

Blufflands Coalition 2024 Annual Report

January 13, 2025

This is a report of Blufflands Coalition member progress in protecting our regional blufflands since September of 2023.

Blufflands Coalition Vision

The Blufflands Coalition will establish an exceptional network of contiguous protected lands and recreation trails throughout the La Crosse-La Crescent region. Our cooperative efforts will enhance the health of residents, visitors, natural ecosystems, and our local economy.

Blufflands Coalition Mission

The Blufflands Coalition's mission is to organize a regional approach to the conservation and recreational use of our blufflands.

Members

The Blufflands Coalition is an umbrella group composed of local governmental and nonprofit organizations dedicated to the preservation of our blufflands. Each member of the Coalition has a vote on the Coalition's Steering Committee. The steering committee has monthly meetings to advance the cause of the Coalition. Here is a list of current Coalition members:

- La Crosse County
- City of La Crescent
- City of La Crosse
- City of Onalaska
- Village of Holmen
- Town of Holland
- Town of Medary
- Town of Shelby
- La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC)
- Explore La Crosse
- Friends of the Blufflands (FBL)
- Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC)
- Outdoor Recreation Alliance (ORA)

The Blufflands Coalition was created in response to [*THE BLUFFLANDS - A Plan For Conservation and Recreation Throughout the La Crosse - La Crescent Region*](#). The Blufflands Plan was developed in 2016 by the LAPC using a planning consultant and a steering committee. Its goals are improved public health, ecological diversity, connected communities, economic strength, and a high quality of life. All Blufflands Coalition members have approved a Memorandum of Understanding governing Blufflands Coalition operations.

2023-2024 Accomplishments

Blufflands Coalition

- The Blufflands Coalition has enabled communication and coordination between members by regular meeting and planning sessions.
- The Blufflands Coalition went through a strategic planning process in the first few months of 2024, to better focus our efforts and identify the resources needed for success. We identified the top goals as:
 - Preserve natural spaces by protecting land from development.
 - Restore natural habitats.
 - Create accessible spaces for public recreation.

The top items identified to work on are:

- Develop and expand resources
- Projects that create credibility
- Community outreach and engagement
- A Blufflands Coalition trifold brochure was created describing the organization and its purpose.
- The Blufflands Coalition internet site [The Bluffland Coalition](#) continues to be maintained and updated.
- Completion of the Bluffland Traverse trail signing and marking was identified as a top priority for the coming year. This is a recreational trail extending from the northern border of La Crosse County to Goose Island on the southern border.
- Since the Coalition does not have a budget or paid staff, the organization's goals are primarily accomplished by the member organizations, either working on their own or in cooperation with other coalition members. Accomplishments by the coalition and members are shown below.

La Crosse County

- La Crosse County has funded a number of Blufflands Coalition's activities through the years. The county set aside \$200,000 for bluffland protection in 2024, with an additional \$28,100 carried over from 2023.
- The County Board voted to fund projects totaling \$139,500 for four entities in 2024:
 - \$10,000 to Friends of the Blufflands for restoration of Juniper Prairie in the City of La Crosse
 - \$14,500 to the Town of Shelby for land management, mapping, and signage of the Butterfly Trails in Shelby
 - \$15,000 to Mississippi Valley Conservancy for restoration activities on the Kaplan Tract in the Town of Medary
 - \$100,000 to the Outdoor Recreation Alliance for land acquisition at Trail Farm, restoration activities at Trail Farm in the Town of Shelby, and for signage on the Bluffland Traverse trail through La Crosse County.
- The County Board allocated an additional \$100,000 for bluffland protection in the 2025 budget. With the \$88,600 carried over from 2024, the 2025 fund balance is \$188,600.
- The county has also provided meeting rooms for Blufflands Coalition meetings, and secretarial help for storing records.
- A county employee created and maintains the Blufflands Coalition internet site.
- La Crosse County and LAPC staff helped set up the strategic planning sessions held in early 2024.

City of La Crescent

- The City of La Crescent protects approximately 200 acres of blufflands.
- La Crescent is planning a River to Ridge Trail that will wrap around the City from the Best Western hotel and event center to South 7th Street. The goal is seven miles of trails. To advance this plan, the city completed an easement agreement that connects City-owned property in the Apple Blossom Point development with the end of a cul-de-sac in the Horse Thief Ridge development. The City also did a land swap to gain six acres that may ultimately connect Eagles Bluff Park to Apple Blossom Scenic Overlook Park.
- Working with Map the Xperience, the City designed and installed full size trail maps at Eagles Bluff Park. The Eagles Bluff Park trail system was improved during this process.
- The City formed a Natural Resources Advisory Group to assist with natural area management, including the blufflands. They have begun a forest habitat restoration project at Stoney Point.
- The City has been working with The Prairie Enthusiasts Minnesota Driftless Chapter to do remnant prairie restoration at Eagles Bluff Park.
- Planning continues to connect La Crescent to the existing Root River Bike Trail.



Photos from La Crescent's Park System

City of La Crosse

The City of La Crosse protects 1,700 acres of blufflands containing eight remnant prairies in various stages of restoration and three planted pollinator prairies. There are 38 miles of heavily used trails - 26 miles of shared-use trails and 12 miles of hike-only trails. Cross country skiing trails are groomed in winter. The City's Parks and Recreation Department has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Outdoor Recreation Alliance to assist with trail maintenance and a Memorandum of Understanding with Friends of the Blufflands to assist with prairie restoration and reforestation.

- A forest-bathing route was opened in Hixon Forest this year, with platforms constructed for forest meditation. Groups have conducted forest-bathing outings.
- The mountain bike pump track is a popular destination and is being expanded by the Outdoor Recreation Alliance to include course options for riders of all abilities.
- Besides the individual or family hiking, biking, running, skiing, dog-walking, birding, snowshoeing and forest bathing, there are organized events (with assistance from River City Running Club and Outdoor Recreation Alliance) that draw people to this area. Running/walking events included:

- Hixon4est RUD Run – Run Until Done (or 24 hours)
- Hixon RUCK Run – 40 ROTC teams from around the country plus civilians in a winter race
- Hixon Summer Trail Series – Monthly event on a four-mile loop in Lower Hixon Forest
- Hixon 50 – A weekend of trail running capped off with a 50k run on Sunday

Mountain biking events included:

- ORA Trails Fest – A weekend of racing and fun including an uphill time trial, enduro, short track race, and cross-country race (one of the Wisconsin Off-Road Series races that draws many people to the La Crosse area)
- Trail Master Course – mountain biking instruction
- Women’s Mountain Bike Clinic – instruction oriented to women bikers.



From a 1975 La Crosse Tribune Article

- Eight remnant prairies in the City’s blufflands are actively being restored – Mathy Bluff, Stry, Vista, Lookout, Zoerb, Birch, Dobson, and Juniper. This work is being done in cooperation with Friends of the Blufflands and The Prairie Enthusiasts. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has funded some of the work through their Private Lands Program. Work is continuing on the oak reforestation project at the corner of County Roads F and FA.
 - The Prairie Enthusiasts is doing prairie burns on remnant prairies at no cost to the city.
 - The City provided \$5,000 for restoration of Birch Point Prairie and pledged an additional \$5,000 for Juniper Prairie restoration in 2024.
- La Crosse organized the Bluff Bash evening of education and entertainment at a bluffland site to highlight the value of our blufflands and the recreational opportunities available.
- City employee Samantha Meyer created a trifold brochure for the Bluffland Coalition.

The City’s Parks and Recreation Department has worked extensively with the non-profits: Outdoor Recreation Alliance (ORA), Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC), and Friends of the Blufflands (FBL) along with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the US Fish and Wildlife Service and The Prairie Enthusiasts on the projects listed above.

City of Onalaska

The City of Onalaska Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2023-2028 was published in January 2023. The plan includes the 236-acre complex of Savanna Oaks, Elmwood Partners Tract, and Greens Coulee Park. This area helps address the expressed desire for passive recreation and nature-based amenities. It helps provide the desired activities of exercise, connection with nature, and activities for children and families. Goals for Savana Oaks and Elmwood Partners are to conserve and protect natural resources and wildlife habitat, provide sustainable recreation opportunities, and provide public education.

- Mississippi Valley Conservancy has been conducting work outings for prairie restoration on the Savana Oaks site.
- Some walking trails have been mowed on the property the City of Onalaska purchased off French Road. This connection is important for future trail development, opening over 80 acres of MVC-owned property that was landlocked prior to this purchase. Parking options are being

explored for the site. The French Road acquisition is a key connector for any future trail from Greens Coulee to French Road.

- If future funding was available, the City would like to work with ORA, MVC or WisCorps, on invasive species management and trail maintenance and construction.

Village of Holmen

Over the past 15 years, the Village of Holmen has spent approximately \$2,500,000 on improving their trail system. Trails include the Halfway Creek Trail, Deerwood Park Trail, and half of the Holland Bluffs Trail.

- The portion of the Bluffland Traverse trail through Holmen is partially signed, and Holmen has offered to fund \$15,000 toward completion of the trail signage.
- There are plans to pave the Holland Bluffs Trail in the next year. This trail runs through the Village of Holmen and the Town of Holland.
- These trails join the interconnected and multiuse trail system shared by Blufflands Coalition members throughout the County of La Crosse. The Bluffland Traverse includes some of this trail system.

Town of Holland

- The Holland Bluffs Trail has been developed, extending along Hwy 53 from Drugan's Castle Mound in the Town of Holland to the Village of Holmen. A Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) Grant from Wisconsin DOT will help pay for paving the trail in the next year. The Holland Bluffs Trail has been included in the Bluffland Traverse trail system.
- The Town of Holland's Holland Sand Prairie and MVC's New Amsterdam Grasslands properties are important green spaces in the Town of Holland that have support from the town, though they are not in the blufflands proper.
- Friends of the Holland Sand Prairie funds restoration activities on the Holland Sand Prairie and has volunteers who work on the prairie. Mississippi Valley Conservancy and The Prairie Enthusiasts Coulee Region Chapter also do maintenance work outings on the property. The prairie is a rare remnant sand prairie and hosts educational outings on the mowed trail system.
- The Town has supported the McGilvray/Seven Bridges Road Trail in the Van Loon Wildlife Area, and recently created a trail on the new Stephenson Farmstead Town Park to increase recreational opportunities in the Town.

Town of Medary

- In 2021 MVC acquired the 45-acre Kaplan Tract in the Town of Medary, for habitat conservation and protecting the viewshed along Highway 16. This property is adjacent to the protected Mathy Tract in the City of La Crosse. MVC has been doing restoration efforts in 2024 on the Kaplan Prairie and surrounding savanna and woodlands.
- Medary is in the process of writing a land use plan.

Town of Shelby

- The Town of Shelby now owns 69 acres on Hedgehog Bluff and wrapping around toward Cliffwood Bluff, overlooking La Crosse, with the goal of protecting this area from development.

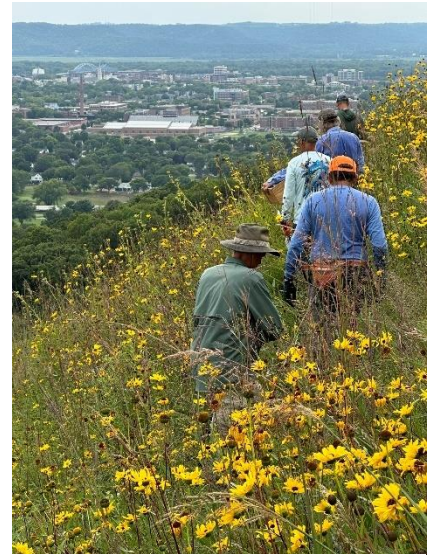
- The Town has developed the Butterfly Trails on the acquired property. The Town recently received \$14,500 from La Crosse County, matched by the town, to do better mapping and signage on this trail system. This popular trail system is an asset to the community.
- The \$14,500 from La Crosse County will also fund habitat restoration work on property, including the Butterfly Field pollinator prairie.
- The Town has been awarded Transportation Alternative Program funding for the Goose Island Connector Trail to be constructed on the west side of Hwy 35, from Sunnyside Drive south to Goose Island entrance. Construction will not take place until after the south phase of the Hwy 35 project is complete (approximately 2025/2026). This will become part of the Bluffland Traverse.
- The 1994 Mormon Creek Area Trail Study proposed development of a Mormon Creek Area Trail from Southern Bluffs School to the east along Mormon Creek.
- ORA's 280-acre Trail Farm project is in the Town of Shelby. ORA is fund raising and creating a development plan for the property.



Shelby Butterfly Trails Trailhead

Friends of the Blufflands (FBL)

- Friends of the Blufflands (FBL) provided 2,000 hours of volunteer labor on various habitat restoration projects in 2023 and over 1,000 hours year-to-date in 2024. We also shared an AmeriCorps placement with MVC during summer 2024.
- FBL funded 500 hours of contractor labor in 2023 and another 500 hours YTD in 2024. This habitat restoration was funded through grants and funds from the Paul E. Stry Foundation, the La Crosse Area Community Foundation, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin C.D. Besadny Conservation Fund, the USFWS Private Lands Program, the Friends of the Blufflands Conservation Fund, and the City of La Crosse. The Prairie Enthusiasts also paid for contracting through funding from the Paul E. Stry Foundation. La Crosse County allocated \$10,000 for restoration of Juniper Prairie in 2024.
- Remnant prairie restoration work was performed on Zoerb, Lookout, Stry, Mathy Bluff, Juniper, Vista, Dobson, and Birch Point Prairies in 2023 and 2024. Zoerb and Lookout Prairies are now in the maintenance phase. That requires less effort, which allowed FBL to start restoration efforts on Vista and Birch Prairies in 2024.
- Friends of the Blufflands and The Prairie Enthusiasts formed an agreement to work together on management of remnant prairies in the City of La Crosse. Prairie burns were done by The Prairie Enthusiasts Coulee Region Chapter on Mathy Bluff Prairie and Lookout Prairie in November 2023. Burns are planned on Stry, Dobson, and Zoerb Prairies along with Lookout Savanna this burn season.



Setting Live Traps to Monitor Mice & Voles on Lookout Prairie, August

- FBL continues to maintain Mathy, Fitzpatrick, Thompson, and Dobson Pollinator Prairies in the blufflands.
- FBL is working to create Lookout Oak Savanna below Lookout Prairie and create an oak savanna next to the Upper Hixon parking lot entrance.
- Oak forest restoration on the Skemp2 tract continues to do well thanks to continued efforts by FBL.
- FBL started a project to reintroduce native spring ephemeral plants in the forest on the north side of Grandad Bluff. Seeds and plants were purchased and planted there.
- FBL led educational walks to the restored prairies, including a Natural Resources Foundation of WI outing in summer 2024 and a hike at the Bluff Bash event.

Outdoor Recreation Alliance (ORA)

- ORA purchased 280 acres of bluffland in the Town of Shelby in 2023 to create the Community Trail Farm (CTF). The CTF is intended to welcome users of all ability levels into nature and to provide education on cultural, historical, and ecological significance of the site and surrounding area. 10 to 15 miles of trails are envisioned to connect the community to nature. Site planning for the CTF is underway. A public fundraising kickoff event was held in October 2024 and a concept design with trail routes was mapped and flagged.
- ORA received \$150,000 from La Crosse County in 2023 for the Community Trail Farm purchase, which helped land a \$1,150,000 grant from Wisconsin’s Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.
- ORA is purchasing an additional 10.5 acres of land to expand the Community Trail Farm, connect the Bluffland Traverse, and provide trail access from an additional neighborhood. They are also planning forest and prairie restoration on the site. These actions are enabled by a grant of \$87,500 from La Crosse County’s bluffland protection fund in 2024.
- ORA volunteers mapped the 50+ mile Bluffland Traverse trail and received \$12,500 from La Crosse County in 2024 to complete trail marking and trailhead kiosks for the trail.
- ORA maintains the trails in the La Crosse bluffs. They hired 6 trail maintenance staff in 2023 and 2024 that completed 50+ projects. In addition to paid staff, ORA volunteers completed 3,000+ hours of trail building and maintenance in both 2023 & 2024. Twenty people completed a Trail Master Certification course. A chainsaw safety course was held certifying 10 people and 200+ hours were spent clearing fallen trees off the trails. Four benches were added to Hixon Forest lookout areas. The boB trail in Upper Hixon was rerouted, the upper half of the Bicentennial Trail in Lower Hixon was rerouted to meet modern trail grades and significantly reduce erosion, and the existing Upper Hixon pump track was expanded to provide a safer experience by separating different skill zones.
- ORA has a UTV/Groomer they use to groom winter trails in Hixon Forest for cross country skiing and fatbiking.

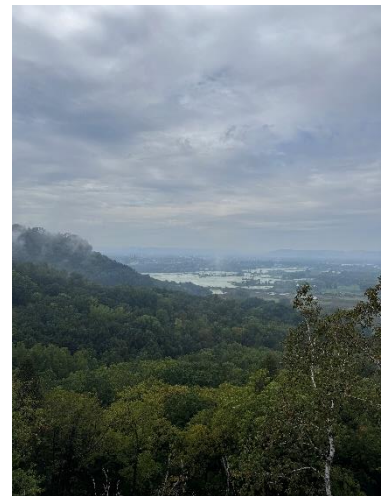


An Introduction to Community Trail Farm by Jed Olson

- ORA built the largest bike park in the area in West Salem, including a beginner loop, three ride lines, and wooden features within.
- ORA continued to grow and support the middle school/high school Mountain Bike Team, with over 80 student athletes, 30 coaches, and over 500 student volunteer hours and 500 coaching volunteer hours over the 16 weeks of practices and 5 race weekends.
- ORA supported multiple events, including the Goose Island Grind paddle race, La Crosse Trails Fest with 750 participants, and the largest three-day bike omnium event in the US. They hosted evening candlelight walks with over 1,000 attendees.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC)

- The 25,000+ acres that MVC has protected from development in the last 25 years include more than 1,000 acres of blufflands within the Coalition’s area. Many of these acquisitions were made possible by grants from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund and from contributions from the local municipality. In many cases MVC put a conservation easement on the property and transferred ownership to the municipality. The Mathy, Juniper Partners, Hass, Dobson, Fitzpatrick, Welsh, Skemp, Skemp2, and Miller Bluff properties were transferred to the City of La Crosse, the Savanna Oaks and Elmwood Partners properties were transferred to the City of Onalaska, and the Holland Sand Prairie was transferred to the Town of Holland. MVC continues to play a part in the management of these bluffland properties.
- In 2024, MVC conducted remnant prairie and forest restoration on the 45-acre Kaplan Tract in the Town of Medary, utilizing contractors, MVC employees, and local volunteers. This restoration work is ongoing, supported by \$15,000 received from La Crosse County in 2024.
- MVC did a 50-acre expansion of the French Valley Nature Preserve in Onalaska blufflands.
- MVC does regular restoration and burns on the New Amsterdam Grasslands, a critical site for nesting grassland birds. MVC also conducts prescribed burns on the Holland Sand Prairie. MVC advises on all management activities on easement properties.
- MVC is working with the City of La Crosse to get an approved management plan in place on the Welsh and Juniper Partners tracts.
- MVC’s La Crosse River Conservancy project is located in the La Crosse River valley east of Highway 16 and south of Interstate 90 along the La Crosse River State Trail. This tract permanently protects 373 acres through land donations from Gundersen Lutheran, WWTC, Coulee Region Humane Society, and the Zietlow and Lee families, and a conservation easement with the City of La Crosse. It’s open to hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, hunting, fishing, trapping, canoeing, and kayaking. MVC is maintaining this property that separates the northern and southern blufflands in La Crosse County, working with partners Cities of La Crosse and Onalaska, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Department of Natural Resources, and private landowners.



View from the Kaplan Tract

Explore La Crosse

- Explore La Crosse has been an excellent source of information on the outdoor recreational opportunities in the blufflands to area residents and visitors to this area. They get the word out on formal events and highlight opportunities for nature-based recreation for individuals and families.
- Explore La Crosse has helped by documenting the economic value of outdoor recreation to the coalition area and making it known to decision makers.
- According to Explore La Crosse, the La Crosse areas birding, hunting, fishing, hiking, bicycling, camping, and much more outdoor recreation opportunities are a major influencer and driver to the success of tourism in La Crosse County, which ranked 9th out of 72 counties in Wisconsin for direct visitor spending in 2023. Based on Wisconsin Department of Tourism estimates, Explore La Crosse calculated that the ORA Trails Fest mountain bike race generated approximately \$225,000 in economic impact for the three-day race. Another event providing a major economic impact utilizing trails and outdoor resources included the Hixon 50 (\$145,200).
- Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation was established in 2019, just the 14th office established in the country. It was formed to recognize the significant role outdoor recreation plays in driving tourism, attracting residents, workers and businesses, generating jobs and offering a better quality of life

La Crosse Area Planning Committee

- The La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC) was the agency that managed the creation of the Blufflands Plan in 2016. The Blufflands Coalition was created out of this plan. The LAPC has been an active participant in the Blufflands Coalition from the start.
- The LAPC staff helped set up the 2024 strategic planning session and has helped conduct meetings and produce meeting minutes.

2025 Goals

Blufflands Coalition goals for 2025 include:

- Continue to work on implementation of the strategic plan developed in early 2024. Emphasis on completion of the community outreach strategy.
- Complete trail marking and develop trailhead kiosks for the Bluffland Traverse. Publicize the trail to the public and continue to work on improved trail routing.
- Continued efforts to acquire ownership or easements for bluffland green spaces, emphasizing conservation and protection from development compatible with land use plans of local governmental units, and creating public recreational opportunities for users of all ability levels.
- Get jurisdictions working together to further develop a network of interconnected multiuse trails in the blufflands connected to other destinations in the area. Investigate future funding opportunities and options to accomplish goals of the Blufflands Coalition and governmental units.
- Complete planning for a trail connecting the blufflands of La Crosse County with those of La Crescent and farther into Houston County. Trail completion in summer of 2026 with the construction of the Mississippi west channel bike & pedestrian bridge.
- Publicize the existence of the trails system and green spaces. Encourage area residents and visitors of all ability levels to get out and enjoy these recreational opportunities.

- Continue conservation efforts in the blufflands – controlling invasive species, restoring degraded prairies, and doing reforestation where needed.
- Protect the rare and threatened species found in area blufflands.