



Fall Burning Helps Restore Upland Habitat in Minnesota

Each fall, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel at Windom Wetland Management District in Minnesota conduct prescribed burns to improve habitat (with the dual benefit of reducing hazardous fuels) in areas known as Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA). These areas were purchased with money generated from the sale of federal duck stamps and are managed to increase local populations of migratory birds, especially waterfowl.

Eight prescribed burns totaling 160 acres are planned in Cottonwood, Faribault, Jackson, and Murray counties. Traditionally, burns conducted in the fall at Windom WMD are small ones, leaving critical winter habitat for the many bird and mammal species that depend on the area. This fall's burn objective is to prepare sites for fall seeding as well as removal of invasive trees and woody vegetation.

Prescribed burns are used as a management tool to maintain and improve wildlife habitat for all species including game and non-game birds. In the 12 counties covered by Windom WMD there are nearly 13,000 acres of WPAs and 740 acres of northern tall grass prairie.

“It is particularly rewarding to be involved in restoration projects on a District scale,” said Eric Earhart, Prescribed Fire Specialist at Windom. “Fire, once perceived as a destructive force, is now one of our favorite tools for use on the landscape. We have never lost our respect for its destructive potential but have gained new respect for its place in the prairie ecosystem. Used correctly it is an excellent option when attempting to restore native prairie.”

Without prescribed fire, WPAs containing native prairie often become infested with trees or brush, and can become a danger in the wildland urban interface while at the same time reducing good habitat for resident creatures. Invasive woody vegetation decreases the open habitat required by birds and other wildlife, and in just a few years the prairie habitat is gone.

Viable seed is harvested in the fall on native prairie sites that were burned the previous spring. This rare and valuable seed contains a diversity of prairie grass and wildflower species that will be used to coax back native habitat.

“Restoring prairie is difficult and burned areas are not particularly aesthetically pleasing, but give them a season or two to recover and spend some time walking among the native grasses and forbs – it is well worth the effort,” said Earhart.



The Wolf Lake area at Windom Wetland Management District was burned last spring in preparation for fall seed harvest. The seed will be used at another site this fall once that area has been treated with fire. (USFWS)
