

Friends of Sax-Zim Bog: Protecting North America's southernmost boreal forest for biodiversity

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A unique stretch of 190,000 acres, Sax-Zim Bog is roughly 180 miles north of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the Upper Midwestern region of the United States (<https://saxzim.org/about-sax-zim-bog/>). This land is part of the southernmost boreal forest of North America, and home to thousands of living species. It has become a global destination for birders, being, for example, one of the best places in the world to see the majestic great gray owl (*Strix nebulosa*) – the largest species of owl in North America (Figure 1). Enter Friends of Sax-Zim Bog. This nonprofit organization was created to preserve this treasured habitat for future generations of birds (e.g. black-capped chickadees; Figure 2) and other boreal species, as well as for human beings who love nature.

The mission of Friends of Sax-Zim Bog began as a problem to be solved. The rate of mature black spruce logging was rising dramatically in the northern Minnesota region and threatening this crucial ecosystem. Sparky Stensaas, a local naturalist, recognized the diversity of species and habitat in the area. He knew that Sax-Zim Bog needed a platform and advocates to make its voice heard. In collaboration with local Duluth naturalists, Dave Benson and Kim Eckert, Friends of Sax-Zim Bog was born in 2011. Sparky serves as the executive director of the organization, which also includes a management director and four naturalists. The head naturalist, Clinton Dexter-Nienhaus, leads educational events during the year to help people connect with this unique ecosystem (Benda, 2024). Sparky and his team all share a palpable exuberance for protecting such a beautiful and biodiverse area.

For some, the word 'bog' may spark thoughts of mosquitoes, mud and feelings of dreariness. However, these places are thronging with a broad presentation of



Figure 1. A great gray owl along McDavitt Road.

life. Furthermore, although bogs make up only three percent of this planet's surface, it has been discovered that they hold up to 44 percent of soil carbon (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2022). Their protection is thus crucial to combating climate change.

Driving along highway 7 of Sax-Zim Bog creates a feeling of being in the northern tundra (Figure 3). Red osier dogwood speckles the vast horizons. Orchids, wild berries, and carnivorous plants emerge every spring and summer. Tamaracks turn bright yellow in fall. The cyclical reality of life is on vivid display here. Driving the dirt roads of Admiral, McDavitt, and Stone Lake creates an intimate setting. Cars slowly inch forward. Eyes of drivers dart back and forth between the road and the forest canopy. The search is on for the elusive great gray owl. For many visitors, seeing this iconic owl for the first time is a deeply emotional experience. It provides hope for the preservation of what is wild. It creates a special connection to this place.

The Friends of Sax-Zim Bog organization focuses on two primary actions. First, it preserves treasured habitats for the diverse species who live here – with over 3,600 species documented in the area so far. The Friends have currently purchased nearly 25,000 acres of bog land for protection. Second, it establishes spaces for visiting humans to learn about and enjoy the bog. The Friends engage in a variety of fundraising efforts to support this work, including an annual auction for tiny bird art. In recent years, the organization has built a welcome centre for educational purposes, and assembled four boardwalks across a range of preserved land parcels – Auggie's Bogwalk,



Figure 2. A black-capped chickadee.

Warren Woessner Boardwalk, Bob Russell Boardwalk (Figure 4) and John C. Gale Taiga Boardwalk. There are additional trails that have been created as well, all of which are important means for accessibility.

A significant part of protecting Sax-Zim Bog is by creating a public connection with it. This comes through teaching people about the wide array of life that the bog holds. Sparky Stensaas and Clinton Dexter-Nienhaus create videos of their monthly experiences (<https://saxzim.org/videos-of-sax-zim/>). Sparky takes viewers on virtual field trips throughout the bog, and often finds a broad spectrum of wildlife. Clinton's 'Bog-ventures' and 'Critters' videos delve deeper into natural history and individual species of Sax-Zim Bog. These allow people from all over the world to learn about and develop an affinity with this place.

Bogs, fens, marshes and wetlands tend to be marginalized landscapes and habitats across the world (Miller, 2022). They are often disparaged and discounted as 'wasteland'; they ignite fear as they are difficult for human beings to access and exploit. They symbolize the unknown and humanity tends to fear the unknown. Friends of Sax-Zim Bog offers a way into this 'unknown', by helping human beings to learn about, understand, and most importantly *connect* with the bog environment.

In *The Creative Mind* (1946), French philosopher Henri Bergson suggests that there are two ways of knowing something. The first way involves "circling around its exterior" (p. 128); it depends on the analysis of symbols and perspective; it is abstract, detached. The second way, however, is intuitive and



Figure 3. Sax-Zim Bog from highway 7.

involves entering *into* that thing; becoming a part of it, and making it a part of us. This way of knowing, Bergson suggests, engages our human capacity for transcendence. I can speak from experience that as one connects with the beauty and richness of Sax-Zim Bog, and acknowledges being a part of it, it can inspire love for, and an urge to protect, this special habitat and its extraordinary biodiversity. This is exactly what Friends of Sax-Zim Bog is trying to achieve.

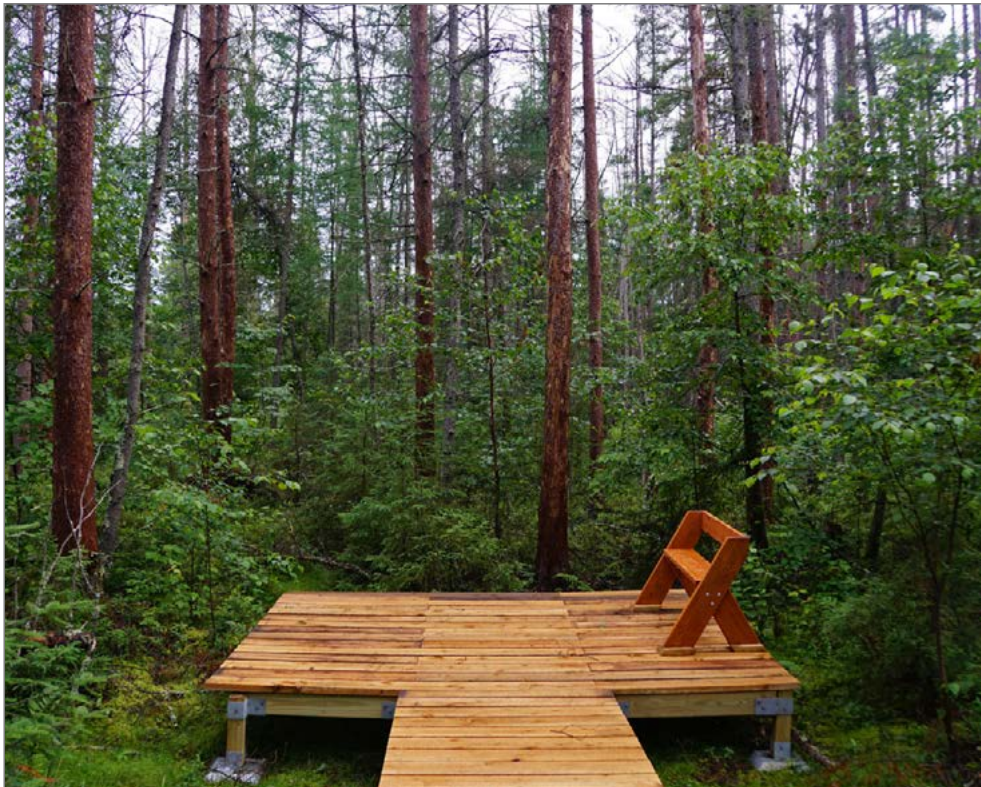


Figure 4. Part of Bob Russell Boardwalk.

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