



Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

Ryan Peterson with the Kandiyohi County Soil and Water Conservation District talks June 16 about prairie restoration efforts on 10.8 acres of Willmar city parks that will be planted beginning next week.

THE BEAUTY OF THE NATIVE PRAIRIE COMING TO WILLMAR

By Shelby Lindrud
West Central Tribune

Willmar

For hundreds, if not thousands of years before European settlers arrived in Minnesota, the landscape of southwest Minnesota was one of prairies and wetlands, an environment filled with various grasses and wildflowers and habitat to birds, bees, butterflies and other animals. Today, less than 1% of that native prairie still survives.

Starting this summer, the city of Willmar, with help from the Kandiyohi County Soil and Water Conservation District, is hoping to recreate a bit of that lost prairie wilderness within several of its own parks.

"Pollinator habitat just seemed like the natural fit," said Ryan Peterson, RIM coordinator at SWCD.

Grow instead of mow

Willmar has 37 different city parks, and many of them have large open green spaces. While some of those areas are used for things such as pick-up soccer matches or just areas for kids to run around in, there is also plenty of empty lawn that is underutilized.

"We noticed we were mowing a lot of acreage," which costs the city in time and money, said Paul Tinklenberg, Willmar Public Works foreman.

Instead of continuing just to mow and maintain areas that aren't being used, Tinklenberg began to look for another option. A nature lover himself, who is concerned about the plight of pollinators, he thought it would be a grand idea to plant native wildflowers and



Shelby Lindrud / West Central Tribune

Hopefully, by spring 2023, the eight different prairie restoration areas, including this one in Ramblewood Park, will be blooming, providing habitat and food for pollinators and birds.

grasses in areas across the city parks.

"I love to set aside acreage," for these kinds of conservation projects, Tinklenberg said.

Working with the SWCD, the two parties began investigating where the best spots would be for these prairie restoration plots. At first, there were about 20 potential sites, but that was reduced to seven sites with eight plantings. Parks with these plantings are 2.1 acres in Valleybrook, 2 acres in Swansson, 1 acre in Ramblewood, 1 acre in Southview, 1.8 acres in Pleasantview, 1.9 acres in Sunrise and 1 total acre in two spots on either side of Robbins Island along the lakes' shores.

To fund the project, the SWCD applied for and was awarded a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Conservation Partners Legacy Grant. The project was given

around \$22,000 to purchase seed and pay for other work needed on the sites.

"Converting the prairie was not cheap, and the cost of putting it back is not cheap either," Peterson said.

Tinklenberg and Peterson had hoped to get a start on the project last year, but with the drought, planting was pushed back to late June 2022. The seed being planted is a high-quality mix of native wildflowers and grasses, with about 75% being flowers.

"We are trying to do a premium job out here. We set our bar pretty high for the seed mix we use here," Peterson said. "All of our seed are real, locally-sourced native seed. We know where the original plant (is) the seed came from."

Since the plants being sowed into the soil are in a sense coming home, Peterson doesn't believe they'll have any problem growing and thriving

in these new plantings. Even if the weather isn't conducive to growth this year, the seed will just lay dormant until the next growing season.

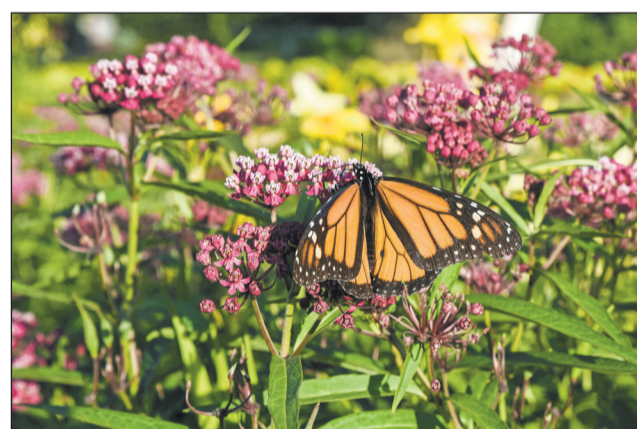
"It is well adapted to this area. These plants are remarkably hardy," Peterson said. "If you plant them, they are going to grow."

The hope is, weather permitting, that by spring 2023, people will start seeing blooming wildflowers in the plots. The seed mix includes a variety of different flowers with different blooming seasons.

"In May we hope to have a few things blooming, going all the way through October," Peterson said.

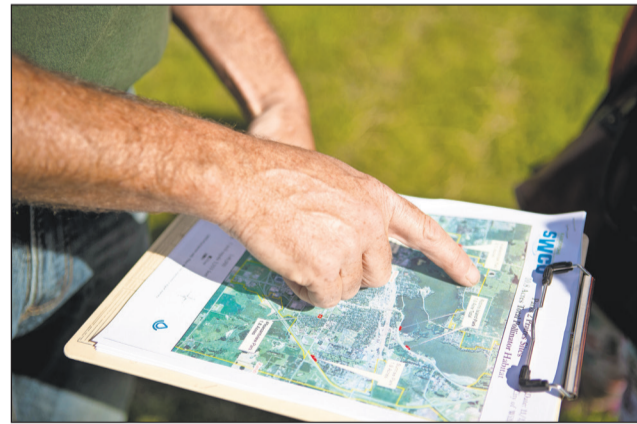
Partnership between prairies, pollinators and people

Not only will those flowers provide beautiful scenery for people, but they will be a much-needed food source for



Erica Dischino file photo / West Central Tribune

The Parks to Prairies project, which will see native prairie plantings in seven Willmar parks, will provide pollinators such as the monarch butterfly with needed food and habitat.



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Ryan Peterson with the Kandiyohi County Soil and Water Conservation District identifies areas on a map of the City of Willmar that will become areas of prairie restoration June 16.

birds and pollinators, especially in the early part of spring, when few things are growing.

"They are the ones that are the hungriest and they are looking for food," Peterson said.

Those birds and pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, are also instrumental in the food chain.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, nearly three-fourths of the world's flowering plants and 35% of food crops require animal pollination, such as bees flying flower to flower. This is another reason why restoring native prairies, or

planting pollinator-friendly gardens are so important.

Today's farmers can also thank the native prairies for the high-quality soil they plant in. Those native grasses helped form the deep, dark and soft soil this area relies on. Soil erosion is one of the main reasons the county SWCDs from across the state have become a big player in restoring native plantings.

Over the years, staff at SWCD has assisted farmers and property owners establish native plantings in their conservation acres,

READER NEWS

Support group coordinates bike safety program to provide kids with helmets

By Alisa Savelkoul

The West Central TBI support group has been distributing bike helmets to second-graders in Kandiyohi, Meeker and Renville counties.

In Kandiyohi County, West Central Industries has provided a place to store and sort the helmets for the past 20 years.

The Willmar Police Department has been an asset with educating about bike safety and handing them out to the children and making it a fun event for the kids.

Greater Minnesota Family Services staff assist with the ordering, coordination and distribution in Willmar, Atwater and Raymond.

This year we covered 422 second-graders'

heads thanks to Kandiyohi County United Way, American Legion, Fraternal Order of Eagles, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. The Lions Clubs in Raymond and Atwater also helped to cover additional costs.

We would like to give a big thank-you to the teachers and other school staff who help out with measuring and distribution.

In the BOLD school district in Renville County, the Olivia Kiwanis financially support the bike safety program. Mark Glesner works with school staff to distribute in the BOLD area school.

The Litchfield second-graders' helmet program is financed by Proworks, Inc in Meeker County.



Contributed

Willmar Police officers, from left, Abby Clancy, Muse Amal, Bryan Almejo and Zach Herzog post for a photo with John Wetterling, who received a new bike helmet.

SEND YOUR STORY TO THE TRIBUNE'S READER NEWS

The West Central Tribune is seeking content for Reader News.

The content of Reader News, scheduled to run every Saturday, will consist solely of stories and/or photos contributed by Tribune readers. This content will feature news about the people and organizations of west central Minnesota.

This reader-generated content, also commonly called citizen journalism, will be written by readers and citizens about local news, people or events that deserve recognition. The author of each item will be credited.

This content should be an original story and/or photo about area residents, organizations or news events located in or having a connection to west central Minnesota. Readers may submit any original content they wish for consideration in this reader-generated feature. The primary content criteria will be that the event must have occurred recently and that it has not been published previously.

Examples of Reader News are as follows:

- ▶ An article and/or photo of a neighborhood gathering.
 - ▶ An article and/or photo of a speaker at a service club.
 - ▶ A photo of a youth completing a project in your community
- Please submit any Reader News you think deserves recognition in your community.

Submissions may be sent to: readers@wctrib.com. Each item should include the writer's name, mailing address and contact phone number, in case of questions. Submissions may be edited for basic grammar, style and length purposes. Photos need to be high resolution and cannot come from Facebook. The full names of everyone in photos required for publication.

Float a boat

Collective draws on replica Viking design to make 27-foot rowboat

By Peter Passi

Duluth News Tribune

DULUTH — A group of local volunteers has been working hard to construct their version of a Viking boat, circa A.D. 1045. And they aim to sail the vessel to the Two Harbors tall ship festival in early August.

John Finkle, who founded and organized the wooden boat-building collective, said the vessel was modeled after a replica ship he visited at a museum in Roskilde, Denmark.

But the Duluth collective, called Noatun, has taken a few liberties to ensure their take on the vessel will be able to safely ply local waters.

"Lake Superior is known the world over as just cold, ferocious and unpredictable. So, we're being very safe in raising the sides and doing a lot of things from our experience with other boats that we've built," he said.

The single-masted 27-foot-long wooden vessel will be built in the style of a Norwegian "treroring," almost entirely using hand tools.

The project started two winters ago, as volunteers ventured into the woods to harvest and haul out the tamarack and white burr oak that is now being used to construct the boat, which Finkle hopes to name Alfinna, in honor of his Norwegian grandmother.

But Noatun hasn't exactly encountered the

type of ideal conditions that allowed for smooth sailing.

Those headwinds included the relocation of the collective's shop work space from Lincoln Park to Duluth's waterfront and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Noatun landed in a Duluth waterfront location formerly occupied by Duluth Timber, and Finkle considers the setting a bit of a dream come true. Yet, he said it came with some challenges, thanks in large part to the pandemic.

"It was right at a transition point where we were coming to this lovely waterfront space. So, it kind of threw us for a loop as it did everybody. It just changed the world," Finkle said.

That pause had its benefits, however.

"It allowed us to put our heads down and really start to develop this into what we wanted it to become — a welcoming space where people could be creative and explore ideas and have some fun in kind of an unusual spot," Finkle said.

Volunteers worked to open up the available work space, installing windows to provide more natural light. They also installed a 4-ton stone stove, leading one to believe they're probably planning to stay a while.

Finkle said a core group of around 20 people had been plugging away on the boat regularly. But all told,



Steve Kuchera / Duluth News Tribune

Justin Anderson, from the left, Jaz Sipila, Oliver Swenson and John Finkle work on various features for a traditional, 27-foot-long Scandinavian rowing boat June 1. The vessel is modeled after a Viking ship replica built in Denmark.

probably more than 100 volunteers have lent a hand somewhere along the line.

People of all ages and skill levels have gotten involved.

"We've had folks as young as 4 and as old as 90 doing ax work, learning from each other, and often people share stories and tools," said Justin Anderson, another collective member.

"It's a learning/sharing experience for everybody," he said, noting that his own skill set has expanded vastly.

Geoffrey Gates, a 73-year-old retired physician and endocrinologist, was helping to reinforce attachment points in what will be the ship's sail, using heavy black thread to encircle a multitude of grommets last week.

His partner in the effort was 13-year-old

Jasper Sipila, who said the repetitive, tedious and exacting grommet work was the kind of thing that causes you to "zone out."

Gates agreed: "The first ones are nerve-racking. You wonder: Am I getting it right? Am I getting the right tension? But after a while, it becomes automatic. And it's fun to learn new things. Still, I can't imagine being in the 1800s, when this is a job that a person would do day after day for 12 hours at a stretch. That would get hard."

Thankfully, Gates said the collective puts people to work on multiple tasks each day, breaking up the monotony of some of the more repetitive jobs.

Sipila said he enjoys learning new skills, as well, and the exciting promise of having the

opportunity to help sail the finished boat is an added bonus.

Finkle believes the project is on course for timely completion. "The race started about five months ago, and we still have a lot of work to do," he said.

But, Finkle also described the project as largely "over the hump."

"We're going to be working every single day, and then we'll be spending most of July in sea trials," he said, explaining that adjustments will need to be made as the boat's crew fine tunes the vessel and adjusts its sail well after it kisses water.

In addition to relying on wind for propulsion, the boat also is set up for six rowers.

Finkle acknowledged that Noatun has been willing to riff on

the original design of the vessel, while holding true to certain other core principles. "This is not necessarily a Viking boat, but it's more of a project where we asked: How do you build something using local materials and sustainable products and very little plastic that's a thing of beauty?" he said.

The collaborative relies on its members to chip in as they can, but also has sought outside funding, including a recent grant it received from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council. Finkle remains optimistic more support will follow, especially as the organization seeks federal nonprofit recognition as a 501(c)(3).

He doesn't view the Alfinna as a one-off boat build.

Rather, Finkle said: "After this one, I think we'll be doing more."

PRAIRIE

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along buffer strips and in other areas it would be beneficial.

"The native grasses are what made that black dirt," Tinklenberg said. "We are allowing some of it to go downstream, which is a shame."

Peterson said SWCD is also on hand to help homeowners who are interested in doing pollinator-friendly plantings in their yards and gardens. Other organizations such as the Environmental Quality Board and Board of Soil and Water Resources also have information available.

Kandiyohi County has also gotten involved in the



Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

Signage identifies a plot of prairie restoration land within the Swansson Field Recreational Complex on June 16 in Willmar.

quest to protect pollinators. In 2021 the county became the first in the nation to join the Nationwide Candidate

Conservation Agreement for Monarch Butterfly on Energy and Transportation Land conservation program.

The county has set aside around 200 acres of its roadside right of ways as protected monarch habitat. In those adopted acres, the county has to protect the monarch's habitat, specifically milkweed, by reducing mowing and weed spraying and perhaps planting additional plants if needed. In 2022, the county hopes to continue discussions to develop public/private partnerships to create and enhance pollinator habitat.

Public enjoyment

Tinklenberg admits the city of Willmar is taking a bit of risk in the Parks to Prairie program, as it is a fundamental shift to how the city used to operate.

"It has always been mow,

mow, mow," Tinklenberg said.

However, he and Peterson are hopeful the program will be a success and provide not only pollinators a safe haven but a place for people to enjoy as well.

"We want them to use these areas. I think there is going to be a huge draw for photography," Peterson said. "It is really going to be an asset to the park system."

And, perhaps, push others to do similar projects on their lands. There have already been good comments from community members who have spoken to Tinklenberg.

"If it is successful here, it could have a domino effect," Tinklenberg said. "The feedback we have been getting is 'Oh, my gosh, what a great idea.'"