



# **Wachiska Audubon Society**

## **Strategic Focus for 2025-2029 Period**

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## Intro

Wachiska Audubon Society's mission is to bring people together to preserve and restore tallgrass prairies and other natural ecosystems, promote birding, support native wildlife, provide nature education, and advocate for sustainability of our natural community.

Since its inception in 1973, Wachiska has grown from a small grassroots organization to a proactive supporter of viable natural ecosystems in southeast Nebraska.

The previous strategic plan was developed for the 2020-2023 period and included four focus areas:

- ***Building relationships*** through increased memberships, utilizing technology, improving communications and engaging volunteers.
- ***Advocating for the environment*** by using resources and people to further educational programs and advocacy efforts.
- ***Caring for tallgrass prairies*** by pursuing professional (staff and/or contractual) as volunteers age out
- ***Strengthening internal operations*** through a review and update of internal policies, procedures and governance, including a goal to hire an executive director.

Numerous steps forward were made, including hiring the organization's first executive director, entering into agreements with professional organizations to manage the nine prairies Wachiska owns and establish working relationships with the 23 conservation easement owners. Annual education programs, such as Bird EnCOUNTER, Prairie Discovery Days, Nature Nights, and Tour the Wild Side continued to grow. Focus also turned to working with new cultural groups such as the Asian and Malone Centers and increased cooperation with the Otoe-Missouria Tribe. Internally, the bylaws and general organizational and financial policies were developed or updated and a new membership database came online.

The Board contracted with the Heartland Center for Leadership Development to help build the 2025-2029 strategic plan. Taking into account the experiences and lessons learned during the past five years, survey questions were developed and sent to current friends, members, peer organizations, and others with email addresses in the database. The survey was distributed to Wachiska's MailChimp list, with 78 responding.

A post survey focus group of five volunteers (Mark van Roojen, Ted LaGrange, Dan Schulz, Elizabeth Nelson and Marilyn McNabb) met with Executive Director Brohman, Board President Pella and Milan Wall (Heartland Center) for one Zoom meeting to give input on questions posed to them, based on the survey responses. The questions

centered on suggestions for birding field trip alternatives, potential reactions if Wachiska decided to terminate easements that no longer meet the goal of preserving prairies and options for moving forward with needed help in maintaining prairies. A summary of the feedback may be found in the Appendices.

Next, the Wachiska Board and other invitees held a workshop on August 25<sup>th</sup> at Prairie Pines Nature Preserve Nature Center. One reason for this location was that in early August, the University of Lincoln Foundation made an offer to give the Preserve to Wachiska. Holding the workshop there gave those unfamiliar with the location a chance to see it.

While a decision whether to accept Prairie Pines Nature Preserve (PPNP) loomed large over discussions, the focus for the 2025-2029 strategic plan was on ideas for continued progress, regardless of the decision. *Note: The Board voted to accept PPNP from the Foundation on October 15, 2024.* At the same meeting, the Board adopted the following focus areas. Progress will be tracked and periodically reported to the membership.

## 2025-2029 Focus Areas and Priorities

### Focus Area 1:

**Continue movement to become a solid, smooth operating organization  
(our why – need well-functioning organization to be able to fully support birds and prairies)**

Priorities:

- 1) 500 friends/members with 50% being active (*Membership Committee lead*)
- 2) Find ways to better engage members and the public (*ED and Board leads*)
  - a. Learn what engages younger demographics through efforts such as:
    - i. Programs
    - ii. Tour the Wild Side
    - iii. Outreach to rural areas
    - iv. Online zoom for meetings
    - v. FAA
    - vi. 4H
    - vii. Working lands
    - viii. Talk to college/university professors
- 3) Have a steady pipeline into board membership (*Executive Committee lead*)
- 4) Develop multi-year business/operating plan that is economically solvent for all aspects of the organization (*Executive Director and Board President leads*)
  - a. Have a staffing plan (ex: ED, habitat manager(s), office) that can withstand changes in people
  - b. Include objective(s) for the non-prairie Lincoln Community Foundation accounts
    - i. Helps to inform potential donors what the expectations will be for their funds
  - c. Include analyses of demographic projections, how similar organizations are staffed, etc.

### Focus Area 2:

**Have in place a sustainable long-term plan for owned prairies and conservation easement properties**

**(our why – tallgrass prairie is still one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world)**

Priorities (*Conservation Committee lead on all*):

- 1) Make recommendations to the Board for each of current 23 easements to retain, divest (if legally possible), or something else
  - a. Identify a dedicated staff, contractor, or volunteer to work with owners for those Wachiska is retaining (*as of 2024, communications and improvement efforts are managed in a contract funded through a NET grant by Prairie Legacy, LLC*)
  - b. Continue to improve the systemic process used to evaluate property and easement offers to help with for Board decisions

- 2) Identify a dedicated staff, contractor, or volunteer to manage owned prairies (*as of 2024, all owned prairies are managed in a no cost contract by Northern Prairies Land Trust*)
- 3) Create endowment for prairie manager and/or new prairies OR require endowment for each new prairie or easement
- 4) Develop a five-year business plan that considers most appropriate geographic portions of Wachiska's 17 counties for additional properties
  - a. Consideration of non-WAS prairie and easement locations in the 17-county area and their proximity to WAS prairies and easements.
    - i. Could help prioritize future land/easements offers
  - b. Business plan to include objectives for the prairie related Lincoln Community Foundation accounts
    - i. Helps to inform potential donors what the expectations will be for their funds

### **Focus Area 3:**

**Become a known entity throughout southeast Nebraska where any individual or group can come to learn about the importance of tallgrass prairies and become advocates to protect this rare ecosystem.**

***(our why – having others know and understand our work will encourage similar efforts)***

Priorities:

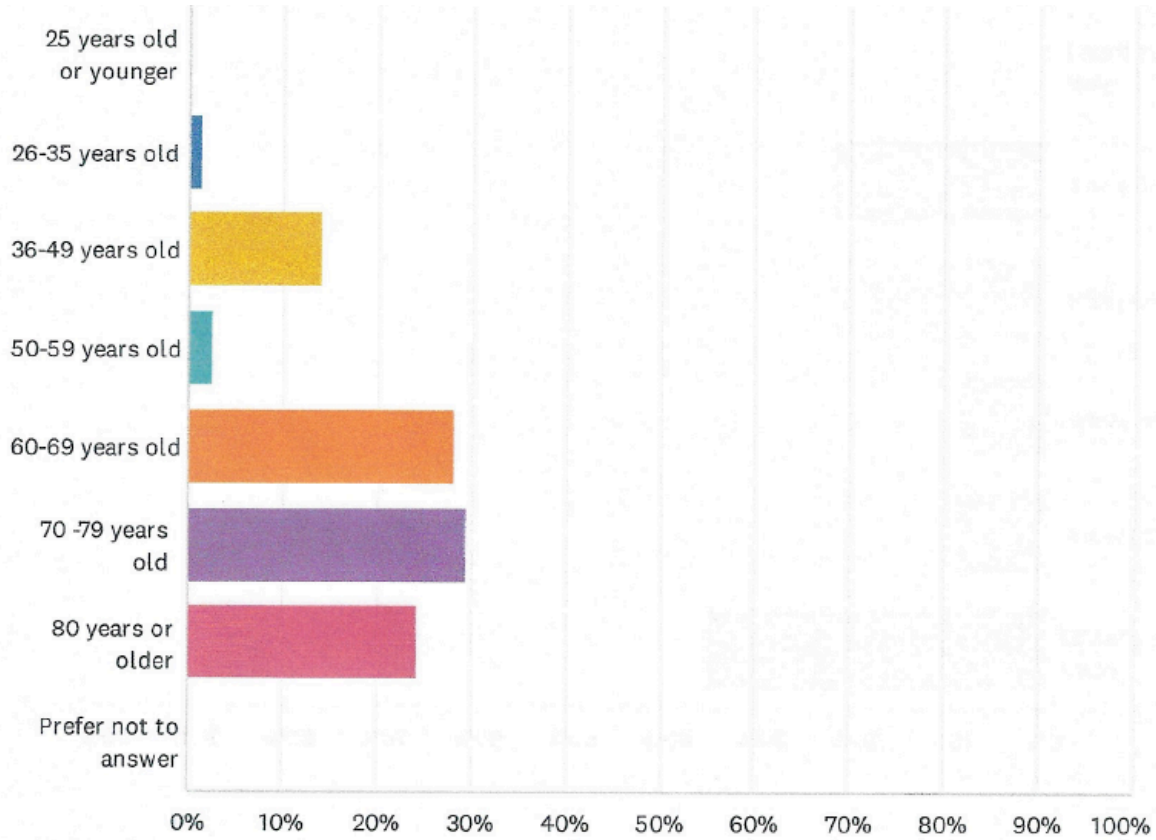
- 1) Identify opportunities for more effective community engagement and diversity
  - a. Have a consistent Otoe-Missouria presence on our prairies (*ED and Tom Lynch leads*)
  - b. Try birding trips with other groups (*ED lead*)
  - c. It becomes clear that we are not Spring Creek Prairie (*Everyone*)
  - d. Expand demographics knowledge about Wachiska's 17 counties (*Ann Briggs lead*)
  - e. Try more rural areas outreach (beyond Prairie Discovery Days) (*Education & Outreach Committee lead*)
  - f. Continue educational programming for youth and adults (*Education & Outreach Committee lead*)
- 2) Do policy work to educate about the connection between birds, wildlife and prairies (*ED Lead*)
  - a. Coordination with similar groups
  - b. Be proactive in evaluating and advocating legislative agenda
- 3) Find ways to get more and better media coverage (*ED and Board leads*)
  - a. Need to be prepared with concise messages to share

## APPENDICES

Summary of survey responses:

### Q1 What is your age?

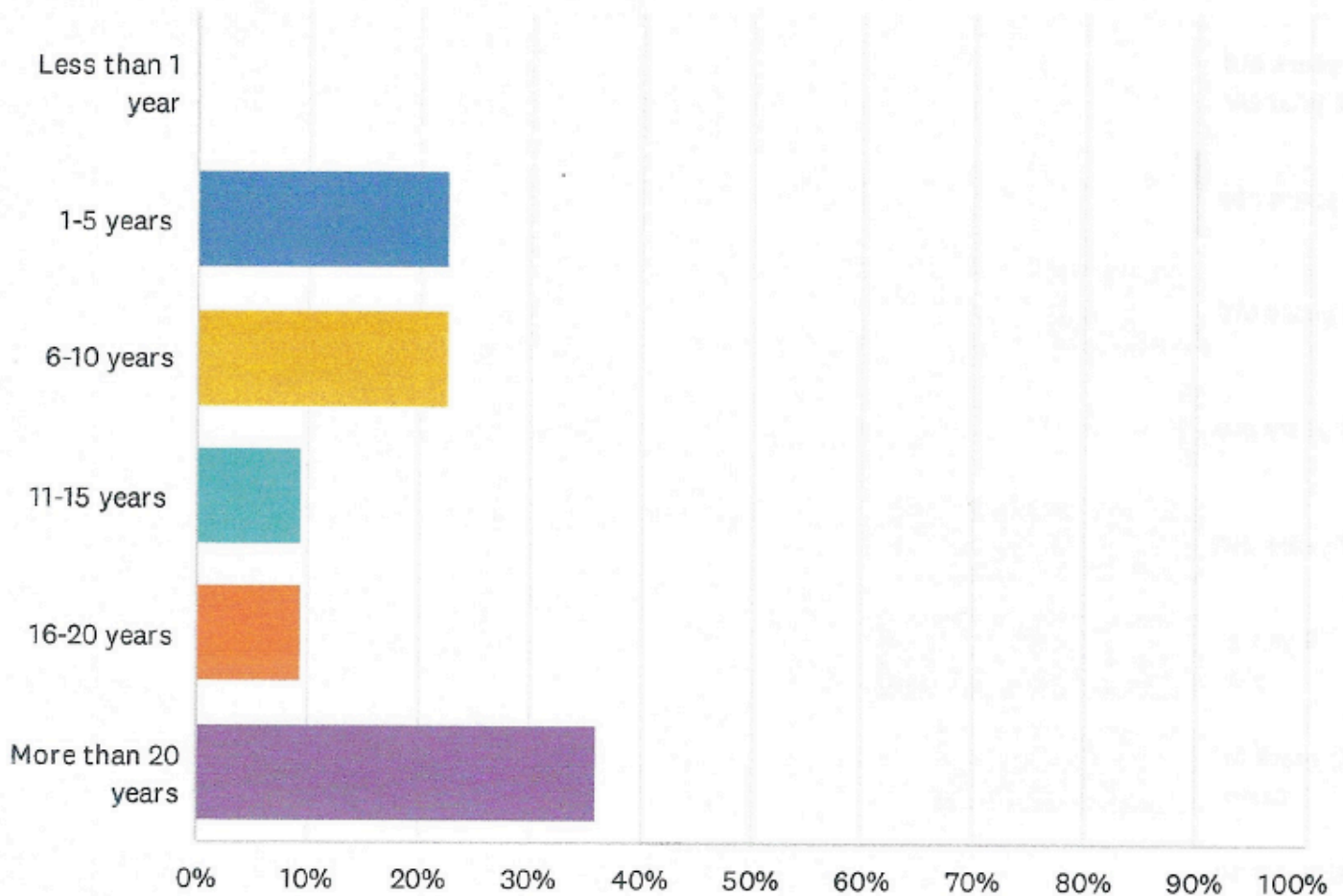
Answered: 78    Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
25 years old or younger	0.00%	0
26-35 years old	1.28%	1
36-49 years old	14.10%	11
50-59 years old	2.56%	2
60-69 years old	28.21%	22
70 -79 years old	29.49%	23
80 years or older	24.36%	19
Prefer not to answer	0.00%	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>78</b>

## Q2 How long have you been associated with Wachiska Audubon Society?

Answered: 75 Skipped: 3



### ANSWER CHOICES

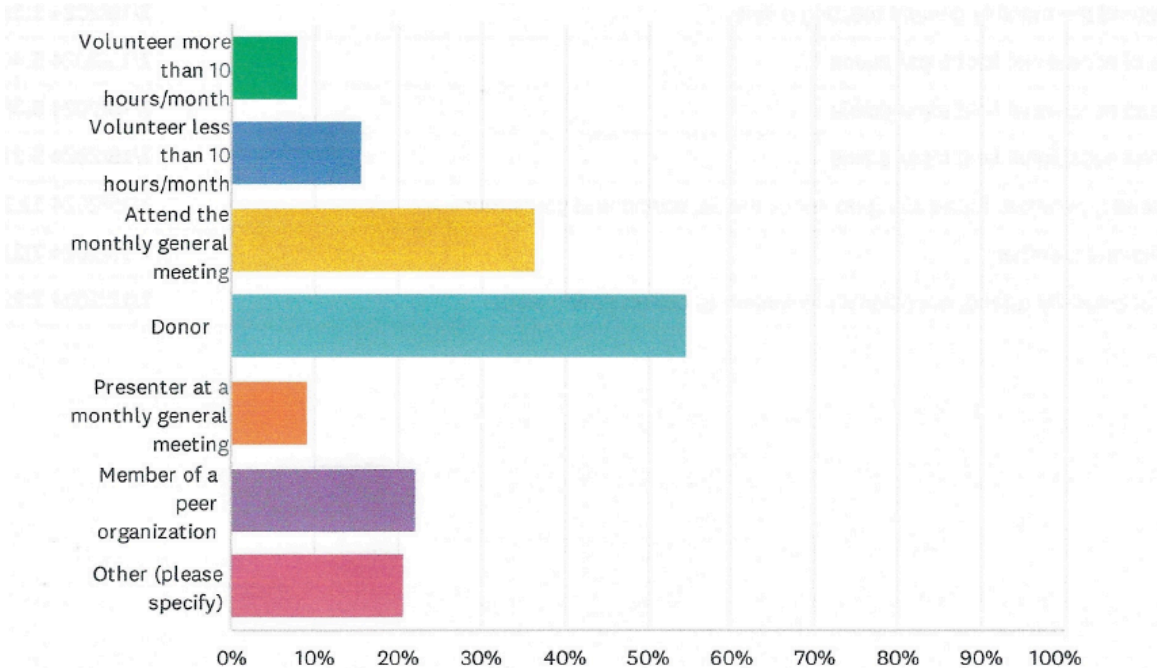
Less than 1 year  
 1-5 years  
 6-10 years  
 11-15 years  
 16-20 years  
 More than 20 years  
 TOTAL

### RESPONSES

0.00%      0  
 22.67%      17  
 22.67%      17  
 9.33%      7  
 9.33%      7  
 36.00%      27  
 75

### Q3 What is your primary association with Wachiska Audubon Society? Check one or two.

Answered: 77 Skipped: 1



**ANSWER CHOICES**

**RESPONSES**

Volunteer more than 10 hours/month	7.79%	6
Volunteer less than 10 hours/month	15.58%	12
Attend the monthly general meeting	36.36%	28
Donor	54.55%	42
Presenter at a monthly general meeting	9.09%	7
Member of a peer organization	22.08%	17
Other (please specify)	20.78%	16

Total Respondents: 77

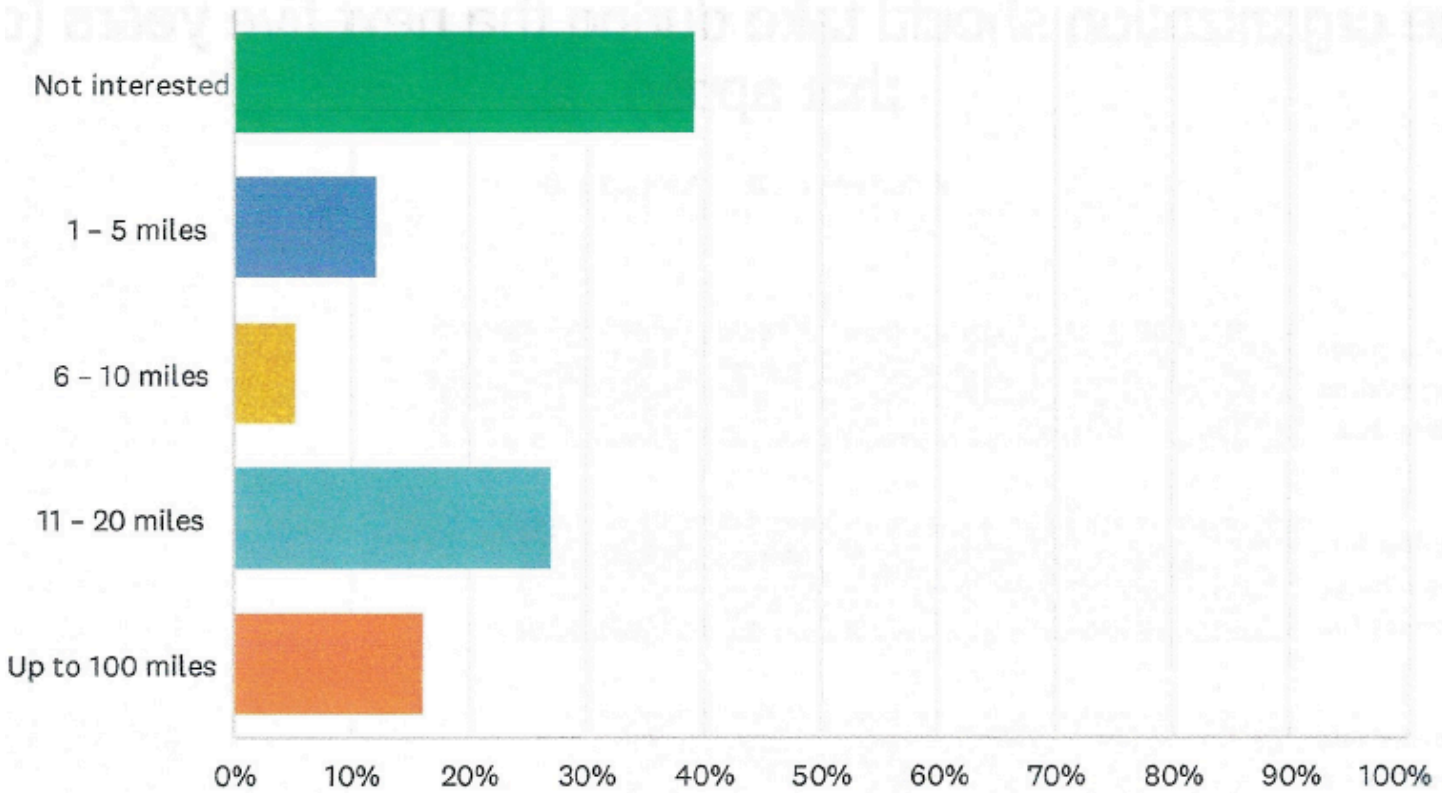
#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Represent Wachiska on the NE Land Trust	8/5/2024 3:54 PM
2	Board member at times	8/5/2024 12:59 PM
3	Was on the Wilderness Park board years ago	8/5/2024 11:39 AM
4	Attend some functions mostly online.	8/4/2024 2:38 PM
5	buy birdseed and collect prairie seed	8/2/2024 8:22 PM
6	newsletter contributor	8/2/2024 5:44 PM



7	lapsed dues member who went to some talks, now follows online	8/2/2024 1:42 PM
8	I used to be heavily involved but age-limited now. I used to attend most meetings but cannot drive at night.	8/2/2024 12:07 PM
9	Environmentalist interested in habitat for birds on our chemical-free grassland since 1992 & supporting locally grown, healthy, sustainable food & donating our 36-acre farm as a conservation easement to training new food growers!	7/30/2024 8:17 PM
10	Attend the monthly general meeting online,	7/16/2024 1:15 PM
11	lead occasional field trips/ prairie	7/15/2024 5:40 PM
12	lead occasional field trips/ prairie	7/15/2024 5:38 PM
13	lead occasional field trips/ prairie	7/15/2024 5:37 PM
14	Read newsletter, follow along on social media, attend wild yards tour	7/15/2024 11:23 AM 7/13/2024 7:21 AM
15	General member	
16	I occasionally attend, occasionally volunteer to collect prairie seeds.	7/12/2024 7:22 PM

## Q4 Do you have an interest in birding with a group? If so, how far would you be willing to travel from Lincoln?

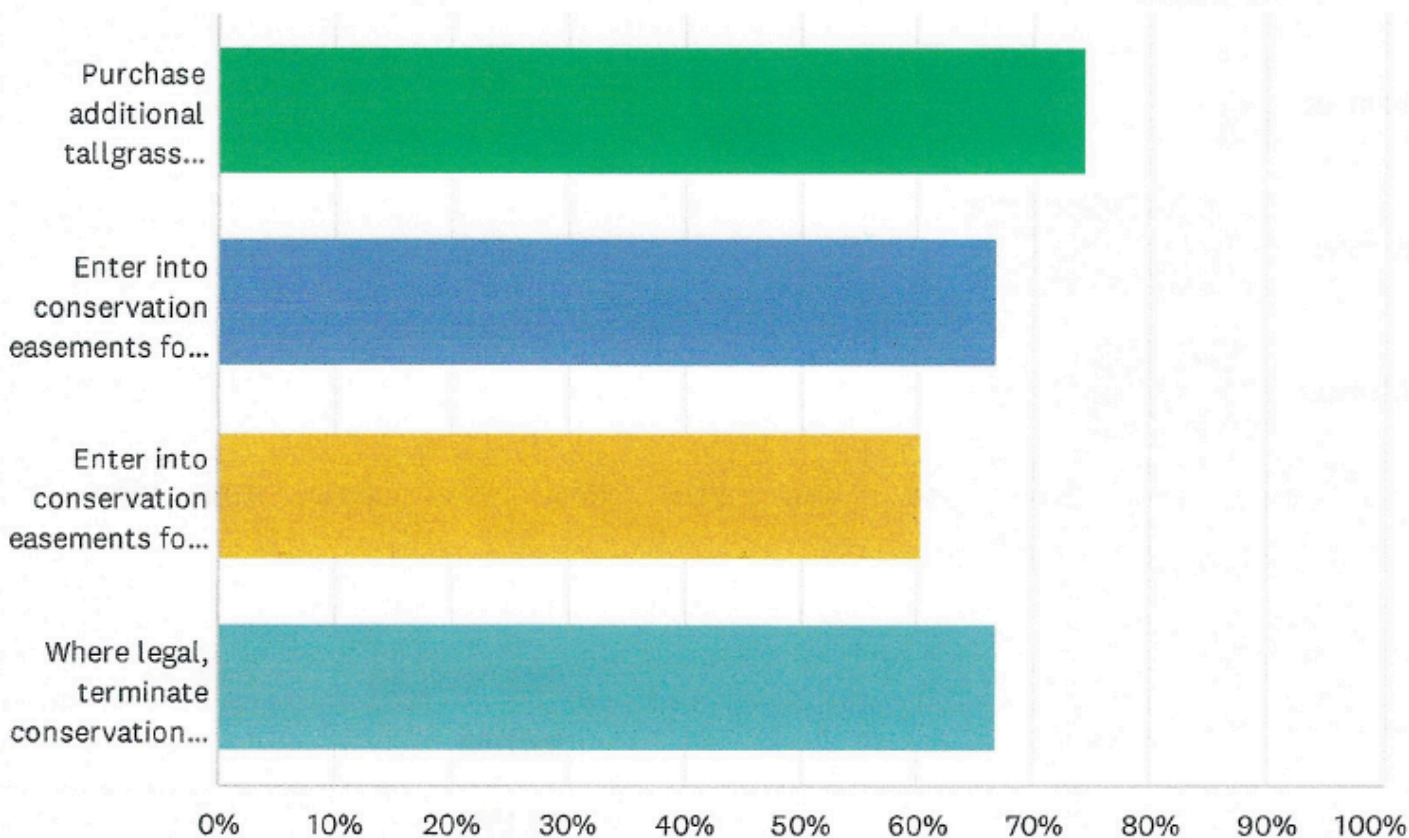
Answered: 74 Skipped: 4



Answer choices	RESPONSES	
Not interested	39.19%	29
1 - 5 miles	12.16%	9
6 - 10 miles	5.41%	4
11 - 20 miles	27.03%	20
Up to 100 miles	16.22%	12
Total		74

**Q5 Referring to the background documents emailed earlier and available on the website (<https://www.wachiskaaudubon.org/>) about the challenges and financial needs of managing Wachiska's existing prairies and conservation easements, the Board needs to hear from you regarding the direction the organization should take during the next five years (check all that apply)**

Answered: 78 Skipped: 0



**ANSWER CHOICES**

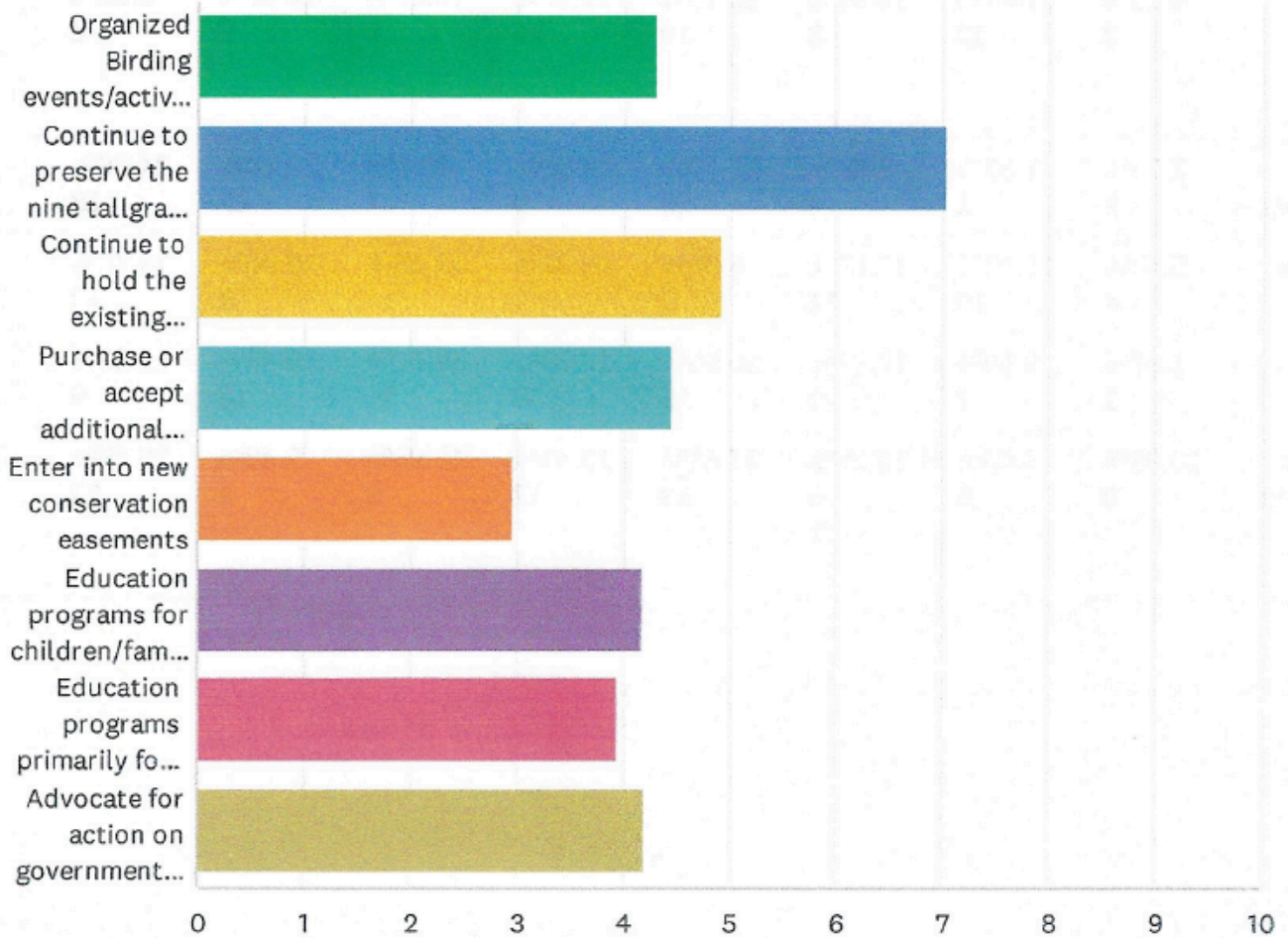
**RESPONSES**

Purchase additional tallgrass prairies and other natural ecosystems that fit the mission	74.36%	58
Enter into conservation easements for the purpose of retaining or restoring to prairie	66.67%	52
Enter into conservation easements for the purpose of keeping lands from being developed	60.26%	47
Where legal, terminate conservation easements for properties that are not meeting Wachiska's mission	66.67%	52

Total Respondents: 78

**Q6 Please refer to the same background documents as for Q5 as you rank the following as activities and projects that you would be willing to help with. Use the up and down arrows, ending with your highest ranked item at the top, lowest at the bottom.**

Answered: 73 Skipped: 5

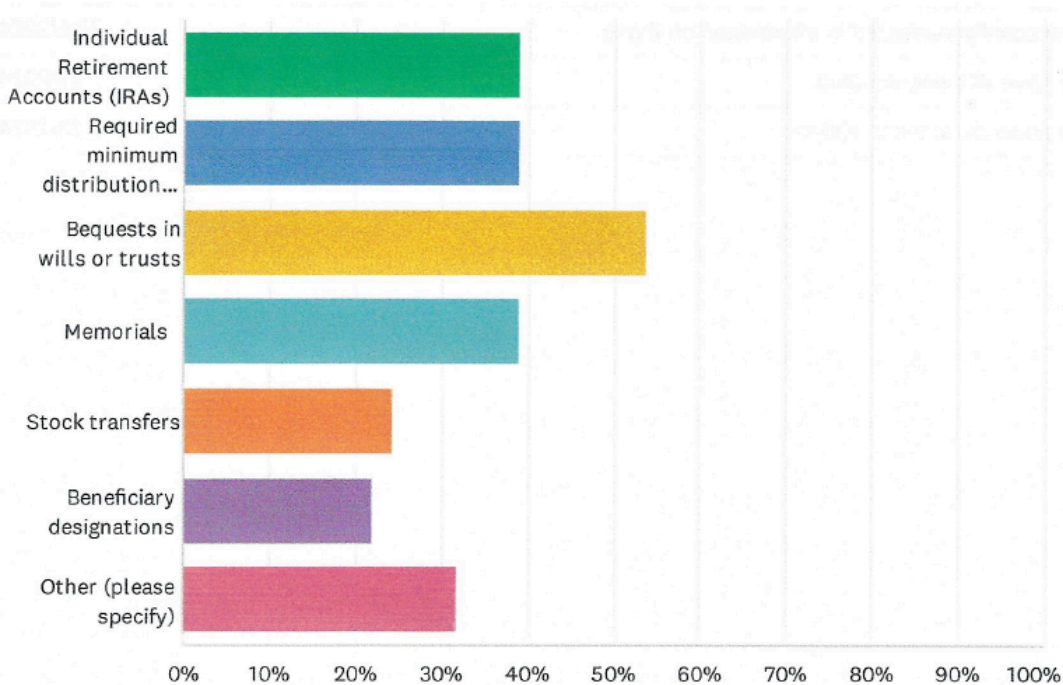


Wachiska Audubon Society 2024 Strategic Plan survey

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	TOTAL	SCORE
Organized Birding 13.70%		12.33%	12.33%	9.59%	5.48%	15.07%	13.70%	17.81%		
<u>events/activities</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>13</u>	73	4.30
Continue to preserve the nine tallgrass prairies owned by Wachiska	58.90% 43	16.44% 12	10.96% 8	4.11% 3	4.11% 3	4.11% 3	1.37% 1	0.00% 0	73	7.04
Continue to hold the existing conservation easements	2.74% 2	21.92% 16	21.92% 16	13.70% 10	12.33% 9	15.07% 11	9.59% 7	2.74% 2	73	4.92
Purchase or accept additional tallgrass prairies and/or other natural areas	4.11% 3	17.81% 13	10.96% 8	13.70% 10	21.92% 16	10.96% 8	12.33% 9	8.22% 6	73	4.45
Enter into new conservation easements	2.74% 2	1.37% 1	5.48% 4	13.70% 10	12.33% 9	9.59% 7	30.14% 22	24.66% 18	73	2.96
Education programs for children/families	5.48% 4	13.70% 10	15.07% 11	6.85% 5	15.07% 11	19.18% 14	10.96% 8	13.70% 10	73	4.18
Education programs primarily for adults	1.37% 1	9.59% 7	12.33% 9	20.55% 15	12.33% 9	15.07% 11	16.44% 12	12.33% 9	73	3.95
Advocate for action on government policies and regulations that further Wachiska's mission	10.96% 8	6.85% 5	10.96% 8	17.81% 13	16.44% 12	10.96% 8	5.48% 4	20.55% 15	73	4.21

# Q7 There are many nontraditional ways to donate to Wachiska. Would it be helpful to learn from a professional(s) about (check all that apply)

Answered: 41 Skipped: 37



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs)	39.02%	16
Required minimum distributions (RMDs)	39.02%	16
Bequests in wills or trusts	53.66%	22
. Memorials	39.02%	16
Stock transfers	24.39%	10
Beneficiary designations	21.95%	9
Other (please specify)	31.71%	13
Total Respondents: 41		

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)		
1	Just not a priority for me.	5	Yearly presentations, at least in print.
2	I would attend a program on these subjects.	6	none of these
3	biodegradable coffin raffle Gust a joke -- N/A on question 7)		
4	not interested		

7 Allow Wachiska to have a conservation easement of our organic/bio dynamic Silva pasture perinea! food growing farm/multispecies grazing system. The plan is that the training farm will come with a Foundation.

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8 Charitable Remainder Trusts

9 donations of land

10 I think all 80 year olds know about this stuff

11 I'm not personally interested in information on these.

12 I already have this one covered

13 I already understand these options.

**QB Please add comments you may have to clarify/explain your responses to any of the above questions. Include the question number(s) related to the comment(s).**

Answered: 29 Skipped: 49

**# RESPONSES**

1 As you know you can't respond to questions like 5&6 in a black and white manner. The single most important thing in owning land, or holding CEs is to have a related long-term plan. Having a policy to not own land, or hold CEs, does not seem wise - you never know when a deal "too good to pass up" will come along. Again, the key to land ownership or CEs is to have the plan that will carry you far beyond the typical strategic planning horizon. In terms of CEs, I strongly recommend close contact with the NE Land Trust to learn more about taking on more CEs. I suggest having a two-pronged strategy with regard to CEs - one for the existing CEs, and one for those that may present themselves in the future. Additionally, I suggest that any strategic plan put emphasis on the need for a vision far beyond the typical five or ten year plan lifetime. I apologize for not providing more thoughtful info - I'm afraid this got buried - I am really glad you extended the deadline.

2 I think it would be best to try to consolidate the prairies Wachiska owns. Expanding when possible. Fewer but larger prairies is probably both ecologically more sound and also more efficient to manage.

3 #5&6. In regards to conservation easements monitoring and management, hard to comment without knowing the terms of the easements regarding what can and can't be done on the properties. What latitude the landowner has in continuing to generate income to pay the taxes. What responsibilities Wachiska reserved regarding management. Has the chapter looked into transferring the easements to an accredited organization such as the Nebraska Land Trust to monitor and defend the conservation easements? Pursue a long term agreement with Northern Plains. Kent knows what he's doing regarding management. Keep landowner avenues open for the future acquisitions. If landowners are comfortable working with Wachiska, continue to be the lead in landowner communications.

4 I generally don't bird in a group but am happy to help with a group event if needed. Some of the easement questions seemed to pertain to landowners so that is why I ranked them lower because it is not something I can do.

5 I am currently experiencing health issues that severely limit what I can do.

6 Thanks for all you do

7 I think appreciation for native plants and prairie is growing and will continue to grow. I think seed gathering on the easement and owned lands may be a way of bringing in more college students, maybe youth church groups. I think we need to set a fundraising goal of securing investments adequate to cover our Exec Dir's salary, and after that, we need to

squirrel away funds for a parttime prairie manager to care for the patches of land we own and hold easements on.

8

I suspect that conservation easements are not particularly helpful as they require legal action to enforce them. They're expensive, and enforcement will alienate farmers.



9 No strong feelings about any of the questions 10 You're already in my will

11 Keep up the good work

12 Question 4: Realistically I'm pretty busy so I am unlikely to go to many birding events but one might strike my interest and if I was free I might go. Question 5. About terminating, I guess my answer would be it depends. Perhaps transfer would be better if possible.

13 Re: #6 I cannot help with anything.

14 Print fiscal summary a least 1 time a year.

15 I believe its a good idea to review existing lands and easements you manage. If it makes sense, consider consolidating your land management activities. Programming for youth and families is one way to expand your base and add sustainability. These activities also take significant inputs and require long-term feeding, so consider partnerships with other organizations to extend your efforts.

16 #5 Continue those which are written to best be supporting with legal standing Wachiska, and see if those that are not, can be changed.

17 Kristal Stoner, said that the most impact we can have against Global Warming is to eat locally! Nebraska once was the "Beef" State, where the Sandhills were filled with grazing ruminants, sequestering carbon back into the soil & not sucking the Ogalala Aquifer dry to grow commodity grains, which pollute the ground water so much it causes a question if Nebraska is "REALLY" the right to life state because of the incredibly high NITRATE LEVELS I have never tasted a slice of prairie, but I know ranchers who graze Prairie managed by their livestock! COVID showed the Akillies heal of food shortages & an environmental, economic & sustainable opportunity for Nebraska to grow healthy food sustainably! After becoming Chemical Free since 1992, I promise the variety and amount of birds on our farm would astound you. Where else do you see Swallows flying above grazing cattle grabbing flies?

18 My emphasis on prairie preservation is due to the fact that tallgrass prairies are very rare and becoming more rare each year as ownership changes. Future conservation groups will not have the opportunity to preserve native prairie in eastern Nebraska, even with more public education and changes in state government. It will be gone.

19 #5 & 6. I believe preserving prairies is very important. Before taking on more land or easements I think you need to determine what it would cost to hire someone to manage the properties. Any land or easements accepted need to also come with funding to take care of them. It would be very helpful to have a fund for this purpose, it needs to have sufficient funds to pay for the annual costs of maintaining the properties from the income on the fund, with also reinvesting some of the income to cover future inflation/higher costs.

20 Moving forward, we should not break any easement agreements in order to maintain our reputation as prairie worthy stewards.

21 I came to Wachiska because of the friendships I formed on the birding trips. If we do not do birding trips, we need to create other small group opportunities to get to know each other.

22 It seems like more funding is needed to sustain the land holdings and conservation easements. Although I ranked acquiring additional property low, it may be that you need to pursue additional holdings and easements, and insist that come with large endowments or funds, that could be used to support the whole preserve system (such as through hiring a full time supervisor). I am not sure if you have a dedicated fundraiser on staff.

labor and financial support for the organization. I ranked legislative issues after that because people get really fired up about legislative issues. Again, people are needed for the labor of advocacy and financial support of the organization.

This is another route to go to get funding for the habitat restoration on holdings and easement properties. They can also work on establishing an endowment whose proceeds can support staff salaries. I ranked education (for families and adults) highly because connecting with people matter - they are the ones that are going to provide the physical

23 Continuing to protect, conserve and restore through holding conservation easements on and owning remaining remnants of aboriginal unbroken native

tallgrass prairie in southeastern Nebraska should remain the senior priority for Wachiska Audubon Society (WAS); since the tallgrass prairie ecosystem is one of the most threatened ecosystems in the planetary biosphere, and with protection comes the habitat for the equally threatened birds and mammals, flora and fauna, inherently dependent on that biosphere. However, wanted, it cannot, and will not materialize, in the absence of a financial revenue stream to support what exactly is wanted either in the parochial or broader geographical context. Currently, the prairies and properties directly or indirectly owned by the WAS are not proving to be liability for the organization, and, as a matter of fact, are proving just the opposite with revenue incomes exceeding expenses for not only the Conservation Committee but helping balance finances for the organization. While the data are not reflected on the charts, internal accounting clearly has the WAS-Conservation Committee, who is primarily responsible for managing or having management oversight for the nine properties (597 acres) indirectly or directly owned by the WAS, having an annual mean net balance of - \$ 10.0 K during the past 9 years. In some respects, the WAS already has more than enough to effectively manage, while in others, it needs nearly 10 times more. Such as it is in the business of agriculture. Unfortunately, the same is not the fact for the 23 Conservation Easement Agreements (CEAs) (377 acres) currently being held by the WAS. While the CEAs are interpreted to imply management responsibilities to preserve the ecological qualifications for holding the easement, no moneys are available outside of volunteer contributions to defray the management costs if the property owner is reticent for taking the appropriate action. Time and resources are requisites for management, and time and resources are not cost-free. The costs have to be accounted for either through volunteer donations or revenue held available for or generated from managing the properties. Therefore, the organization should not be agreeing to hold any additional Conservation Easements or own any additional properties in the absence of having a well thought out and developed economically rational revenue stream and business plan to provide the fiscal support for sustainably administering and managing the properties owned and held as easements. This is absolutely critical! Furthermore, a business plan for property and prairie management should probably be incorporated into the same for the entire organization.

Salaries and payroll expenses continues to account for the overwhelming proportion of the operational costs for the organization, with the cost for an Executive Director (ED) being most important Important as the EDS position is for an organization, anticipations for ED finding and bringing in grants and donations equal to defraying the costs for financing the position have not materialized to the extent expected. Therefore, would appear the need exists for discovering more creative solutions and creating cases for substantive support from less than common or traditional sources. A long-term sustainable source of funding has to come from somewhere if intentions are to maintain an economically viable organization with less dependency on volunteers and more on paid administration.

- concerns.
- 26 Or may have percentage of estate to Wachiska and conservation & preservation of prairie concerns.
- 27 Or may have percentage of estate to Wachiska and conservation & preservation of prairie concerns.
- 28 We don't need just to fundraise, we need to more knowledgeable assess our organization's financial needs and leaders who can develop/ carry out plans to achieve those goals.
- 29 none

24 I think there's value in our ties to Native American groups.

25 Or may have percentage of estate to Wachiska and conservation & preservation of prairie

**Q9 How you can help - if you'd be willing to participate on a post-survey focus group to give the Board input as it considers organization goals OR/AND if you have or know someone with fundraising or philanthropic experience or knowledge, please contact Mark Brahman, Executive Director at [mark.brohman@wachiskaaudubon.org](mailto:mark.brohman@wachiskaaudubon.org) or 402-486-4846.**

Answered: 15 Skipped: 63

- # **RESPONSES**
- 1 I would be happy to help. Wachiska is a great organization.
- 2 Hi Mark, I'd consider helping out on a focus group. I'm not comfortable with fundraising or donor contacts. Dan Schulz [danduh25@gmail.com](mailto:danduh25@gmail.com)
- 3 [ted.lagrange@gmail.com](mailto:ted.lagrange@gmail.com)
- 4 I'd be willing to be on a focus group. I wonder about asking Dave Sands to advise us with his ideas about our 5 year and longer plans and visions. Perhaps also someone with the Nature ConseNancy in Nebraska.
- 5 I'd be willing to do the focus group.
- 6 yes
- 7 My expertise is in planning and land management. I'll call Mark.
- 8 NONE TO MY KNOWLEDGE
- 9 I would be happy to help you with setting up example of bird friendly farming & grazing tours in the area & closer to the Southeast Wachiska Prairie Easements as examples of bird friendly habitat.
- 10 Yes, I am interested in participating in a focus group. 11 Yes, I am willing to participate in focus groups.
- 12 I might be able to help because of understanding some of the capability of our ELEO database. It is hard for me to give up on the easements, but I am open to exploring ways to do it, if the owners do not want the responsibility. (I have some faith that even those that all not cared for by this generation, may be able to come back if they outlast the negligent owners. Maybe I am naive. We only have so much money. It is probably better to concentrate on the easements with property owners who care. I am not sure that my opinion is the one that matters. I would always align myself with Ross.
- 13 Yes to "post-suNey focus group". The "philanthropic experience or knowledge" rests with the Executive Director.
- 14 Fundraising should be given high priority. Wachiska has a wonderful brand. People with experience in fundraising will be a valuable resource.
- 15 I am already participating on a number of financial-focused areas, and will continue to do so if we boost our staff capabilities in those areas. We can't do it all with volunteers.

## Q10 Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Answered: 26 Skipped: 52

#	RESPONSES		
			prairies.
1	program to educate the general public on the importance of all natural systems - and preserving them	13	NO
2	You guys have your hands full but keeping land from being developed is so important. Would love for you guys to get more (affordable) marketing out there.	14	Currently, I am fencing for multispecies livestock a Milford farm that has been in crbp production. For this last week, I have been watching a pair of turkeys grazing insects throughout the farm as well as Red Capped & Downy Woodpeckers, and so much more!
3	I'm sorry that at 83 I am not able to participate actively in Wachiska activities.	15	I believe we need to continue to shift our focus somewhat from fundraising among our members to locating larger individual donors and donor organizations, statewide and nationwide.
4	You are doing some good things. Probably want to identify any other organizations that are doing similar things and make sure you don't overlap or duplicate. Maybe collaborate with some.	16	The cause of protecting tallgrass prairie is one of the most important environmental issues in Southeast Nebraska.
5	I have read that cats kill many birds and that windows in buildings c1re also a problem. Should Wachiska spend some effort educating and generating awareness of these issues?	17	Enjoy all the programs
6	Keep up the great work and glad you are planning for the future'	18	This strategic plan needs to set a priority to develop a overall financial plan that includes fund raising, monthly finance committee meetings, coordination of fund raising.
7	I'm glad we're doing this assessment. Wachiska's first wave of supporters won't last forever, and if we have a clear and attractive picture of what the chapter can do in the future, it will get support in wills. I believe.	19	I recently submitted comments to Theresa and Mark about issues which I consider important.
8	I'm old enough to be concerned about our environment, but haven't the energy to help physically. I do contribute money and understand that protecting nature is very expensive.	20	Glad to share my thoughts. I'd like to do birding trips but often don't have time. Appreciate that you still offer virtual programming for membership meetings.
9	Wachiska does good work. Thank you.	21	Have probably stated enough or more than enough in No. 08 above.
10	Thank you for all you do.	22	I'm very glad to serve on the conservation committee. I agree that we may need to pick one or two easements/owners to walk away from and add easements with better prairies and contracts.
11	More interaction with other groups/organizations that support conservation.		
12	Thanks for fostering appreciation for our wonderful		

Wachiska Audubon Society 2024 Strategic Plan survey

- 23 The work Wachiska does with education and prairie management provides a huge positive balance to all the negatives in this world. Proud to be an active member and supporter of Wachiska.
- 24 Good set of questions, including asking if people want more info about planned giving (Q 7). (and I think that "planned giving" is a phrase you could use in the future)
- 25 I believe Wachiska is lacking financial operational expertise. We don't just need a bookkeeper, or treasurer, or fundraiser, we need someone who can understand and lead in all these areas. Our ED should have these capabilities, or we should have someone else on paid staff who does.
- 26 not at this time

Post-survey feedback from the focus group:

**Wachiska Audubon Society 2024 Strategic Plan survey results background:**

The first three questions are statistics and similar to questions from the previous survey in 2020.

Per Question 1, it seems we are slowly engaging a younger audience, which was a goal in 2020.

2020 Survey (age group):

25 years old or younger - 0%

26-49 years old - 0%

36-49 years old - 5.79%

50-59 years old - 13.16%

60-69 years old - 34.21%

70 years old or older - 46.84%

Question 2 responses in both surveys are similar.

2020 survey "how long involved with WAS":

Less than 1 year - 3.17%

1-5 years - 22.22%

6-10 years - 15.34%

11-15 years - 14.29%

16-20 years - 11.11%

More than 20 years - 33.86%

For question 3, it is great to see donor association growth from 30% (2020) to 54% (2024)!

2020 survey "what is your involvement":

Volunteer less than 10 hours/month - 12.09%

Volunteer more than 10 hours/month - 4.4%

Attend monthly meeting - 20.94%

Donor - 30.97%

Monthly meeting presenter - 4.27%

Field trip participant - 11.50%

Members of peer org - 15.34%

The bar graph for Q6 shows the results of ranking potential priorities. The associated table (pg 8) shows the actual ranking of each priority, with column 1 highest, column 8 lowest. For example, 17.81% of respondents (13) ranked “Organized Birding events/activities” the lowest priority.

Finally, page 17 of 17 was removed as it consisted of individuals naming themselves and was optional.

### **Discussion points for Monday’s Zoom (and input)**

- 1) *Do the three statistical question results give you any idea of how/where Wachiska can continue to grow?*
  
- 2) *Responses to Question 4 indicate a need to shift how Wachiska can “promote birding”, which is part of our mission. Do you have any suggestions that could replace our precedent of sponsoring birding field trips?*
  - a. Can the survey responses be sorted to show what the 29 and younger respondents answers were?
  - b. Friends of Wilderness Park do monthly walks that are well attended; maybe work with to add a birding/naturalist expert component to nature walk.
  - c. Birders have a wide spectrum of expertise and expectations.
  - d. There are varying interests in why people go out in nature - some see it as a social thing; some may want to do as a family; some like to see wild life.
  
- 3) *Responses to Question 5 shows folks are very interested in “purchasing additional tallgrass prairies and other ecosystems that fit the mission.” At the same time, almost as many agreed “where legal, terminate conservation easement for properties that are not meeting Wachiska’s mission”. How do you think the public and other conservation organizations may react if Wachiska did decide to terminate easements that no longer meet the goal of preserving prairies?*
  - a. See it as a negative if agreements are terminated. If inspections show the land is longer serving the purpose for which agreement was written, maybe open it and modify. Keep in mind landowners need income.
  - b. WAS testified when the CE law was created – could harm org reputation as well as the greater CE world and invite unwelcome changes to the law.

- c. Easements that no longer are being cared for – the WAS signage could be interpreted that WAS doesn't care what is happening. That is damaging to the org reputation.
  - d. There are private \$\$ available to private landowners (outside of NET grant) that NGPC could help find. Maybe WAS can communicate that to the landowners. Scott Luedkte name given to get list of \$\$ options.
  - e. Terminating one easement may make other landowners "nervous"; are there other entities the easement could be transferred to that could do or offer something better.
  - f. Each easement agreement should be reviewed to see what options are and the cost of each. Tallgrass prairies are included in the Legacy Project and some easement prairies are probably located in biologically unique areas (BULs). Can't treat all easements alike.
  - g. There should be one point person to deal with landowners to build a rapport. Takes time but could bring the "uninterested" landowners around.
- 4) *Responses to Q 6 clearly indicate prairie conservation should continue to be a major part of Wachiska. With the "retirement" of many volunteers who managed our owned prairies and use of a Nebraska Environmental Trust grant able to start addressing problems with conservation easements, we've realized we can only grow with help. This may include endowments, paid staff, partnering with other conservation organizations, etc. Do you have advice, suggestions, cautions, etc., about moving forward with these and/or other management considerations?*
- a. WAS is in reactive mode, which is not a sustainable solution. Need solid financial management for the entire org (not just conservation comm).
  - b. National Audubon may know of foundations/individuals that may help fund the org.
  - c. Are there other groups with similar purposes that staff could split time in each?



Financial and prairie background for the survey:

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENT FOR SURVEY QUESTION 6.**

One of the survey questions will ask respondents to rank focus areas for the next strategic plan. The following provides a short background for each area.

### **6 a. Organized Birding Events/Activities**

For many years, Wachiska volunteers led well-attended field trips throughout eastern Nebraska. Participation ranged from 20 to 2 attendees. In recent years, the decreased availability of volunteer field leaders resulted in fewer field trips and fewer attendees. The reasons may be varied, but the availability of online tools such as eBird and bird song apps may be one reason. People can now find out where birding “hotspots” are and rare birding sightings and head out on their own.

### **6 b, c, d, and e**

#### **Prairie Ownership and Conservation Easements Background**

Recognizing that tallgrass prairies across the U.S. were diminishing and in Nebraska today are 2 percent (June 2023 Nebraskaland magazine) of historic levels, since the mid 1990s Wachiska’s work included preservation of tallgrass prairies and other natural areas through direct ownership or conservation easements. At the time, easements were a way to protect intact natural areas with the owners agreeing to be land managers. Through the years the number of owned and easement properties grew in numbers and Wachiska is now at a crossroads as a prairie owner and easement holder and is interested in your thoughts to help shape the future.

#### **Nine Prairies owned by Wachiska (total 597 acres)**

With the historical goal of protecting and conserving prairie, planning has focused on the goal without due consideration of the business realities of preserving prairies. Wachiska’s long dependency on volunteers to perform “on the ground” work and management responsibilities, such as invasive species control and removal, seeding and reseeding as necessary reached a critical point a few years ago. A no cost agreement in 2021 with Northern Prairies Land Trust (NPLT) brought professional staff and equipment to perform some of these duties. This agreement should not be

considered a long-term agreement and may be cancelled by either party with a 60-day notice.

Some tasks are still done by volunteers, such as negotiating and monitoring livestock grazing and haying contracts, coordinating seed collections, administering payments for expenses and revenues received and making decisions related to needed capital improvements. The volunteers also monitor and enforce compliance with the Conservation Easement Agreements.

In 2022 Wachiska was selected for a \$377,500 three-year grant (ending June 30, 2025) from the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) to help pay for materials such as seed and fencing on the owned prairies and invasive species removal on the easements. In addition to the NET funds Wachiska volunteers have spent the equivalent of \$36,000/year in labor and management time (see previous paragraph). This gives an idea of what a professional prairie manager would cost before payroll taxes and benefits.

### **Twenty-three Conservation Easements Wachiska Holds (total 377 acres)**

From 1994 up through 2014 Wachiska entered into conservation easement agreements with interested landowners. The underlying purpose for the easements was to protect the lands as prairies and put Wachiska into the position of monitoring and promoting beneficial management practices by the landowners. Communications and working with the owners fluctuated as work on the nine prairies Wachiska owns kept the volunteers busy. As a result, the quality of some easements deteriorated and relationships weakened as original owners sold their properties. Many new owners do not understand the purpose and responsibilities of the easements; some are not interested.

Wachiska earns no income from the easement properties. With NET funds Wachiska contracted with Prairie Legacy, LLC for approximately \$15,000/year to open communications with the landowners and work with them to make improvements. In 2021, Prairie Legacy was hired to survey plant species on each of the easements, so work could readily begin. Progress is being made on some easements, for example invasive species are being removed and owners are haying at times that weaken invasive species. However, there remain some owners who show no interest in working with Wachiska. Research into each easement agreement is underway and the Board

may need to decide whether to pursue legal options at some point. Another option may be to shift the purpose for holding easements from attempting to preserve and improve prairies to simply protecting them from infrastructure development or being converted into cropland. This would reduce oversight over prairie conditions.

### **Prairie Crossroads**

There continues to be interest by others to give or sell Wachiska additional properties through easements or to own. Executive Director Mark Brohman is assisting the Conservation Committee in researching inquiries as they come in for further discussion by the Committee. Once the Committee approves a motion to act, the motion is forwarded to the Board for a final decision. . Neither the Conservation Committee nor the Board expects to take make any decisions regarding a property until more is known about the priorities of respondents to this survey.

### **6f. Education programs for children/families**

Volunteers and the executive director participate in public events and sponsoring mission-related activities in elementary schools such as Nature Nights, are resulting in name recognition for Wachiska by local libraries, schools and the city of Lincoln. Activities have varied from nature nights and after school programs at elementary schools to family events such as Bird EnCOUNTER at a local library and booths at Earth Day and Return of the Thunderbirds.

### **6g. Education programs for adults**

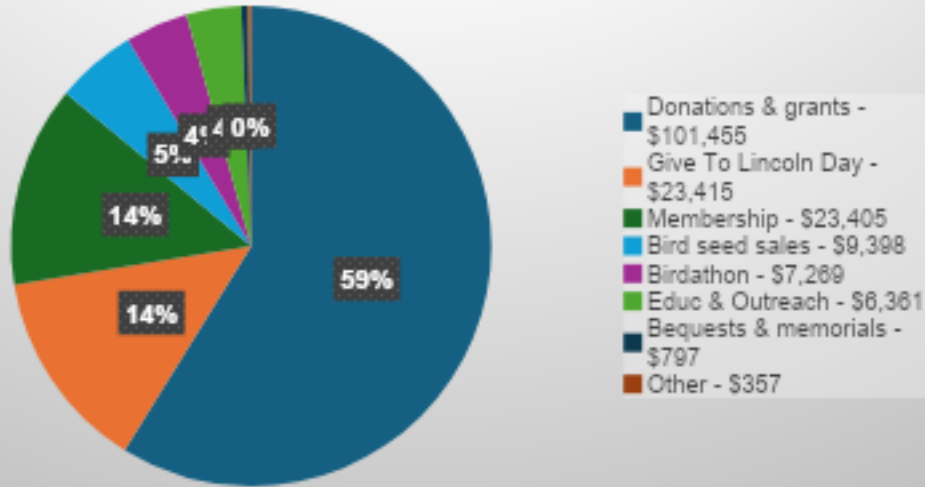
The one adult focused education program sponsored by Wachiska is managed by Executive Director Brohman and volunteers. The intent of Tour the Wild Side is to expose the public to various ways landowners are integrating native plants into landscapes. By seeing what someone else is doing they are more apt to try it themselves, thus compounding the plant options for insects and birds. In recent years, volunteers have also taught prairie programs in UNL's OLLI program.

### **6h. Advocate for action on government policies and regulations that further Wachiska's mission**

During the Nebraska legislative session, Executive Director Mark Brohman tracks bills that could potentially affect (positive or negative) the prairies or conservation easements owned by Wachiska. Other big picture concerns are limitations on renewable energy options or development on public lands. Through the years, Wachiska has gained a reputation as a conservation organization that researches the science and facts before commenting on an issue.

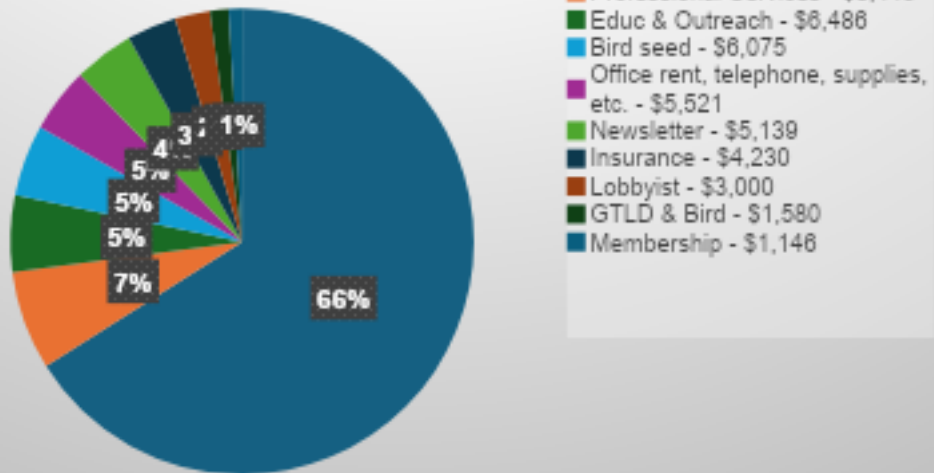
## 2022 Revenue - general - \$175,490

(numbers are rounded)



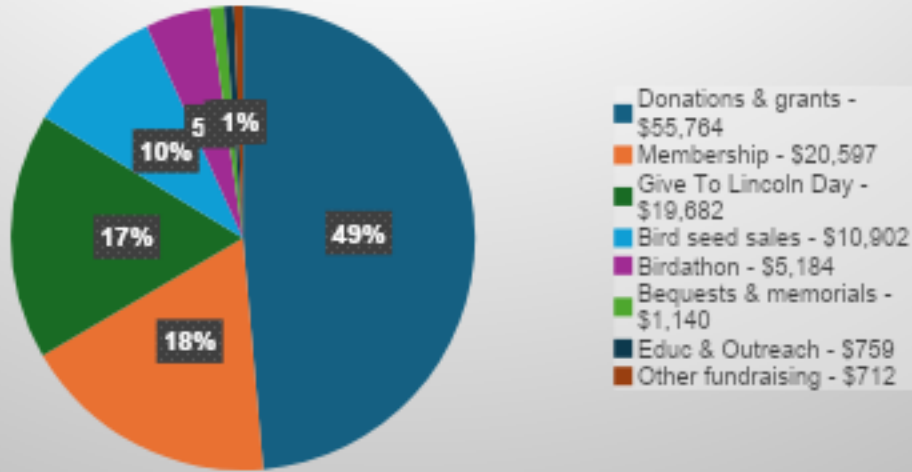
## 2022 Operating Expenses - general - \$122,543

(numbers are rounded)



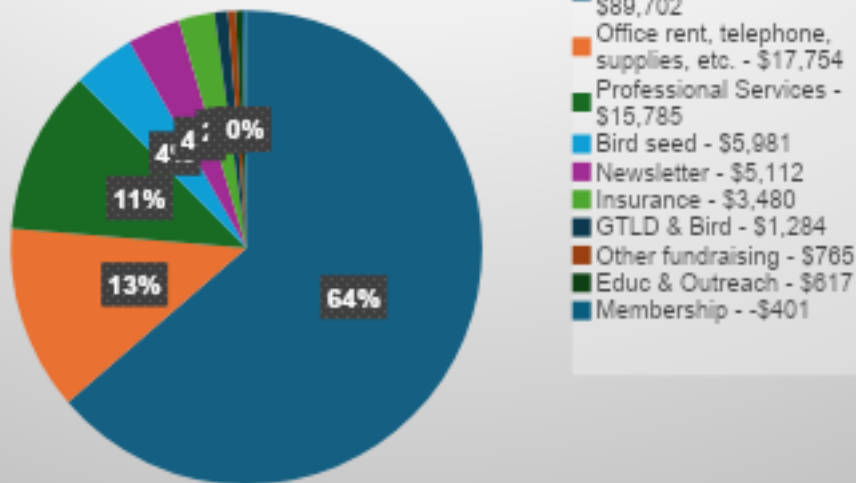
## 2023 Revenue - general - \$114,403

(numbers are rounded)



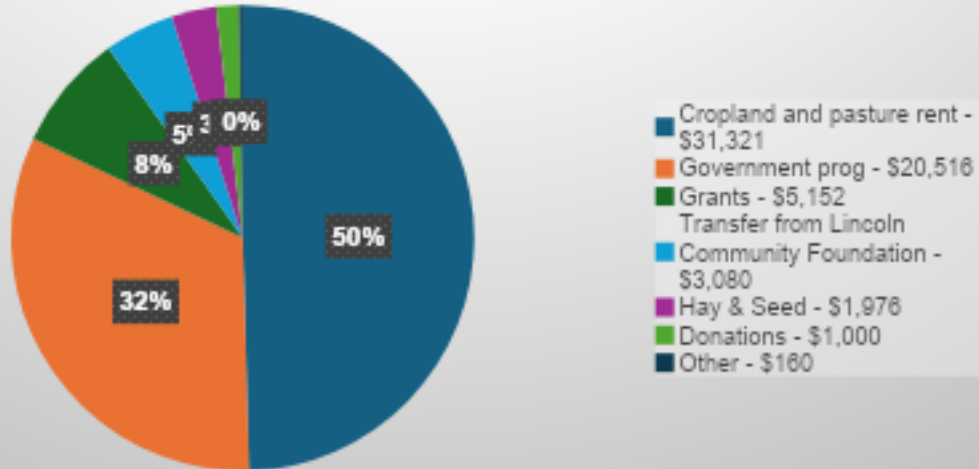
## 2023 Operating Expenses - general - \$140,075

(numbers are rounded)



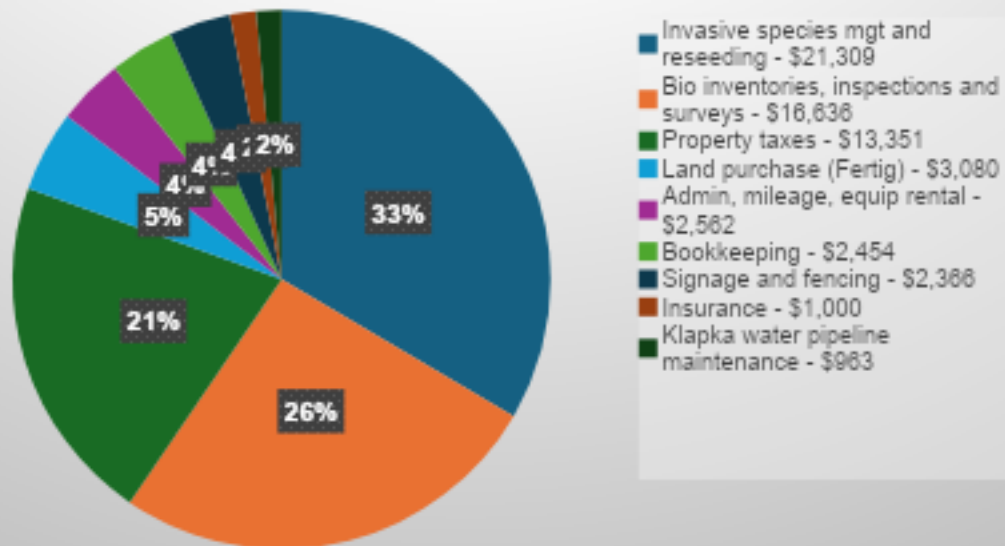
## 2022 Revenue - conservation - \$63,205

(numbers are rounded)



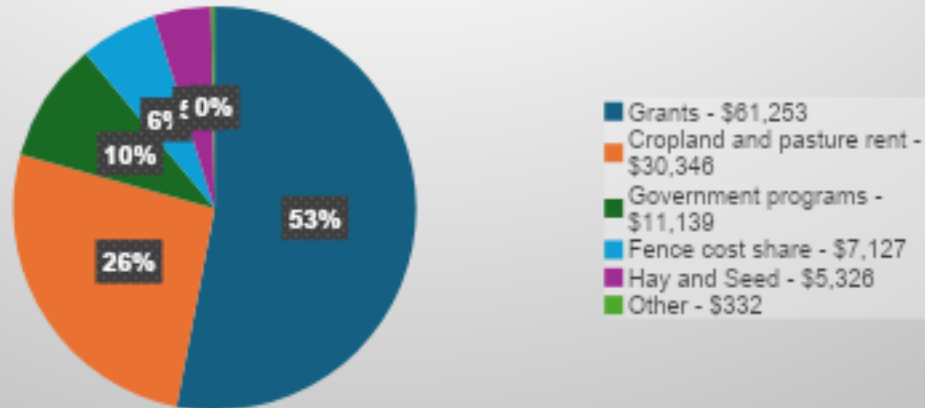
## 2022 Expenses - conservation - \$63,721

(numbers are rounded)



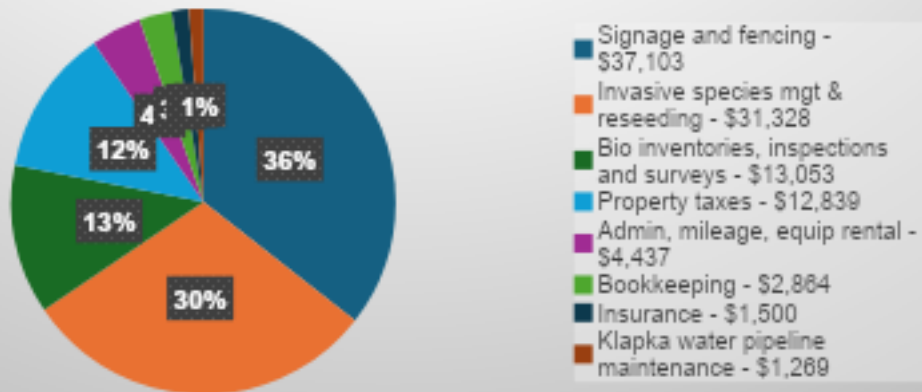
## 2023 Revenue - conservation - \$115,523

(numbers are rounded)



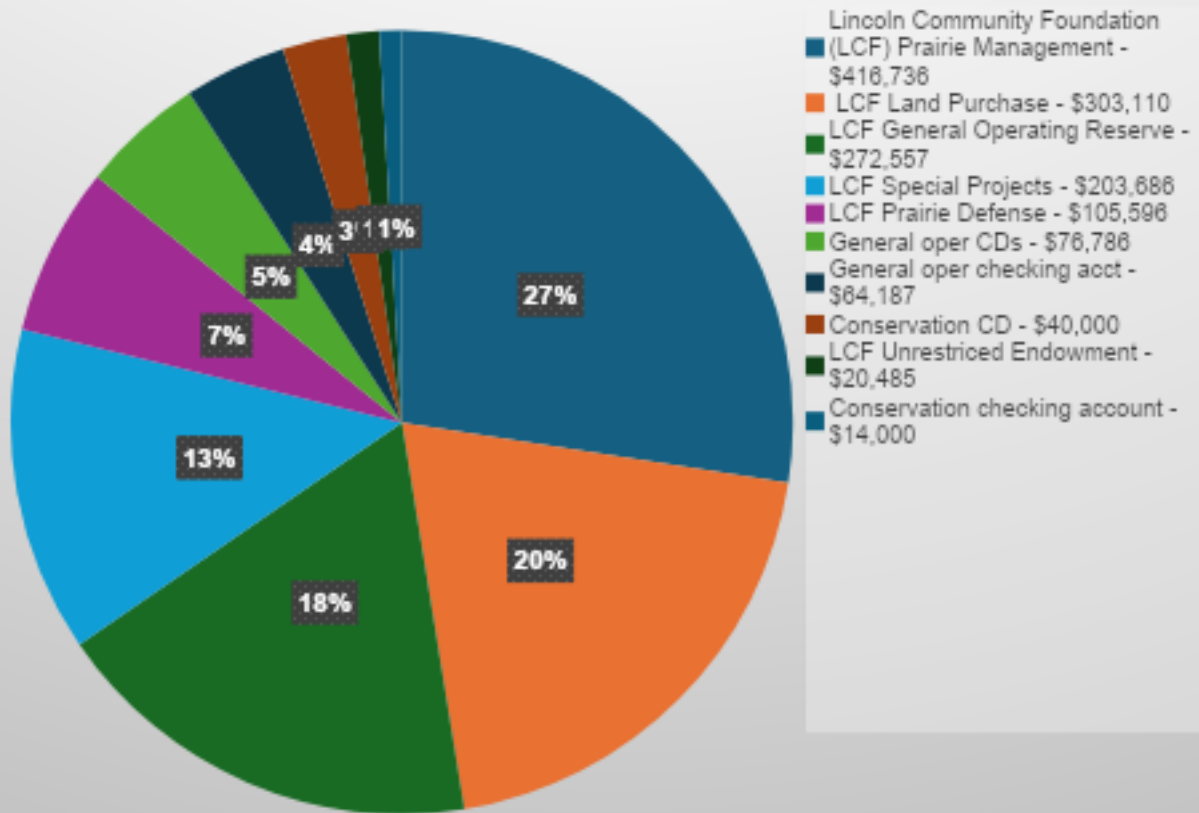
## 2023 Expenses - conservation - \$104,393

(numbers are rounded)





**Wachiska Audubon Society Assets as June 2024**  
**- \$1,517,143**  
 (numbers are rounded)



Note: does not include land values.