaborations and acquisitions, we're building a connected network of resilient lands and waters to help the Midwest's unique landscapes, wildlife and communities adapt and thrive in a changing world.



**Healthy
oceans**

10B

We will conserve nearly **10 billion acres of ocean**—more than 10 percent of the world's ocean area.

In the Upper Midwest: We are protecting the rivers and lakes that feed marine habitats in the Chesapeake Bay and Gulf through collaborations with farmers who implement nature-friendly agriculture, which reduces nutrient runoff that affects waterways, as well as floodplain restoration efforts.



**Healthy
fresh water**

**74M
620K**

We will conserve more than **74 million acres of lakes and wetlands and 620,000 miles of river systems** (enough river length alone to stretch around the globe 25 times).

In the Upper Midwest: With a broad array of partners, we're helping to conserve, protect and restore the Great Lakes, one of the world's most vital freshwater ecosystems, as well as the great rivers and floodplains throughout the Mississippi River Basin.



People

45M

We are supporting the leadership of **45 million people** from local and Indigenous communities whose well-being and livelihoods depend on healthy oceans, fresh water and lands.

In the Upper Midwest: We're growing collaborations with partners—including Indigenous nations and communities, farmers, foresters and fishers, as well as government agencies, local organizations, businesses, universities and more—to support community-driven conservation initiatives that benefit people and nature throughout the Midwest.






By supporting our efforts, generous donors like you are driving positive impacts that extend far beyond your local community. Visit [nature.org/MidwestWins](https://www.nature.org/MidwestWins) to learn about our biggest successes in the Upper Midwest region from the past year.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT COLUMN Soundscapes researchers at Hemlock Draw in the Baraboo Hills © Emily Mills/TNC; An early fall morning in the Central Sands © Kevin Sink; Northwoods crew group photo © Will Parsons; **MIDDLE COLUMN** Dairy cows on pasture in the Driftless Area © Jim Ivory/TNC Photo Contest 2021; The Family Forest Carbon Program offers a financially sound way for families to protect their conservation legacies. © Emily Mills/TNC; A school of lake whitefish © Paul Vecsei; The prairies of the Driftless provide habitat for many bird species and pollinators and contribute to water quality in local streams, rivers and the Mississippi. © Mark Godfrey/TNC; **RIGHT COLUMN** The East River Collaborative is helping local communities adapt to climate change by tackling flooding and water quality issues head-on. © Ben Young/NEW Water; Bay View Montessori is one of 36 schools that have benefited from Reflo's greening efforts. © Reflo; A bald eagle observes the landscape. © Steve S. Meyer; Renewable energy adoption is an essential component of the climate change equation. © Ivan Kmit

2025 at a glance



At TNC, we're committed to a shared vision for our planet—a future with a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature.

To make this vision a reality, we aim to:


-  **PROTECT** the lands and waters on which all life depends.
-  **PROVIDE** resilient freshwater, thriving fisheries and regenerative food systems.
-  **TACKLE** climate change and enhance climate resiliency.

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PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Land acquisition fills in “donut hole” in Baraboo Hills + Bioacoustic Soundscape project

With a recent 149-acre addition at Baxter’s Hollow Preserve (affectionally referred to as the “donut hole” by staff), TNC has secured the last private in-holding within a nearly contiguous block of 6,000 acres in the Baraboo Hills. This acquisition is located near the center of Baxter’s Hollow and helps protect and maintain a continuous, connected landscape that includes crucial habitat for many native and neotropical bird species. TNC has protected more than 12,000 acres across several preserves in the Baraboo Hills Priority Area over the past 65 years, working alongside partners in a long-term effort to protect approximately 30,000 acres across the broader Baraboo Range.

Also noteworthy in the Hills, TNC collaborated with a team of researchers from the University of Wisconsin–Madison on a bioacoustics recording project to monitor the Acoustic Complexity Index, or ACI, of multiple managed and unmanaged locations within the forest. ACI is correlated with bird diversity and abundance, and a higher ACI number indicates greater bird biodiversity in a particular area. The researchers also used an index called Soundscape Saturation, which is based on the concept that all species in an ecosystem call at a unique frequency and time of day to avoid overlapping with one another. The study found that managed woodlands have higher ACI and Soundscape Saturation numbers when compared with unmanaged forests.

For TNC in Wisconsin, these findings validate historic management decisions that have helped support forest biodiversity and climate resiliency.

Since the initial study, a much larger project has begun that uses similar research methods. This “baselines” project is being led by Zuzana Burivalova, an assistant professor in UW’s Department of Forest & Wildlife Ecology, with help from Maia Persche, Sathya Chandra Sagar, Laura Berman and others. The baseline work involves recording sound continuously over an entire year and across five sites in the Baraboo Hills. It is one of just six baseline projects globally (the others are in Borneo, Gabon, Peru, Ecuador and Germany), and the first to record in a temperate wooded forest community. The data will be made available to other researchers for further study, in the hopes of providing a better understanding of the current health and needs of various ecosystems.

The Soundscape project was recently featured on PBS’ *Great Lakes Now*.



CHECK OUT the episode at naturewi.org/listeningin.



Protection and restoration progress in the Central Sands

This year’s work in the Central Sands was marked by the acquisition of 1,014 new preserve acres (as of September 2025) and the transfer of 80 acres to

PROTECT BY THE NUMBERS



244,319

TNC’s total acres of land protection in Wisconsin since 1960

5,830

Acres of prescribed fire on TNC and partner properties (FY25)

5,615

Acres of on-the-ground stewardship activities at TNC preserves (FY25)

Clark County Forest for long-term management and protection. TNC’s cumulative holdings in the region currently sit at around 5,000 acres. While work is ongoing across multiple project sites, progress toward barrens restoration in Adams County was particularly noteworthy. The project received a boost with the application of prescribed fire on 60 acres of recently harvested red pine plantation and native plant seeding (using drones!) on the reopened landscape. Additionally, 48,000 jack pine seedlings were planted at the same site in May 2025, with another 78,000 planned for planting next spring. Native biodiversity and resiliency remain the main goals for the project, and the Adams County site is specifically part of a collaborative restoration project with the American Bird Conservancy to restore nesting habitat for the state endangered Kirtland’s warbler. TNC and partners are also collaborating to support other species of conservation concern including the Greater prairie chicken and the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly.



New mobile fire crew expands fire capacity in Northwoods

TNC recently hired three crew members and formally launched the Wisconsin Northwoods Burn Crew based in Hayward, WI. Modeled after the successful Southern Wisconsin Burn Crew, this team is a trained and mobile fire crew that can also provide other land management services to TNC and partners across the Northwoods. To date, the crew has assisted state and federal partners in implementing 1,752 acres of prescribed fire in the Northwoods, with a recent highlight being the chapter's first assist on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. The burn served as TNC's segue into supporting fire on more than 1.5 million acres of USDA Forest Service lands in the state! We also established a Memorandum of Understanding with Bayfield County, enabling us to support them in meeting their prescribed fire needs on the 178,000 acres of Bayfield County Forests.



Foodscape initiative supports regenerative agriculture in Upper Mississippi Basin

In coordination with TNC's global Foodscape initiative, TNC's North America Agriculture program, and three other states (Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois), we are working to leverage and scale lessons learned in regenerative agriculture across the Driftless Region. In Wisconsin, TNC

and our partners in the Wisconsin Grazing Coalition wrote and advocated for state policy to increase technical and financial resources for grass-based livestock in the state. While the bill did not advance in the Wisconsin legislature, together with TNC colleagues from the Midwest and beyond, we're working to understand how this policy, and others, could be adapted to states in the Upper Mississippi River Foodscape. We know that policy can accelerate adoption of regenerative agriculture, and we're looking forward to advancing advocacy for scalable regenerative agriculture solutions.



LEARN MORE about Foodscapes and their global impact at naturewi.org/foodscapes.

DONOR PROFILE

"We have been troubled by the seeming inevitability of impacts from a changing climate and losses of biodiversity. Rather than despair, we have sought philanthropic opportunities to make a difference. The long-standing leadership of The Nature Conservancy inspired us to begin supporting their work.

A huge proportion of the land in Wisconsin is devoted to agriculture, so farmers' choices on how they use the land will be hugely important in Wisconsin's degree of success in mitigating the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss. This is why we are investing in TNC's work with Wisconsin farmers."

LAU & BEA CHRISTENSEN



PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS *continued*



Family Forest Carbon Program expands in Wisconsin and across the U.S.

To better assist U.S. private landowners in the care and management of their lands—particularly on smaller properties—TNC has partnered with the American Forest Foundation (AFF) to create the Family Forest Carbon Program (FFCP). Recently expanded to Wisconsin, the FFCP is a unique incentive program for private landowners who own at least 30 forested acres. The program is a first-of-its-kind opportunity that incentivizes landowners to take a more sustainable, carbon-first approach to their land management while still allowing for timber harvests and consistent revenue generation. Upon enrollment, landowners receive annual financial compensation for their 20-year commitment, as well as access to the services of professional foresters who provide tailored management advice.

To date, the FFCP has registered 21 landowners in Wisconsin, with a total of 1,800 acres enrolled in the program. A total of 691 private landowners, representing 95,010 acres, have enrolled nationwide.



LEARN MORE about this exciting program at naturewi.org/familyforestcarbon.



Lake Superior research project supports trout and whitefish fisheries

TNC tested, designed and constructed a telemetry array in Lake Superior, in collaboration with the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources. This project, known as the Apostle Islands Gull Island Shoal Study, monitors habitat use of spawning Lake Trout and Lake Whitefish on a pristine, well-functioning reef. Findings from this research will inform future reef management and fishery projects across the Great Lakes Basin. Thriving fisheries are vital to Wisconsin's economy and also support many cultural traditions that make our state and region unique.



Strengthening partnerships in the Southern Driftless

TNC has been helping build conservation strength in the southwestern part of the state through communications and conservation planning support for the Southern Driftless Grassland Partnership. Recent efforts have included supporting an update to the *Landowner Resources Directory* to empower area landowners to manage their grasslands, forests and agricultural lands for climate resilience and biodiversity. Also, in June, TNC's Science and Measures Team brought partners together to develop a theory of change to improve the management of privately owned oak forests across the Driftless Region. The workshop strengthened local relationships and surfaced shared interest in formalizing a strategic partnership approach to oak management. TNC recognizes the ecological significance of the Driftless and looks forward to future collaborations in this part of the state.



Download the Southern Driftless *Landowner Resources Directory* at naturewi.org/sdgresourceguide.

PROVIDE BY THE NUMBERS



\$5.1 billion

Value of Great Lakes commercial, recreational and tribal fisheries. The industry also supports 75,000 jobs. (Source: Great Lakes Fishery Commission)

\$100,000

Amount awarded through TNC Challenge Grants to support nine farmer-led watershed groups across the state, resulting in the implementation of 7,500 acres of durable regenerative agriculture practices

10

Small grants awarded to farmers who have not historically participated in regenerative agriculture through the Small Farm Sustainability Stipend partnership with Wisconsin Farmers Union (program will expand to support 22 farmers in FY26)



Progress in the East River Watershed

TNC and the East River Collaborative (ERC) are tackling everything from flood abatement to habitat improvement in the East River Watershed in Brown County. The ERC recently completed the East River Recreational Trail Master Plan and has begun design work on projects that will increase floodwater storage, stabilize eroded streambanks, and improve habitat for fish and wildlife. In addition, the group is developing a decision support tool and a community-driven implementation plan to help identify the highest-impact potential projects across the

watershed. At the same time, in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Division of Extension, a residential needs assessment is being done to help understand the needs and perspectives of residents in both urban and rural parts of the watershed, as well as the best ways to engage them. As a tributary of the Fox River and contributor to the Bay of Green Bay, a healthy East River provides benefits for people and nature in northeastern Wisconsin and across the Great Lakes.

TNC partners with Reflo to help regreen schoolyards in Milwaukee

TNC supported local nonprofit Reflo's Green and Healthy Schools initiative this past year through funding, project coordination and hands-on stewardship and maintenance at multiple schoolyards and worksites in the Milwaukee area. Reflo's projects bring usable green infrastructure to formerly paved schoolyards (they've completed 36 projects to date!), aiming to reduce flooding and heat pollution while providing students access to thriving nature spaces and living classrooms. The sites also offer training opportunities and career advancement for the next generation of environmental leaders through Reflo's stewardship and internship programs. TNC is proud to partner with local organizations that put people first and help communities become more resilient in the face of a changing climate.



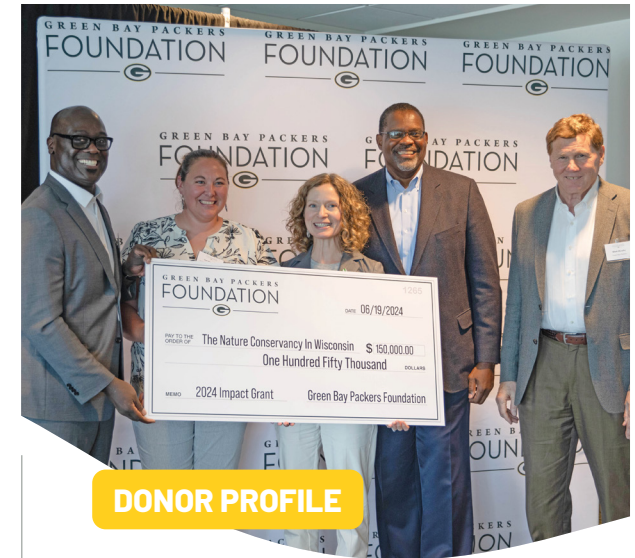
LEARN MORE about Reflo's inspiring work at naturewi.org/regreeningmilwaukee.



Speaking up for nature: TNC helps defeat two state constitutional amendments with "Vote No" campaign

In August 2024, TNC took a stance on two proposed amendments to the state constitution that would have stripped the governor of the power to appropriate federal dollars without prior approval from the state legislature. The two proposed amendments would have severely hindered the flow of billions of dollars in funding for conservation, emergency relief, and infrastructure projects across the state. The Wisconsin chapter felt this was an existential threat to our mission and to the missions of our many conservation partners across the state.

We developed and executed a statewide influence campaign with the support of generous donors and our coalition partners. Our efforts contributed to both measures being defeated in historic votes, with 57% of voters voting no for one amendment and 58% voting no for the second. While this direct approach to political action for conservation was somewhat new to us, we stand by our commitment to non-partisan solutions that prioritize Wisconsin's natural resources and communities over politics.



DONOR PROFILE

Packers Foundation

Making a difference for people and the planet, The Green Bay Packers Foundation recently awarded TNC a \$150,000 impact grant to advance projects in the East River Watershed to reduce flood impacts and improve water quality.

"The East River is the lifeblood of many communities in northeastern Wisconsin. As residents of Brown County know first-hand, what happens upstream matters in Green Bay and to the entire Great Lakes system. It's a great honor to help bring The Nature Conservancy and the Green Bay Packers together—two organizations near and dear to my heart."

DR. GEORGE KOONCE

The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin Trustee, Member of Green Bay Packers Board of Directors, and Super Bowl XXXI champion



DONOR PROFILE

Edie Brengel

Edie Brengel grew up near the shores of Lake Michigan. As a teenager, she spent time at YMCA Camp Manito-wish, learning to canoe and sail. As an adult, she enjoyed time on Lake Superior with her own family. It was this passion for the Great Lakes that inspired her to join TNC as a member 20 years ago.

Edie went on to serve on the TNC Wisconsin board for nine years and recently included The Nature Conservancy in her estate plans.

"There are so many meaningful causes, it can be overwhelming trying to focus my donations, but I trust TNC to use a scientific approach in prioritizing my gift for the greatest impact."

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS *continued*



New tool promotes renewable energy adoption in Wisconsin and across the region

TNC is nearing completion of the Renewable Opportunity Explorer (ROE) tool, which assesses the environmental and social impacts and development potential for solar or wind projects at the township scale. TNC encourages the consideration of climate, conservation and community impacts—our 3Cs approach—when siting renewable energy projects. This novel tool measures 3C impacts by incorporating TNC's Site Renewables Right and Power of Place science and applies across the five Upper Midwest states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. To date, the TNC team in Wisconsin has presented the ROE to conservation partners, county commissioners and renewable energy developers, and future discussions are planned for the coming year. Informed, community-level siting is critical to the success of durable energy projects that benefit people and nature.

TACKLE BY THE NUMBERS



1,800

Acres of Wisconsin lands currently enrolled in the Family Forest Carbon Program

10

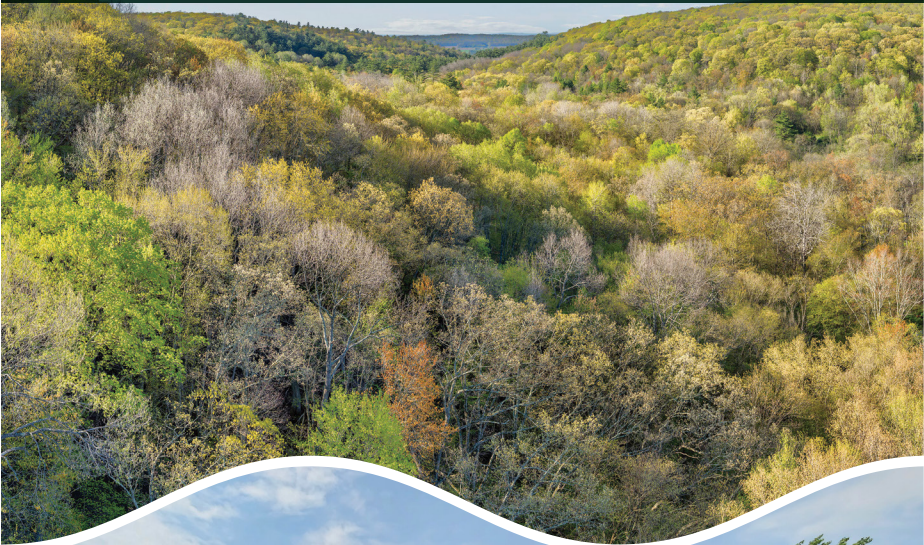
Schoolyard green infrastructure acres managed through TNC's support of Reflo's green infrastructure maintenance program

108

Acres of carbon-storing trees planted between the Central Sands and Baraboo Hills priority areas in FY25

AROUND THE STATE

The recent addition at Baxter's Hollow Preserve in the Baraboo Hills helped fill the "donut hole" and expanded the site to more than 6,000 combined acres. © Kevin Sink



In June, TNC staff joined partners from the Lower Fox Demonstration Farms Network on a field trip to a restored wetland in Brown County. The project benefits the Upper East River Watershed. © Emily Mills/TNC

Innovative drone seeding has been used in restoration efforts in the Central Sands Priority Area. TNC embraces new technologies to make our work more effective and efficient. © Shannon Haley



TNC supports Milwaukee's Urban Orchard Program and helped compost over 1,000 pounds of apples through a recent pilot project. That's equivalent to a reduction of 1,000 gallons of gasoline usage! © Lamont Smith/TNC



[nature.org/wisconsin](https://www.nature.org/wisconsin)

© Lake Michigan's rocky shoreline at North Bay in Door County © Kevin Sink

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***By investing in and
protecting Wisconsin's
natural resources
today, we can ensure
a bright future
for people and nature
for generations to come.***