



## Middle Niobrara

landscape includes a 76-mile reach of the river in Cherry, Keya Paha, Rock, and Brown counties. This stretch of river has been designated as a

National Wild and Scenic River. The Middle Niobrara River valley is deeply incised, and is the intersection of five diverse plant communities: northern mixed-grass prairie, Sandhills prairie, Rocky Mountain pine woodland, northern boreal woodland, and eastern deciduous woodland. The valley, with its diverse mix of plant communities, is home to an incredible diversity of native animal and plant species, including many glacial relict species. The landscape is often referred to as the biological crossroads of the Midwest. The Nature Conservancy's 56,000 acre Niobrara Valley Preserve alone contains 581 species of plants, 213 birds, 86 lichens, 44 mammals, 25 fish, 17 reptiles, and 8 amphibians. The Middle Niobrara River valley also provides habitat for many at-risk species including whooping crane, bald eagle, piping plover, interior least tern, and Bailey's eastern woodrat, a subspecies endemic to the area. The primary protected areas within the landscape include The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, Smith Falls State Park, and several state wildlife management areas and state recreation areas.

### Natural Legacy Project Demonstration Site

#### **Niobrara Valley Preserve - The Nature Conservancy**

The valley is a mosaic of mixed-grass, tall-grass and sandhills prairie. The steep canyons and slopes lining the river contain a mix of three woodland types: northern boreal, western coniferous and eastern deciduous. The Niobrara Valley Preserve is one of the few locations where bison are used to manage the prairies, in addition to cattle. The Nature Conservancy also uses prescribed fire as a management tool. This site has most of the natural communities of the BUL.

### Stresses Affecting Species and Habitats

- ❖ Specific livestock grazing and haying practices that may reduce native plant diversity and promote uniform habitat structure
- ❖ Interruption of natural fire frequency leading to increased tree densities, primarily eastern red cedar and ponderosa pine, excess litter accumulation and exotic plant invasion in the valley

- ❖ Invasive plants in stream channel, wetlands, woodlands, and grasslands; the primary species of concern include reed canary grass, narrow-leaf cattail, European phragmites, purple loosestrife, leafy spurge, Kentucky bluegrass, and smooth brome.
- ❖ Upstream dams and water diversion
- ❖ Development of homes, cabins, ranchettes, roads, and recreational facilities

## Conservation Strategies

- ❖ Implement planned grazing strategies on private lands
- ❖ Conduct integrated weed control efforts to control invasive species
- ❖ Increase tree thinning and use of prescribed fire in the valley on private and public lands
- ❖ Work with interested landowners to use conservation easements or voluntary fee title acquisition to protect key habitats within the valley from development
- ❖ Work with local government agencies to implement zoning in the valley to limit development
- ❖ Promote the use of conservation buyers in the valley

## Tier I At-risk Species

### Plants:

Prairie Moonwort<sup>4</sup>  
 Large-spike Prairie-clover  
 Small White Lady's-slipper Orchid<sup>3</sup>

### Animals:

River Otter  
 Bailey's Eastern Woodrat<sup>3</sup>  
 Bell's Vireo  
 Burrowing Owl  
 Interior Least Tern  
 Long-billed Curlew  
 Piping Plover  
 Whooping Crane  
 Wood Thrush  
 Blanding's Turtle  
 American Burying Beetle  
 Iowa Skipper  
 Ottoe Skipper  
 Regal Fritillary  
 Mottled Duskywing<sup>4</sup>  
 Northern Redbelly Dace  
 Plains Topminnow

**Aquatic Communities:**

Headwater, Cold Water Stream\*

Headwater, Warm Water Stream

Mid-order, Warm Water River\*

**Terrestrial Communities:**

Cottonwood-Peachleaf Willow Riparian Woodland

Dry Upland Bur Oak Woodland\*

Paper Birch Springbranch Canyon Forest\*

Basswood-Ironwood Springbranch Canyon Forest\*

Green Ash-Elm-Hackberry Canyon Bottom Woodland

Green Ash-Eastern Red Cedar Scarp Woodland

Dry Ponderosa Pine Open Woodland and Savanna\*

Sandbar Willow Shrubland

Buckbrush Shrubland

Buffaloberry Shrubland

Chokecherry-Plum Shrub Thicket

Freshwater Seep\*

Northern Cordgrass Wet Prairie

Sandhills Wet Meadow

Cattail Shallow Marsh\*

Reed Marsh

Eastern Sand Prairie

Sandhills Mesic Tall-grass Prairie

Sandhills Dune Prairie\*

Sandhills Dry Valley Prairie

Threadleaf Sedge Western Mixed-grass Prairie

Great Plains Gravel-Cobble Prairie\*

Perennial Sandbar\*

Sandbar/Mudflat\*

\* Priority for conservation in this BUL

<sup>1</sup> This is the only BUL where the species is known to occur

<sup>2</sup> Known to occur in only one other BUL

<sup>3</sup> Known to occur in only two other BULs

<sup>4</sup> Known to occur in only three other BULs