

In northwestern Iowa, just southwest of Iowa's Great Lakes region, the Little Sioux River winds its way through glacial sand and gravel deposits to the Missouri River. The area is an extremely important ecological region with prairie, river and wetland systems that were once covered by tallgrass prairie. There are many native prairie remnants in the area, including prairie pothole wetlands, calcareous fens on limestone soils, dry and moderately dry hill prairies and oak woodlands. The land is ideal for cattle grazing and hay production but not for row-crop agriculture because of the abundant gravel. Grazing and haying have helped maintain significant prairie tracts.

Several globally rare species can be found in the Little Sioux valley, including the federally-threatened prairie bush clover and eastern prairie fringed orchid. Prairie grasses and wildflowers abound, along with butterflies and grassland birds such as the dickcissel and yellow warbler. Ecological threats to the area include lack of fire, inappropriate tree planting and overly intensive grazing. Harmful non-native species also need to be controlled — for cattle as well as for native plants and animals.

### *Conservancy Initiatives*

The Nature Conservancy has helped protect 2,700 acres in the Little Sioux valley — an area of the state where Iowa's richest black soil prairies remain. Conservancy preserves in the area include the 110-acre Freda Haffner Preserve, southwest of Okoboji. The preserve consists of wet and dry prairies and sedge meadows. It also is one of Iowa's largest glacial "kettleholes," which were formed by large blocks of ice that remained after the glaciers retreated. The Freda Haffner prairie kettlehole is



Regal butterfly (©Carl Kurtz)

one of Iowa's most popular natural areas. Another Conservancy preserve is Mori Prairie in Clay County, a biological and geological state preserve, designated as an excellent example of Iowa blacksoil prairie. The Conservancy's long-term goal for the Little Sioux valley is to work with partners to conserve and restore 15,000 acres in the area.

### For More Information

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