



985 Acres Protected For Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge

By Patrick Williams

Tamarack Farm Wetland photo from The Conservation Fund

A unique partnership between The Conservation Fund, Openlands, and Illinois Audubon Society has acquired Tamarack Farms for Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge (Hackmatack). This refuge protects vital habitat for the region's biodiversity while offering extensive recreational opportunities for the 12 million residents of the greater Chicago, Rockford, and Milwaukee metropolitan areas.

At 985 acres, Tamarack Farms is the largest single property located within Hackmatack's approved boundary. Tamarack Farms is the biggest conservation acquisition in the Chicago region since the creation of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in 1996. Tamarack Farms also connects several existing conservation areas, creating a contiguous 5,600-acre macrosite.

"Protecting Tamarack Farms has been a top conservation priority for decades.

This once-in-a-generation opportunity was realized through the close collaboration of our partners," said Emy Brawley, Illinois State Director for The Conservation Fund. "This will dramatically expand public access for residents and visitors to the region."

Established in 2012, Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge protects wildlife habitat within the Nippersink Creek watershed in McHenry County, Illinois, and Walworth County, Wisconsin. Hackmatack aims to create an 11,200-acre natural landscape by connecting four conservation areas with wildlife-friendly migration corridors.

Hackmatack is also an urban wildlife refuge, a special designation which enhances its recreational and educational mission. When it is eventually opened to the public, recreational opportunities will include hiking, biking, canoeing, birding,

and volunteer stewardship events. The property will connect an adjacent rails-to-trails path with Wisconsin to the north and the Grand Illinois Trail network to the south.

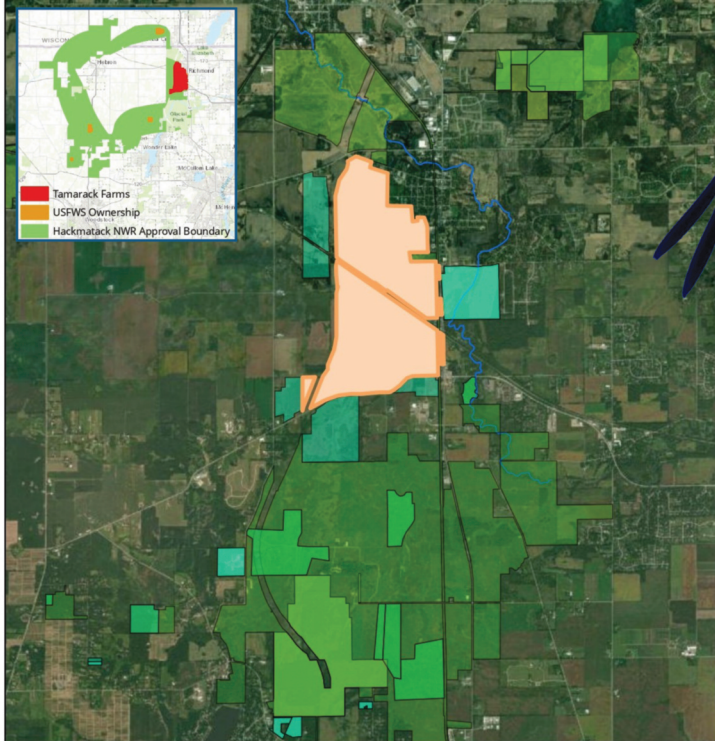
"High-quality public land is a boon to McHenry County. Since the emergence of the idea, Openlands has championed a National Wildlife Refuge right here in our own metro," said Michael Davidson, President and CEO of Openlands. "McHenry County is already seeing the economic results of accessible open space. Between 2021 and 2022, visitors spent more than \$336 million, a 26% increase in spending from the previous year."

The acquisition of Tamarack Farms further protects high-quality wildlife habitat, including remnant oak woodland, nesting grassland birds and waterfowl, cold-water springs, open water wetlands, and

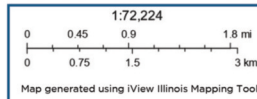


Tamarack Farms—Regional Context McHenry County, IL

THE
CONSERVATION FUND



Tamarack Farms Property
Protected Land (Private Sector)
Protected Land (Public Sector)
Biologically Significant Streams: Nippersink Creek



American Bittern by Paul Rossi

multiple feeder streams to the nearby Nippersink Creek, one of the highest quality streams in the region. Over 200 species of birds, 70 species of fish, 30 species of reptiles and amphibians, 35 species of mammals, and hundreds of plant species have been recorded within the refuge boundary.

“Large-scale conservation is critical to ensure species’ resiliency in the face of climate change, and Tamarack Farms will provide a sanctuary for both people and wildlife,” said Jo Fessett, Executive Director of Illinois Audubon Society. “It creates habitat for threatened and endangered species and also presents the perfect opportunity to enhance public appreciation of nature.”

The property was purchased from a willing private seller with the stated intention of adding it to Hackmatack National

Wildlife Refuge. Tamarack Farms remains under an active farm lease and public access is restricted until the property is opened by USFWS.

The acquisition was funded by The Conservation Fund, Illinois Audubon Society, and Openlands, with additional support from the Bobolink Foundation, James and Elizabeth Bramsen, Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Hamill, Nancy Hamill Winter, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, and the McHenry County Conservation Foundation. Openlands and The Conservation Fund will hold the property in trust until it can be conveyed to the USFWS.

“Acquisition of Tamarack Farms represents a ‘dream realized’ for a small group of people who began to advocate for its protection two decades ago,” said Steve Byers, Chair of Friends of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. “Protection of

Tamarack Farms is a historic leap forward for the Refuge and brings it closer to its goal of 11,200 acres of protected land. It also demonstrates the power of dreams and a shared vision with committed partners.”

Those interested in experiencing the Refuge are encouraged to visit the Friends of Hackmatack website — hackmatacknwr.org — to learn about educational and volunteer opportunities. Until this property is open to the public, you may visit any of the nearby USFWS or McHenry County Conservation District conservation areas.