

Camp Ripley's Stewardship Day helps restore Mississippi riverbank, connects community



A one-day planting event helped stabilize a stretch of Mississippi River shoreline where Fort Ripley once stood, underscoring Camp Ripley's commitment to ecological and cultural stewardship through hands-on conservation.

The annual Stewardship Day brought together military personnel, civilian employees and conservation partners to plant native prairie species as part of a broader effort to restore a 25-acre grassland.

"A big aspect of Stewardship Day is getting involved with the

community, getting people to understand that Camp Ripley, while a military installation, relies on the environment, and the grounds provide that sort of training environment. So, for us to maintain it, to make sure that for generations to come we can continue to use it and accomplish our mission, that's really the purpose of Stewardship Day — bringing outside communities to come work with us, to see what Camp Ripley has to offer to the local community," said 1st Lt. Colton Rossow, Camp Ripley public affairs officer.

Rossow said the event is about

Volunteers took part in the Stewardship Day celebration on May 22, recognizing achievements in ecological sustainability and the importance of environmental awareness. This year, the group focused on planting flowering prairie plants at the historic Fort Ripley site within Camp Ripley. Photo Credits: Tony Housey, Minnesota National Guard



About 80 volunteers planted nearly 1,900 native prairie plugs along the Mississippi River shoreline during the annual event.

more than just planting: It's about building relationships with Tribal communities, demonstrating respect for the land's original inhabitants, understanding history and ensuring the land remains healthy for future generations.

Formerly known as Planting for the Future, the May 22 event merged environmental conservation with historical preservation. About 80 volunteers, including Camp Ripley employees, National Guard service members and Morrison Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) employees, planted nearly 1,900 native prairie plugs, including butterfly milkweed, prairie smoke, blazing star and goldenrod, along a recently restored section of Mississippi River shoreline.

The event took place on the site where Fort Ripley once stood. Today, a sign marks the former military outpost, which was established in 1848 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Stewardship Day also included a historical education component, highlighted by a presentation from Don Wedll, a historian for

the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Wedll, visiting the Fort Ripley site for the first time, shared stories about the Tribal history and early United States government relationships connected to the land. Wedll highlighted the site's importance and the area's Indigenous history, adding cultural depth to the environmental restoration efforts.

"He has such a vast knowledge of the history, and especially the Tribal history in this area. I think for him, it was the opportunity to showcase that we are being good stewards of this site, that the Camp Ripley and the Minnesota National Guard are protecting it and restoring it back to some of its natural biodiversity. It's good to show our Tribal partners that we're protecting both the history and the biological integrity of these lands," said Josh Pennington, conservation program supervisor at Camp Ripley.

Built as part of the United States government's effort to control the northern frontier, the fort served as a buffer between Dakota and Ojibwe lands and was intended to protect the relocated Ho-Chunk people. Its presence encouraged Euro-American settlement in

the area, and although it was briefly closed, the fort was reoccupied due to rising tensions. During the [United States-Dakota War of 1862](#), settlers sought refuge there amid fears the conflict might spread. The fort sat along the Mississippi River, which was used to ship supplies before railroads and highways existed, making its location important for both the military and early settlers.

A shoreline restoration project funded through Minnesota's Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund was completed there in fall 2024. The funds were awarded to the Minnesota Department of Military Affairs and supported a small tree and shrub planting, which laid the groundwork for this year's shoreline planting.

"One of the coolest aspects of this year's event was seeing all the people working hard, scaling up the side of this riverbank, and seeing the reconstructed riverbank and how it's starting to grow and get back to its natural look," said Rossow.

The event was also designed with high school students in mind, particularly those from Tribal schools, to connect youth with environmental

work and potential careers at Camp Ripley. Although scheduling conflicts limited student participation this year, Tribal high school students have contributed to past planting efforts. Still, Camp Ripley plans to expand outreach efforts in future years, inviting future high school classes to the yearly event.

Morrison SWCD staff helped to coordinate logistics and secure funding through the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

"We really value the relationship and the partnership with BWSR, but also the Morrison Soil and Water Conservation District, which was critical this year," Pennington said. "It is important to have partners that can accept funds and help fund events like this. They were on site as well and provided staff and the means through which BWSR could contribute financially. BWSR was able to provide funding to the SWCD, and the SWCD made the necessary purchases and helped facilitate the event."

BWSR supported the event with a \$5,000 sponsorship from a state pollinator fund, reflecting a continued commitment

to habitat restoration and environmental education initiatives. The [fund](#), sourced from [lottery-in-lieu-of-taxes](#) revenue, underscores BWSR's mission to work with diverse partners to protect Minnesota's land and water resources.

BWSR Tribal Liaison
Melissa King was also on

site and provided native seed packets. King handed out [Lawns to Legumes](#) program materials, discussed the program and referred a few people to local SWCD resources for conservation and pollinator projects. King also attended last year's event.

"Participating in the

2024 event was a unique experience — bringing together conservation professionals, service members and American Indian youth in a shared space of learning, respect and connection to the land. The land stewardship approach closely aligned with BWSR's mission and initiatives to restore

native plant communities and protect pollinators," King said. "Supporting the 2025 event provided BWSR with a meaningful opportunity to engage new audiences in this work."

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.