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Current topics and issues affecting outdoor recreation in our State. Prepared by the North Dakota Chapter, The Wildlife Society, and the North Dakota Wildlife Federation.

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The Trees on a Prairie

So, what's in a tree? Living in North Dakota, a prairie State, we have been led to believe that trees are sacred, need protection, and should be planted everywhere. The disastrous drought of the 30's combined with inappropriate farming practices convinced us that every tree is a good tree! We've heard that since we were little kids bringing home a pine tree from grade school, proud and happy to plant a tree somewhere on North Dakota's treeless prairie landscape. To protect wildlife, plant a tree. Through our collective failure to understand wildlife habitat in a prairie ecosystem, we have planted many trees where they don't belong, especially species like Russian olive, Rocky Mountain juniper, Siberian elm, and salt cedar; that spread like weeds along our streams and into the prairies. Well intended and well-funded government program after program provided people the opportunities to plant trees.

It is time to start thinking about the consequences of planting trees where they do not belong. Historically trees were restricted to our streams and river courses. Trees have value as shelterbelts and windbreaks around farmsteads and homes and providing shade from the sun. But trees planted in or allowed to invade prairie and native grassland serve yet another negative impact to our grassland birds including the western meadowlark, our State bird. Along with conversion of grasslands to crop lands and fragmentation of prairies by urbanization, and wind turbines, trees decrease valuable habitat for many of our important game and non-game animals. Local, state and federal agencies and private conservation groups and citizens need to work together to recognize the problem and develop common sense solutions to curb the spread of trees on the prairie. Agencies, private conservation groups and the public should stop planting trees where they don't belong.

For more information on this message or other conservation topics, contact: Mike McEnroe, Past President, North Dakota Wildlife Federation, (memcenroe@midco.net) or Rick Nelson, Past President, North Dakota Chapter, The Wildlife Society (bluebill@bis.midco.net). For a complete list of Conservation Notes visit (www.ndctws.wordpress.com)