

# **Appendix H**

## **Bird and Bat Conservation Strategy**

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for the Big Bend Wind Project

Prepared for Big Bend Wind, LLC  
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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ac	acres
AMMs	Avoidance and Minimization Measures
BBCS	Bird and Bat Conservation Strategy
BGEPA	Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act
Big Bend Wind	Big Bend Wind, LLC
BMPs	best management practices
ECPG	Eagle Conservation Plan Guidance
ESA	Endangered Species Act
ft	foot, feet
ha	hectares
HF	high frequency
IBA	Important Bird Area
IPaC	Information, Planning and Consultation
kHz	kiloHertz
km	kilometer(s)
LF	low frequency
MBS	Minnesota Biological Survey
MBTA	Migratory Bird Treaty Act
met	meteorological
mi	mile(s)
min	minute(s)
MNDOC	Minnesota Department of Commerce – Energy and Environmental Review & Analysis Unit
MNDNR	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
MW	megawatts
NHIS	Natural Heritage Information System
NLEB	northern long-eared bat
NWI	National Wetlands Inventory
Project	Big Bend Wind Project
RSH	rotor-swept-height
USEPA	US Environmental Protection Agency
USFWS	US Fish and Wildlife Service
WEG	Land-Based Wind Energy Guidelines
WEST	Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc.
WIRS	Wildlife Incident Reporting System
WTGs	wind turbine generators

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of the Bird and Bat Conservation Strategy

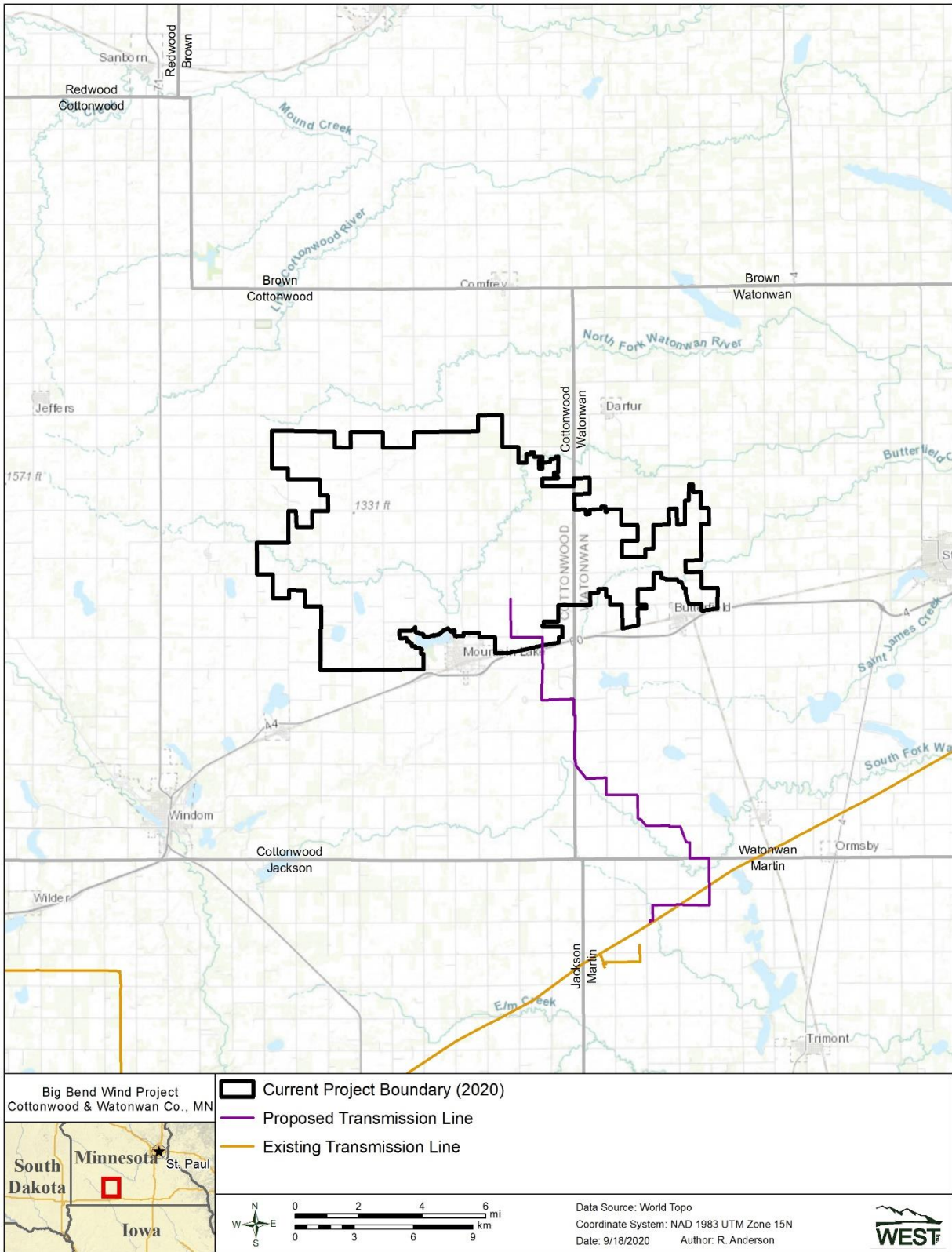
Big Bend Wind, LLC (Big Bend Wind) is developing the Big Bend Wind Project (Project) in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota. Consistent with the tiered approach presented in the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) *Land-Based Wind Energy Guidelines* (WEG; USFWS 2012) and the *Eagle Conservation Plan Guidance* (ECPG; USFWS 2013), Big Bend Wind has completed a variety of bird and bat studies to evaluate risk in coordination with the USFWS and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR). These studies and resulting recommendations from USFWS and MNDNR staff have been used to inform development of appropriate impact avoidance, minimization, monitoring, and adaptive management measures for the Project.

The purpose of this Bird and Bat Conservation Strategy (BBCS) is to document Big Bend Wind's compliance with relevant wildlife laws and regulations by adhering to the processes outlined in the WEG and ECPG for developing, constructing, and operating wind energy projects, and to explain the analyses, studies, and reasoning that support progressing from one tier to the next in the tiered approach presented in the WEG. The Tier 4 monitoring program has been designed to evaluate collision risk and an Adaptive Management Plan to respond to findings, if necessary, is also presented. This BBCS also documents the measures to be implemented during siting, construction, and operations that avoid and minimize impacts to federal and state-listed bats so that no permit is warranted for the Project to proceed to construction and operations.

## 1.2 Facility Description

The Project is located in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota (**Figure 1.1**), and will include the construction and operation of up to 55 wind turbine generators (WTGs), ranging from 5.5 megawatts (MW) to 5.7 MW in capacity, for a Project nameplate capacity of up to 308 MW. In addition to the WTGs, Project facilities will include access roads, an underground electrical collection system, a collector substation, a step-up substation, one permanent meteorological (met) tower, an operations and maintenance building, and one temporary construction laydown area that will be reclaimed after construction is complete. The Project will interconnect to an existing 345-kilovolt (kV) transmission line via an approximately 18-mile (mi) 161 kV aboveground transmission line between the collector substation and Xcel Energy's Crandall Switching Station located at the south end of the Project. A temporary construction laydown area will be used to store construction trailers, equipment, and a portable batch plant if needed, with the majority of the laydown area reclaimed prior to the commencement of operations.





**Figure 1.1. Location of the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota.**

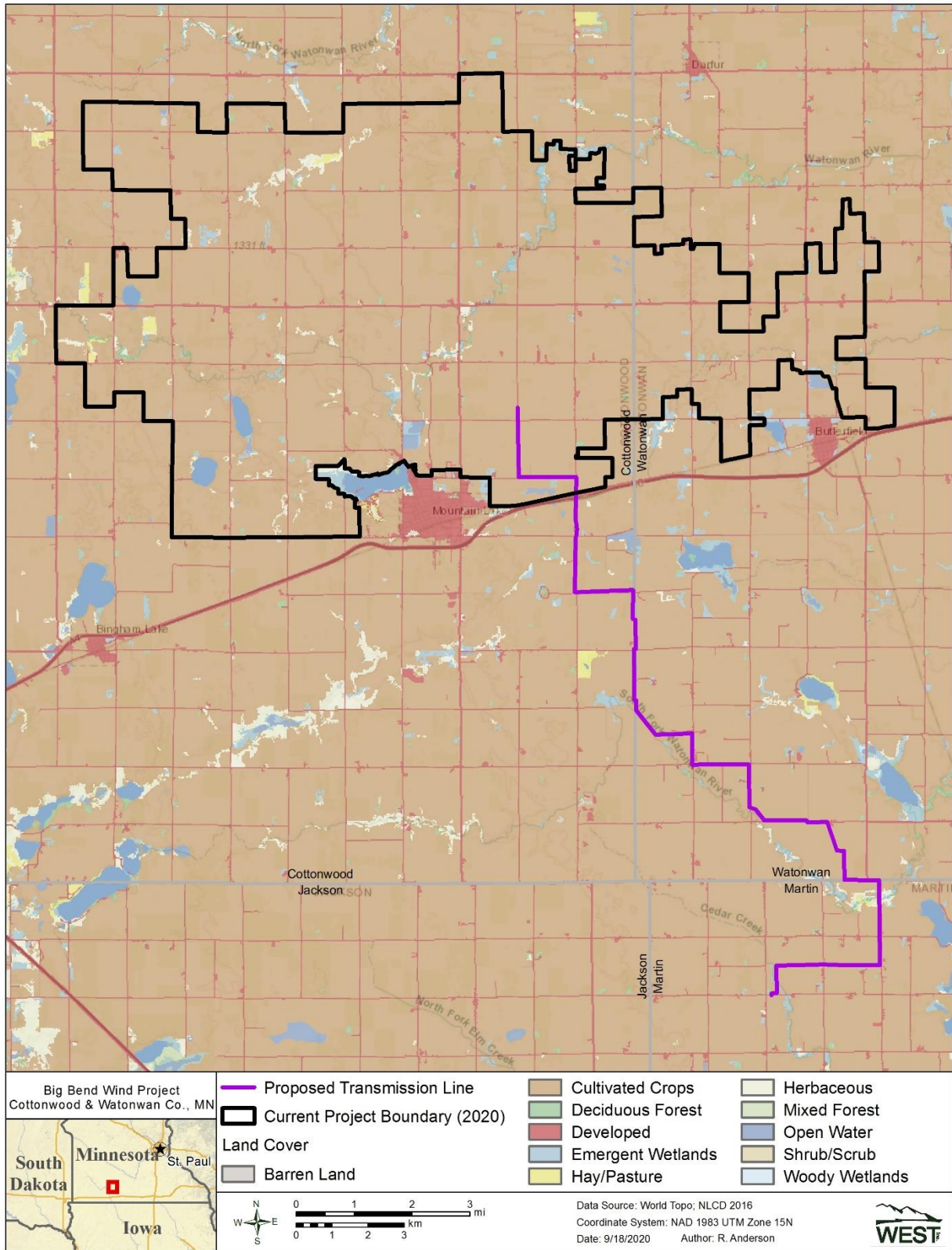
### 1.3 Environmental Setting and Habitat

The 43,523 acres (ac) Project area is located within the Des Moines Lobe Level IV Ecoregion, within the Western Corn Belt Plains Level III Ecoregion (US Environmental Protection Agency [USEPA] 2017), which covers much of Iowa and portions of southern Minnesota and eastern Nebraska. This ecoregion is characterized by glaciated till plains and undulating loess plains. Much of the region was originally dominated by tallgrass prairie, riparian forest, oak-prairie savannas, and woody and herbaceous wetlands. Today, most of the area has been cleared for farms producing corn (*Zea mays*), soybeans (*Glycine max*), and livestock (USEPA 2017). Many smaller streams in this ecoregion have been tilled, ditched, and tied into existing drainage systems, resulting in a reduction in wetland and aquatic habitats (USEPA 2017). The dominant land cover types within the current Project boundary are cultivated crops (92.4%) and developed areas (3.6%; **Table 1.1**; **Figure 1.2**). Herbaceous, emergent herbaceous wetlands, open water, hay/pasture, deciduous forest, mixed forest, barren land, woody wetlands, evergreen forest and shrub/scrub make up the remainder (4.0%) of land cover types within the current Project area (National Land Cover Database 2016).

<b>Habitat</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Percent Composition</b>
Cultivated Crops	40,227	92.4
Developed	1,586	3.6
Hay/Pasture	439	1.0
Emergent Wetlands	379	0.9
Open Water	360	0.8
Herbaceous	252	0.6
Deciduous Forest	142	0.3
Mixed Forest	83	0.2
Barren Land	38	0.1
Woody Wetlands	15	<0.1
Shrub/Scrub	1	<0.1
<b>Total*</b>	<b>43,523</b>	<b>100</b>

Data were obtained from the National Land Cover Database (2016). \* Totals may vary based on rounding.

Consistent with recommendations in Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the WEG, the Project is sited in a landscape that generally avoids natural habitats that are considered high quality and regionally significant, such as riparian woodlands, oak (*Quercus* spp.) woodlands, and native grasslands that may support comparatively greater bird and bat abundance and species diversity than habitats within the Project area.



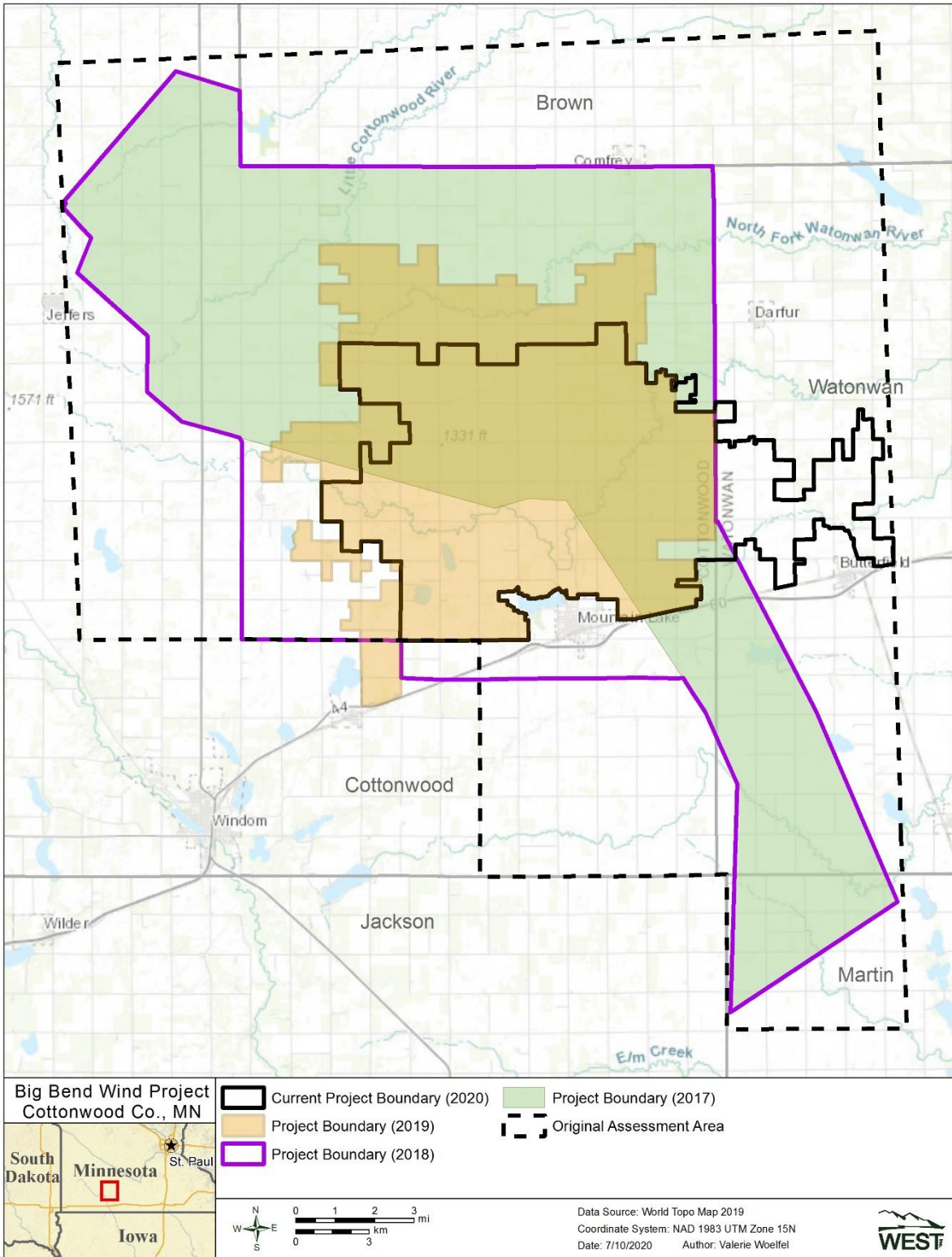
**Figure 1.2. Land cover and composition within the Big Bend Wind Project boundary, in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota.**

## 1.4 Background and Consultation History

Project development was initiated by Big Bend Wind in early November 2017 within a 250,460 ac area that included portions of Cottonwood, Watonwan, Brown, and Martin counties, Minnesota (Original Assessment Area; **Figure 1.3**). The Project boundary changed several times throughout the development process. The Original Assessment Area was reduced to 103,923 ac in mid-November 2017 (2017 Project Boundary; **Figure 1.3**). In March 2018, the Project boundary was expanded to include an additional area to the south to provide flexibility based on initial stakeholder concerns and landowner feedback (2018 Project Boundary; **Figure 1.3**). In March 2019, the Project boundary was reduced to focus on agricultural land south of Jeffers and to exclude waterbodies and other areas which provide habitat for species of concern (2019 Project Boundary; **Figure 1.3**). In early 2020, the boundary expanded east into Watonwan County in response to stakeholder feedback and was then further reduced in size, resulting in the final and current boundary encompassing 43,523 ac (Current Project Boundary; **Figure 1.3**).

Tier 1 and 2 studies were completed for the Original Assessment Area and the 2017 Project Boundary. Tier 3 studies were initiated in November 2017 by Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc. (WEST) and Copperhead Environmental Consulting Inc., (Copperhead) throughout the Project area and are ongoing, with an expected completion date of February 2021. The spatial extent of the Tier 3 studies was adapted in response to the Project boundary changes as they occurred in order to consistently capture and represent the Project in its current state. The purpose of these studies was to characterize the avian, bat and vegetation communities, assess potential risks to wildlife, and inform Project siting.





**Figure 1.3. Boundary changes for the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota.**

Consistent with recommendations in the USFWS WEG and ECPG for agency consultation, Big Bend Wind has communicated on a regular basis with the USFWS and MNDNR regarding birds, bats, and other environmental topics, as illustrated in **Table 1.2**.

<b>Table 1.2. Background and agency coordination milestones for the proposed Big Bend Wind Project.</b>	
<b>Date</b>	<b>Subject</b>
November 2, 2017	Big Bend Wind requested data from US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regarding listed bat roosts and hibernacula, eagle nests, and any other federally listed species that are known to occur within 10 miles of the Original Assessment Area.
November 2, 2017	Big Bend Wind submitted Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS) data request to Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) using the Original Assessment Area.
December 18, 2017	MNDNR provided the Natural Heritage Review of the Original Assessment Area.
December 19, 2017	Big Bend Wind met with USFWS and MNDNR to evaluate the results of the completed Tier 1 and Tier 2 analysis and assess the Tier 3 study plan.
February 2, 2018	Big Bend Wind provided Biological Study Plan to MNDNR for review/approval.
April 5, 2018	MNDNR approved Biological Study Plan.
March 14, 2019	Big Bend Wind provided copies of Tier 3 wildlife studies to USFWS and MNDNR and requested to set up a meeting with both agencies.
April 19, 2019	Big Bend Wind and Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc. (WEST) met with MNDNR to evaluate the results of the completed studies.
April 24, 2019	Big Bend Wind and WEST communicated with USFWS via conference call to evaluate the results of the completed studies.
May 8, 2020	Big Bend Wind requests comment from MNDNR on the Project as part of the state permitting process.
July 7, 2020	MNDNR provides comments on the Big Bend Wind Project in advance of the Big Bend Wind submitting an application for a large wind energy conversion system permit.

## 1.5 Key Avian and Bat Laws, Regulations, Authorizations

The federal regulatory framework for protecting birds includes the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA), the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) of 1940, and Executive Order (EO) 13186: *Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds* of 2001. The MBTA prohibits the take of migratory birds and does not include provisions for allowing unauthorized take; however, no permit to authorize take of MBTA protected species is available. Take is defined under the MBTA as pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, destroy, molest, disturb, or otherwise harm migratory bird species protected by MBTA, their nests, or their eggs. EO 13186 orders federal agencies, who may affect migratory birds directly or indirectly, to work with other federal agencies to support the conservation of migratory bird populations (2001).

The Minnesota threatened and endangered species list, as administered by the MNDNR, includes any species or subspecies of animal or plant designated as endangered or threatened pursuant to the federal ESA, as well as those species designated as threatened or endangered by the Commissioner of Natural Resources. Under Minnesota Statute 84.0895 Protection of Threatened and Endangered Species, it is unlawful to “take, import, transport, or sell any portion of an endangered species of wild animal or plant, or sell or possess with intent to sell an article made with any part of the skin, hide, or parts of an endangered species of wild animal or plant” unless the commissioner issues a permit for an otherwise prohibited act (Minnesota Statutes, section 84.0895, 2019b). Minnesota Statute 84.0895 states that on certain types of cropland, plants destroyed as a result of certain farming practices are exempt, along with the accidental destruction of listed plants where the plant was not known to exist (2019b).

The key federal, state, and local approvals and reviews for avian and bat species are presented in **Table 1.3**.

<b>Jurisdiction/ Agency</b>	<b>Permit/Consultations</b>	<b>Trigger/Nexus</b>	<b>Comments</b>
US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)	Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) Section 7 or 10 Consultation/Biological Opinion; Incidental Take Permitting	Potential take of federally listed species or their habitats	Big Bend Wind completed baseline surveys and consulted with USFWS to evaluate potential impacts on ESA-protected species. <b>Completed Tier 3 studies suggest relatively low risk to federal ESA-protected species from the Project.</b>
	Planning under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (MBTA)	Potential take of migratory birds (no permits available)	Big Bend Wind completed baseline documentation of avian use to evaluate potential impacts on MBTA-protected species and to develop impact avoidance and monitoring measures at the Project. <b>This BBCS is developed consistent with the USFWS WEG to avoid and minimize impacts to MBTA-protected species.</b>

<b>Jurisdiction/ Agency</b>	<b>Permit/Consultations</b>	<b>Trigger/Nexus</b>	<b>Comments</b>
	Planning under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940	Potential take of bald or golden eagles.	Big Bend Wind completed baseline studies to evaluate potential impacts to eagles. <b>This BBCS is developed consistent with the ECPG to avoid and minimize impacts to bald eagles. Golden eagles are unlikely to occur at the Project on a regular basis.</b>
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources	Minnesota Endangered Species Statute 84.0895 Protection of Threatened and Endangered Species	Potential take of Minnesota ESA-protected species.	Big Bend Wind completed baseline surveys to evaluate potential impacts to state-listed species. <b>Survey results suggest relatively low risk to Minnesota ESA-protected species.</b>
Local	None	-	No Cottonwood or Watonwan County regulations pertain to wind energy development and wildlife.

## **2 SITE CHARACTERIZATION AND BASELINE STUDIES (TIERS 1, 2, & 3)**

### **2.1 Preliminary Site Evaluation and Characterization (Tiers 1 and 2)**

#### *2.1.1 Tier 1*

Tier 1 of the WEG calls for an initial screening of the broad geographic area in which a project is proposed to be located. Such screening is useful for identifying regions where wind energy development poses significant risks to species of concern and their habitats, including the fragmentation of large-scale habitats and threats to regional populations of federally or state-listed species; for screening a landscape or set of multiple potential sites to avoid those with the highest habitat values; and for beginning to determine if a single identified potential site poses serious risk to species of concern or their habitats (USFWS 2012).

Initial development of this Project began in 2017 and focused on an approximately 250,460 ac area of interest (Original Assessment Area) in Cottonwood, Watonwan, Brown, and Martin counties (**Figure 1.3**). As part of the preliminary site evaluation, a desktop review was completed to evaluate types of habitat within the area and identify areas with reduced potential for species of concern. In addition, preliminary agency input was requested from USFWS and MNDNR regarding any instances of federally and state-listed animals and plants, natural communities, and other species of concern or significant habitats that occur within the initial area of interest (**Table 1.2**).

The land cover within the Original Assessment Area is primarily cultivated crops; however, there are a few limited wooded areas, native plant communities, and wetlands present that have the potential to support a variety of wildlife and plant species, including migratory birds, bats, and



other listed or species of concern. There are no comparatively large areas of intact native habitats and relatively few habitat- or topographic-based attractants to concentrate species of concern.

Conservation lands, such as the Des Moines River IBA and Heron Lake IBA are located to the southwest of the Original Assessment Area. In addition, native plant communities, sites of biodiversity significance, and Minnesota Biological Survey (MBS) areas are located within the Original Assessment Area. However, these areas were avoided in subsequent Project boundaries as Big Bend Wind progressed through the tiered process of the WEG during project development.

Although the Watonwan River intersects the central portion of the Original Assessment Area, lakes, ponds, and forested/shrub-scrub wetlands are primarily in the southern portion, while riverine habitats and emergent wetlands are distributed throughout. Big Bend Wind is committed to avoiding and minimizing impacts to wetlands and waterbodies per US Army Corps of Engineers and Public Waters Inventory permit standards.

### 2.1.2 Tier 2

Following the Tier 1 evaluation, the Project boundary was reduced and a Tier 2 evaluation was conducted. While the Tier 2 evaluation was conducted using the 2017 Project boundary, the results are representative of the current Project boundary because the areas overlap substantially and because the type of assessment occurs at the landscape level. A discussion of minor differences between 2017 Project boundary and current Project boundary can be found in **Section 3 Discussion and Impact Analysis**.

In accordance with Tier 2 of the WEG, a further review of readily available desktop information was completed by Big Bend Wind in November 2017 within the 2017 Project boundary that overlapped portions of Cottonwood, Watonwan and Martin Counties to assess potential adverse effects to wildlife and their habitats. Data sources included federal and state agency personnel; USFWS Information, Planning and Consultation (IPaC) system website, State of Minnesota websites (e.g., MNDNR Endangered, Threatened, and Special Concern Species; MNDNR Areas of Biodiversity Significance; MNDNR Native Plant Communities); US Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey; aerial imagery; and non-governmental organization websites (e.g., Audubon Society, American Wind Wildlife Institute Landscape Assessment Tool, e-Bird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Hawk Migration Association of North America).

A review of federally listed species with the potential to occur within the 2017 Project boundary was completed using the USFWS IPaC system on November 14, 2017. Results of this search included the federally endangered Poweshiek skipperling (*Oarisma poweshiek*), and the federally threatened northern long-eared bat (NLEB; *Myotis septentrionalis*), Dakota skipper (*Hesperia dacotae*) and prairie bush clover (*Lespedeza leptostachya*). In addition, 16 birds of conservation concern were listed in the USFWS IPaC report on November 14, 2017 as potentially occurring within the 2017 Project boundary (**Table 2.1**).

**Table 2.1. Birds of conservation concern, by habitat type and season, with potential to occur within the 2017 Project boundary.**

Grassland	Marsh/Waterbodies	Open Woodlands/Shrub	Forest
American golden-plover (m)	Black tern (b)	Red-headed woodpecker (yr)	Black-billed cuckoo (b)
Bobolink (b)	Dunlin (m)		Long-eared owl (w)
Buff-breasted sandpiper (m)	Franklin's gull (m)		
Smith's longspur (m)	Hudsonian godwit (m)		
	Lesser yellowlegs (m)		
	Ruddy turnstone (m)		
	Semipalmated sandpiper (m)		
	Short-billed dowitcher (m)		
	Willet (b)		

b = breeding, w = wintering, yr = year round, m = migrating.  
 Source: All About Birds (2017), US Fish and Wildlife Service Information, Planning and Consultation (2017) search of Project Boundary.

A review of state-listed species with potential to occur within Cottonwood, Watonwan, and Martin counties was completed using the MNDNR Rare Species Guide on November 17, 2017. Six state-endangered and three state-threatened species were identified as potentially occurring: the state-endangered king rail (*Rallus elegans*), Henslow's sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*), burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), Poweshiek skipperling, and Dakota skipper; and the state-threatened Wilson's phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*), Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*), and eastern spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorius*).

The Tier 2 site characterization study also evaluated potential impacts to avian and bat populations not considered sensitive or special status, including waterfowl/waterbirds, grassland birds, diurnal raptors, and bats. Results from this study concluded that use of the Project area (2017 and current boundary) by raptors in general was likely at low densities, use by golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) was minimal, and use by bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) was likely at low to moderate levels. Utilization of any open water by waterfowl/waterbirds during migration is likely. Limited native prairie and few grassland areas onsite will provide minimal suitable habitat for grassland birds. Despite relatively little forested habitat within the Project area, tree-roosting bats are likely to be present in and near potentially suitable forested tracts.

Results of the site evaluation and characterization analysis of the 2017 Project boundary which are representative of the current Project boundary are presented in **Table 2.2** below. This information was reviewed with USFWS and MNDNR (December 19, 2017) and a Tier 3 Biological Study Plan was agreed upon for implementation based on this review, as discussed in the next section.

**Table 2.1. Evaluation and characterization of the Big Bend Wind Project: Responses to questions posed in Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the 2012 Wind Energy Guidelines.**

Question	Response
<p>Are known species of concern present on the proposed site, or is habitat (including designated critical habitat) present for these species?</p>	<p>No federally or state-designated critical habitat occurs within the Project area.</p> <p>The federally threatened northern long-eared bat (<i>Myotis septentrionalis</i>; NLEB) has the potential to occur in the Project area. The federally threatened Prairie bush clover (<i>Lespedeza leptostachya</i>) is unlikely to occur in the Project area due to limited suitable tallgrass prairie habitat.</p> <p>Nine state-listed species have the potential to occur within the Project area. Burrowing owl (<i>Athene cunicularia</i>; state endangered) is rare in Minnesota and therefore unlikely to occur. Loggerhead shrike (<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>; state endangered) is unlikely to occur given that recent observations of this species have been limited to only Dakota and Clay counties, Minnesota. Henslow's sparrow (<i>Ammodramus henslowii</i>; state endangered) may occur, although their preferred habitat of uncultivated grasslands and old fields is limited within the Project area. King rail (<i>Rallus elegans</i>; state endangered) has the potential to occur; however, limited marsh habitat exists to attract this species. Critical habitat exists within Cottonwood County (IPaC 2020) for Powesheik skipperling (state endangered), but not within the Project area. This species' preferred habitat includes wet and dry native prairie. Dakota skipper (<i>Hesperia dacotae</i>) is unlikely to occur because it prefers dry-mesic to dry prairie habitat, which is minimal within the Project area. Eastern spotted skunk (<i>Spilogale putorius</i>; state threatened) prefers open lands with sufficient cover, including structures associated with agricultural areas, and is unlikely to occur. Blanding's turtle (<i>Emydoidea blandingii</i>; state threatened) may occur in aquatic/wetland areas and adjacent agricultural areas; however, there is limited suitable habitat onsite. Wilson's phalarope (<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>; state threatened) prefers habitat of wet prairie and grass or sedge-dominated wetlands. Suitable habitat exists near Mountain Lake and near other small waterbodies within the Project area; therefore, Wilson's phalarope may occur within the Project area.</p> <p>The majority of birds of particular concern that have the potential to occur may occur in the Project area at some point during migration, but relatively few are likely to breed in the general region (<b>Table 2.1</b>).</p> <p>Bald eagles occur locally throughout the year, but are more common in winter, with use primarily associated with the town of Mountain Lake (eBird 2017). Use of the Project area is expected to be consistent with eagle use in the region. Golden eagle (<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>) use is unlikely as the Project area is outside this species range (eBird 2017).</p>
<p>Does the landscape contain areas where development is precluded by law or designated as sensitive according to scientifically credible information?</p>	<p>The landscape contains several native plant communities and areas of biodiversity significance. The current Project boundary has been designed to avoid the majority of these areas.</p>

**Table 2.1. Evaluation and characterization of the Big Bend Wind Project: Responses to questions posed in Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the 2012 Wind Energy Guidelines.**

Question	Response
Are there plant communities of concern present or likely to be present at the site(s)?	The federally listed prairie bush clover and ten state-listed plant species have the potential to occur within the Project area but their occurrence is confined to native plant communities, which are limited within the Project area due to the extent of cultivated lands.
Are there known critical areas of congregation of species of concern, including, but not limited to: maternity roosts, hibernacula, staging areas, winter ranges, nesting sites, migration stopovers or corridors, leks, or other areas of seasonal importance?	<p>Suitable potential summer habitat for the federally threatened NLEB occurs within the Project area. There are no known hibernacula or maternity roosts within the Project area, with the nearest NLEB hibernacula located approximately 50 miles northeast of the Project area.</p> <p>Bald eagles may potentially use the habitat in and around the Project area for nesting.</p> <p>The open waterbodies and wetlands within the Project area may be used as stopover habitat for migrating waterfowl.</p>
Using best available scientific information has the developer or relevant federal, state, tribal, and/or local agency identified the potential presence of a population of a species of habitat fragmentation concern?	Species of habitat fragmentation concern that may occur in the Project area include grassland-dependent species (e.g., Henslow's sparrow) and forest-dependent bat species (e.g., NLEB) but the majority of the Project area is highly fragmented and impacts to these species have likely already been realized.
Which species of birds and bats, especially those known to be at risk by wind energy facilities, are likely to use the proposed site based on an assessment of site attributes?	<p>Bald eagles, along with a variety of other raptor species, will likely occur within the Project area. Waterfowl, waterbirds, and passerines are also likely to occur, especially during migration, but generally have low risk profiles with wind energy facilities.</p> <p>Seven species of bats have the potential to occur within the Project area and have known risk, including: hoary bat (<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>), big brown bat (<i>Eptesicus fuscus</i>), little brown bat (<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>), eastern red bat (<i>Lasiurus borealis</i>), silver-haired bat (<i>Lasionycteris noctivagans</i>), tri-colored bat (<i>Perimyotis subflavus</i>) and NLEB (Solick et al. 2019).</p>
Is there a potential for significant adverse impacts to species of concern based on the answers to the questions above, and considering the design of the proposed project?	The potential for significant impacts to species of concern is low based on available data. Although the Project area is likely to be used by bald eagles and has potential to be used by other sensitive bird and bat species, limited habitat is available and is unlikely to support any concentration of these species and therefore significant adverse impacts to these species is unlikely.

## 2.2 Tier 3 Surveys Completed to Date

Based on the results of the Tier 1 and 2 reviews, coordination with USFWS and MNDNR, and MNDNR's approval of the Big Bend Biological Study Plan (LeBeau 2018), Tier 3 surveys were designed and completed at the Project area and vicinity to understand wildlife usage, evaluate risk, and inform siting and operational protocols. The studies listed in **Table 2.3** and discussed in the following sections were developed using various Project boundaries as Big Bend Wind progressed through the WEG. A discussion of the applicability of these survey results to the

current boundary can be found in **Section 3 Discussion and Impact Analysis**.

<b>Study Type</b>	<b>Study Period</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Avian Use Surveys – Year 1	November 2017- October 2018	Foo et al. 2019
Avian Wetland Use Surveys	March 15 – June 15, 2018	Foo and LeBeau 2018
Raptor Nest Survey	April 2018	LeBeau and Foo 2018a
Eagle Nest Monitoring Survey	May 2018 - July 2018	LeBeau and Foo 2018b
General Acoustic Bat Survey	May 2018 – August 2018	Solick et al. 2019
Avian Use Surveys – Year 2	November 2018 – February 2020	Bailey et al. 2020
Aerial Eagle Nest Survey	May 2019	Foo and LeBeau 2019
Northern Long-eared Bat Habitat Assessment	May 2019 – May 2020	Hyzy et al. 2020
Raptor Nest Surveys	March 2020	Janos 2020
Eagle Nest Monitoring Survey	March 2020 – August 2020	Foo and Bailey 2020
Avian Wetland Use Surveys (Watonwan County)	March 2020 – June 2020	Foo and LeBeau 2020
Native Prairie Habitat Assessment	June 2020	Markhart and Foo 2020
Avian Use Surveys (Watonwan County)	March 2020 – February 2021	Ongoing

### Avian Use Surveys 2017-2018

WEST completed Year 1 of avian use surveys over a 12-month period, with the objective to evaluate species composition and seasonal and spatial use of the Project by birds, with a particular focus on bald eagles and species of concern (i.e., defined as federally and state-listed species and species of particular concern as identified in the USFWS IPaC). WEST completed surveys at 42 survey points established throughout the Project from November 2017 to October 2018 (**Figure 2.1**; Foo et al. 2019). In March 2018, the Project boundary expanded and fifteen points were added. These points were not surveyed during the winter season (November 2017 – February 2018); however, eagle use at those points is expected to be comparable to the points that were surveyed during the winter (Foo et al. 2019). The 2019 Project boundary change occurred prior to finalizing the Year 1 avian use survey report; therefore, the analysis of Year 1 data was updated to present only results from points within the 2019 Project boundary (Foo et al. 2019).

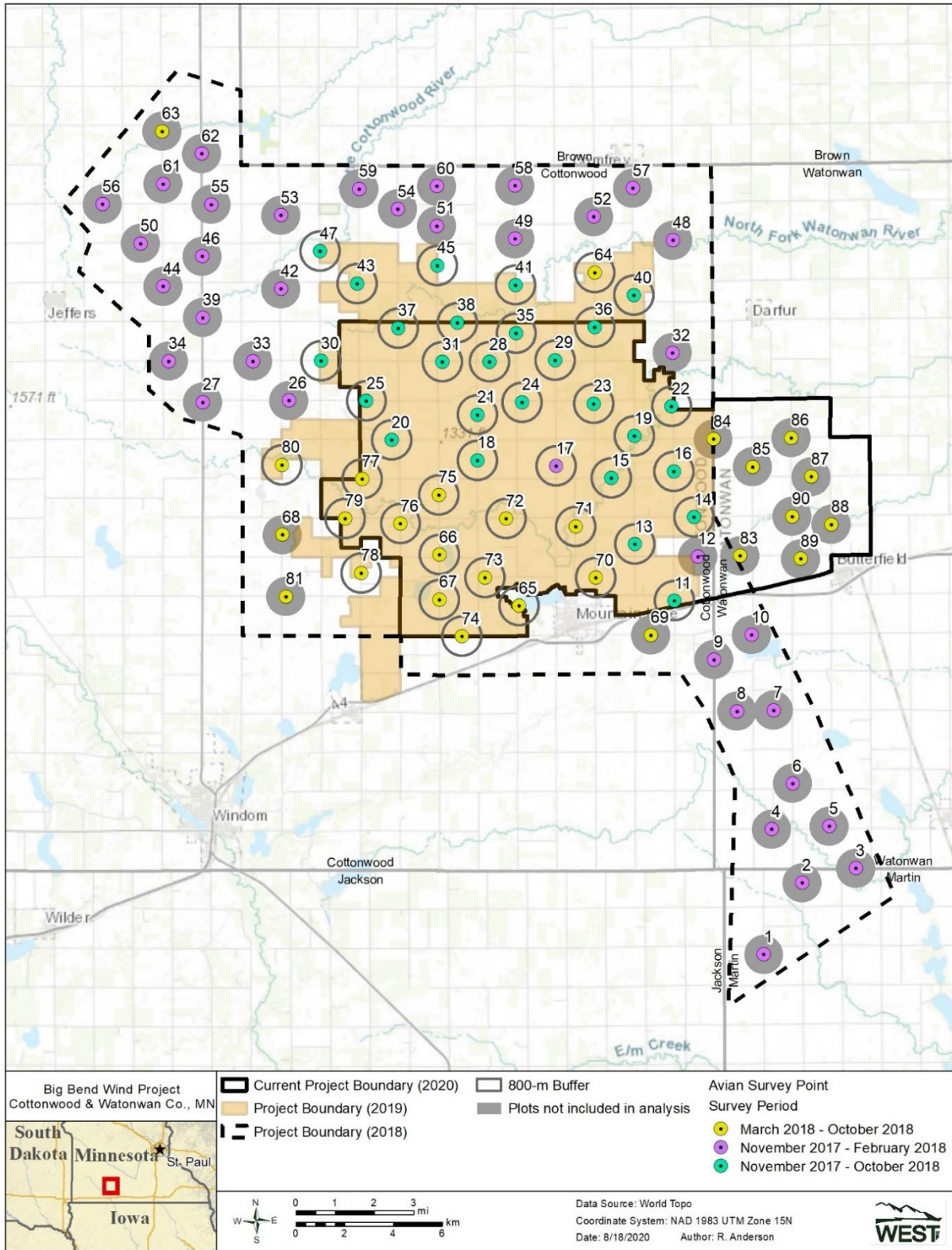
Surveys consisted of 10-minute (min) counts for small birds within 100-meter (m) radius plots, followed by 60-min counts within 800-m radius plots, where all large birds were recorded in the first 20 min and only eagles were recorded for the remaining 40 min. Observations of species of concern were recorded any time they were observed. Observations of species of concern outside of the appropriate survey period, beyond the 100- or 800-m radius plot, were recorded as incidental observations to document occurrence on site, but were excluded from statistical analyses.

A total of 67 small bird species (2,535 observations) were recorded over 72 hours of small bird surveys. Four species composed almost half (48.4%) of small bird observations: horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris*; 20.2%), red-winged blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*; 10.7%), common grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*; 9.6%), and barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*; 7.9%). All other species accounted for less than 7% of the observations, individually. Small bird species richness was highest in summer (2.05 observations/100 m plot/10 min survey), followed by spring (1.45), fall (0.68), and winter (0.18). Overall small bird use was highest during the fall (7.98 observations/100-m plot/10-min survey), followed by spring (7.75), summer (4.58), and winter (3.01). The majority (98.2%) of small birds recorded at all points were passerines.

A total of 35 large bird species (5,606 observations) were recorded over 144 hours of large bird surveys. The majority of large bird observations (85.4%) were of waterfowl observed during spring migration. Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) was the most abundant (61.6%), followed by snow goose (*Chen caerulescens*, 9.7%) and mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*, 7.3%). All other species accounted for less than 3% of observations, individually. Large bird species richness was highest in spring (1.00 species/800-m plot/20-min survey), followed by fall (0.68), summer (0.67), and winter (0.23). Overall large bird species richness was 0.65 species/800-m plot/20-min survey.

A total of 63 bald eagle observations (31 of these were incidental) and no golden eagles were recorded during the surveys. Thirty-one of the 32 bald eagles observed during the surveys were observations (recorded within 800 m and below 200 m of the observer). Bald eagle risk observations were documented at 16 of the 42 survey points (Figure 5). Bald eagle observations were documented throughout the Project and not concentrated within a single area; however, the majority of observations were recorded in close proximity to rivers and lakes. No golden eagles were observed during surveys or incidentally.

No federally or state-listed as threatened or endangered species were observed during the avian use surveys. One state-endangered species was recorded incidentally (Henslow's sparrow; n=2). Four birds of particular concern were observed during surveys and incidentally: black tern (*Chlidonias niger*; n=35, during surveys), red-headed woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*; n=2, during surveys), black-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*; n=1, incidental) and Franklin's gull (*Leucophaeus pipixcan*; n=134, incidental).



**Figure 2.1. Avian use survey points and plots at the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota from November 7, 2017 to October 29, 2018.**

*Note: Point 17 was removed in February 2018 due to land access issues.*

### Avian Wetland Use Survey 2018

WEST completed avian wetland use surveys within the 2018 Project boundary between March 15 and June 15, 2018 to determine the bird species associated with the wetlands and waterbodies in and around the Project area and to approximate their overall use during the spring migration and early nesting period (Foo and LeBeau 2018). Study design followed the MNDNR *Avian and Bat Survey Protocols for Large Wind Energy Conversion Systems in Minnesota* (Mixon et al. 2014).

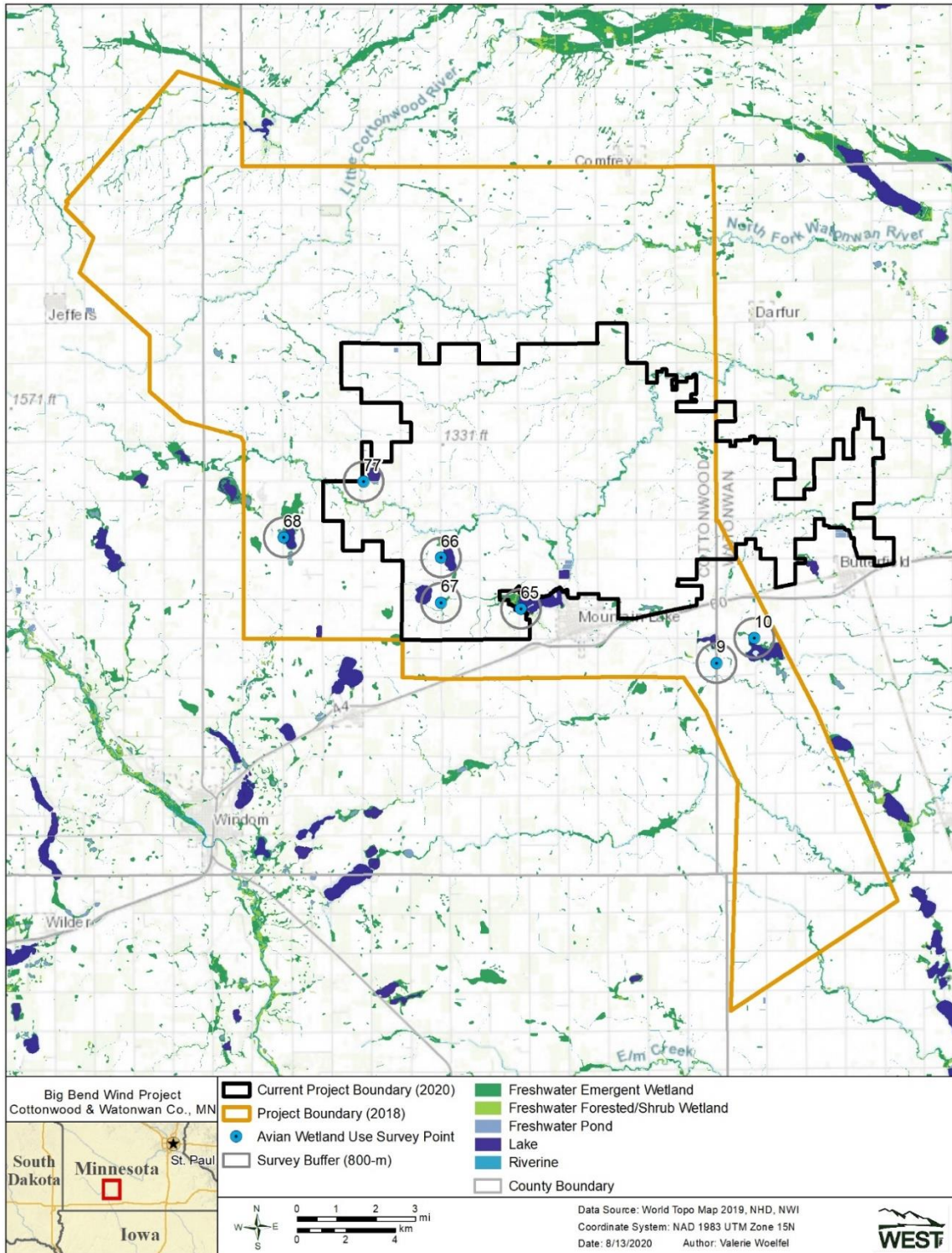
Surveys were completed three times at seven survey points established near open water lakes and larger wetlands in accordance with the MNDNR-approved Biological Study Plan (LeBeau 2018; **Figure 2.2**). Surveys were scheduled to occur so that at least one survey was completed during ice out and peak waterfowl migration. Surveys were completed for 60 min between dawn and 10:00 am or within three hours prior to sunset at each point within an 800-m radius circular plot. All species of large birds were recorded, but emphasis was placed on recording wetland/waterbody-dependent species, federal and state-listed species, and species of concern.

A total of 25 species were recorded (1,280 individual observations) over 21 hours of avian wetland use surveys. Waterfowl were the most commonly recorded wetland bird type (95.8%) and included 15 species with a total of 1,226 observations in 109 groups. Mallard was the most commonly recorded species (540 observations in 15 groups), comprising 42.2% of all observations, followed by greater white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons*) (280 observations in six groups), comprising 21.9% of all observations. Waterbirds, primarily double-crested cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), were the second-most commonly recorded bird group (2.5%). Great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) was the only other waterbird observed. Diurnal raptors made up 0.3% of all observations: three bald eagles, one red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), and one rough-legged hawk (*Buteo lagopus*) were observed.

Waterfowl were observed during 81% of the wetland use surveys and had a mean use of 58.38 observations/800-m plot/60-min survey, higher than any other bird type recorded due to large flocks migrating through the Project area. Waterbirds were observed during 19% of the surveys (1.52 observations/800-m plot/60-min survey); rails/coots were observed during 9.5% of the surveys (0.29 observations/800-m plot/60-min survey); and gulls were observed during 4.8% of the surveys (0.38).

No federally or state-listed species were observed during the 2018 avian wetland use surveys. One species of concern, bald eagle (n=3), was recorded during the surveys.





**Figure 2.2. Survey points and 800-meter-radius plots for avian wetland use surveys and National Wetland Inventory (NWI)-mapped wetlands and waterbodies within the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota (US Geological Survey National Hydrography Dataset 2017 and US Fish and Wildlife Service National Wetland Inventory 2017).**

### Raptor Nest Surveys 2018

WEST completed an aerial raptor nest survey between March 27 and April 12, 2018 to locate large raptor nests within the 2018 Project boundary and 1 mi buffer, and bald eagle nests within the 2018 Project boundary and 10 mi buffer (LeBeau and Foo 2018b). Aerial raptor nest surveys were completed from an R-44 helicopter and were completed by flying meandering transects spaced approximately 0.5 mi apart at speeds of 60-75 mi per hour.

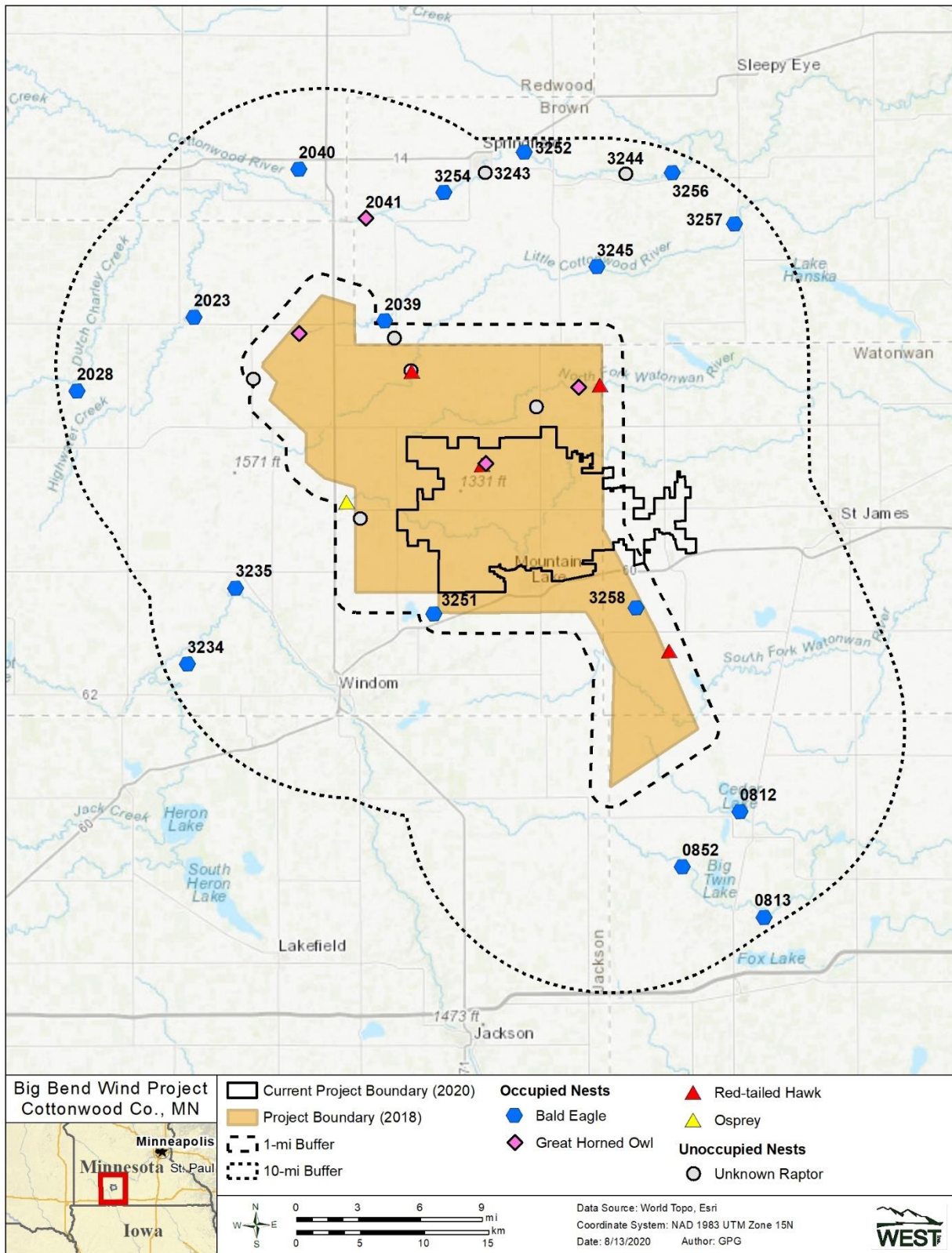
Sixteen occupied bald eagle nests were documented within 10 mi of the 2018 Project boundary (15 active nests, one inactive nest; **Figure 2.3**). One nest was located within the 2018 Project boundary, two were within 2 mi of the boundary, and 13 were over 2 mi from the boundary. Three nests consistent in size and structure with eagle nests were detected between the 1-mi and 10-mi buffers. One active osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) nest, three active great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*) nests, and four active red-tailed hawk nests were identified within 1 mi of the 2018 Project boundary. Five inactive, unidentified raptor nests were also identified and, based on size, were determined to be non-eagle nests.

### Avian Use Surveys 2018-2020

Following the methods in Year 1, a second year of avian use surveys was conducted between November 6, 2018 and February 19, 2020 within the 2019 Project boundary. Surveys were completed from November 2018 to October 2019 at 26 survey points, from November 2018 to February 2020 at 15 points added to the study partway through Year 1, and from July 2019 to February 2020 at one survey point added within a small expansion of the Project boundary per USFWS and MNDNR recommendations (**Figure 2.4**).

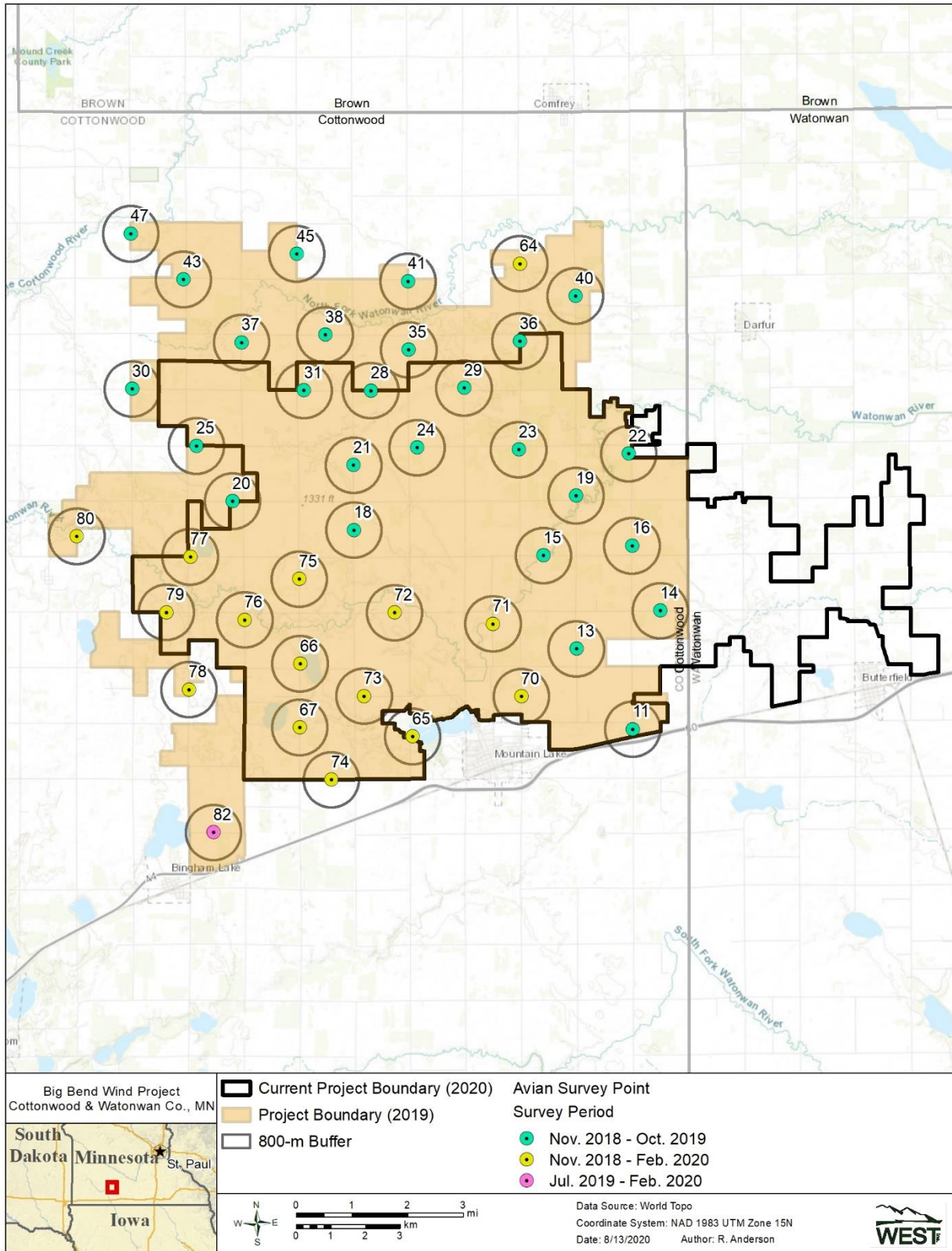
Thirty-four unique large bird species were recorded during Year 2 of avian use surveys. The most commonly observed large birds were Franklin's gull (34.6% of large bird observations), Canada goose (*Branta Canadensis*; 17.4%), ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*; 17.3%) and rock pigeon (*Columba livia*; 9.3%). Seven identified diurnal raptor species and seven unidentified raptor observations were recorded during surveys. Red-tailed hawk was the most commonly observed diurnal raptor (1.4% of large bird observations and 41.4% of diurnal raptor observations).

No federally or state-listed threatened or endangered species were observed during surveys or incidentally. Twenty-eight bald eagles in 28 groups were observed during surveys, 20 additional bald eagle observations were recorded incidentally. Twenty-seven bald eagle risk observations were recorded during surveys. Bald eagle risk observations occurred in fall, winter and spring. No golden eagles were observed. Two birds of particular concern, bald eagle and Franklin's gull, were documented during surveys and incidentally.



**Figure 2.1. Spring 2018 raptor nest survey results for the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota.**





**Figure 2.4. Avian use survey points and plots at the proposed Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota from November 6, 2018 – February 19, 2020.**

### Bald Eagle Nest Surveys 2019

WEST completed aerial bald eagle nest surveys between March 26 and March 28, 2019. The purpose of this survey was to locate bald eagle nests within 2.0 mi of the Project, and to visit previously documented nests within the half mean inter-nest distance (5.6 mi) that was calculated based on the results of the aerial raptor nest surveys conducted at the Project in 2018 (LeBeau and Foo 2018b). Aerial nest surveys were completed from an R-44 helicopter flying meandering transects spaced approximately 1.0 mi apart at speeds of 60-75 mi per hour.

No bald eagle nests were found within the 2019 Project boundary. Four bald eagle nests were located within the buffers, two within the 2-mi buffer and two within the 5.64-mi buffer, all of which were confirmed to be occupied and active either during the survey or during follow-up nest checks (**Figure 2.5**). Three of the bald eagle nests were historical nests from the 2018 surveys, and one was a new bald eagle nest, located 1.7 mi west of the 2019 Project boundary.

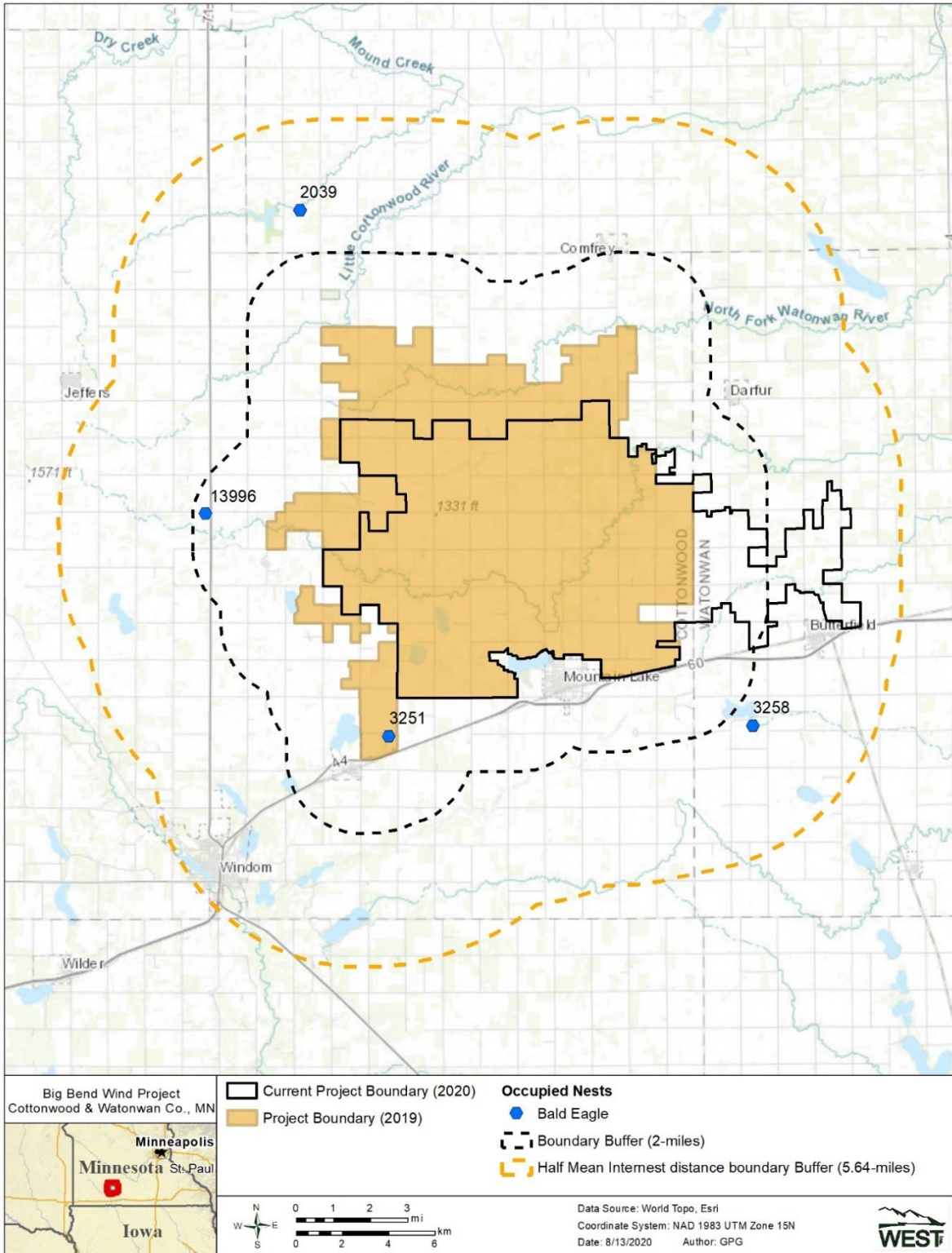
### Raptor Nest Surveys 2020

Copperhead completed an aerial raptor nest survey on February 19 and 20, 2020 to locate large raptor nests within the Project boundary<sup>1</sup> and 0.5-mi buffer, and bald eagle nests within the Project boundary and 10-mi buffer (Janos 2020). Aerial raptor nest surveys were completed from a Cessna 172 aircraft along 1-mi wide transects, with two observers, each covering approximately 0.5 mi viewshed. (**Figure 2.6**).

Fourteen nests consistent in size and structure with eagle nests were recorded during surveys (Janos 2020). Of the fourteen nests, eleven were occupied bald eagle nests (five occupied active and six occupied inactive). One occupied eagle nest was inside the Project boundary, one was 1.1 mi from the Project boundary, and nine were more than 2.0 mi from the Project boundary. Three inactive large stick nests consistent in size and structure with bald eagle nests were more than 3.0 mi outside the Project boundary. One inactive raptor nest was also recorded in the Project boundary; however, the nest was not large enough to have been a potential eagle nest.

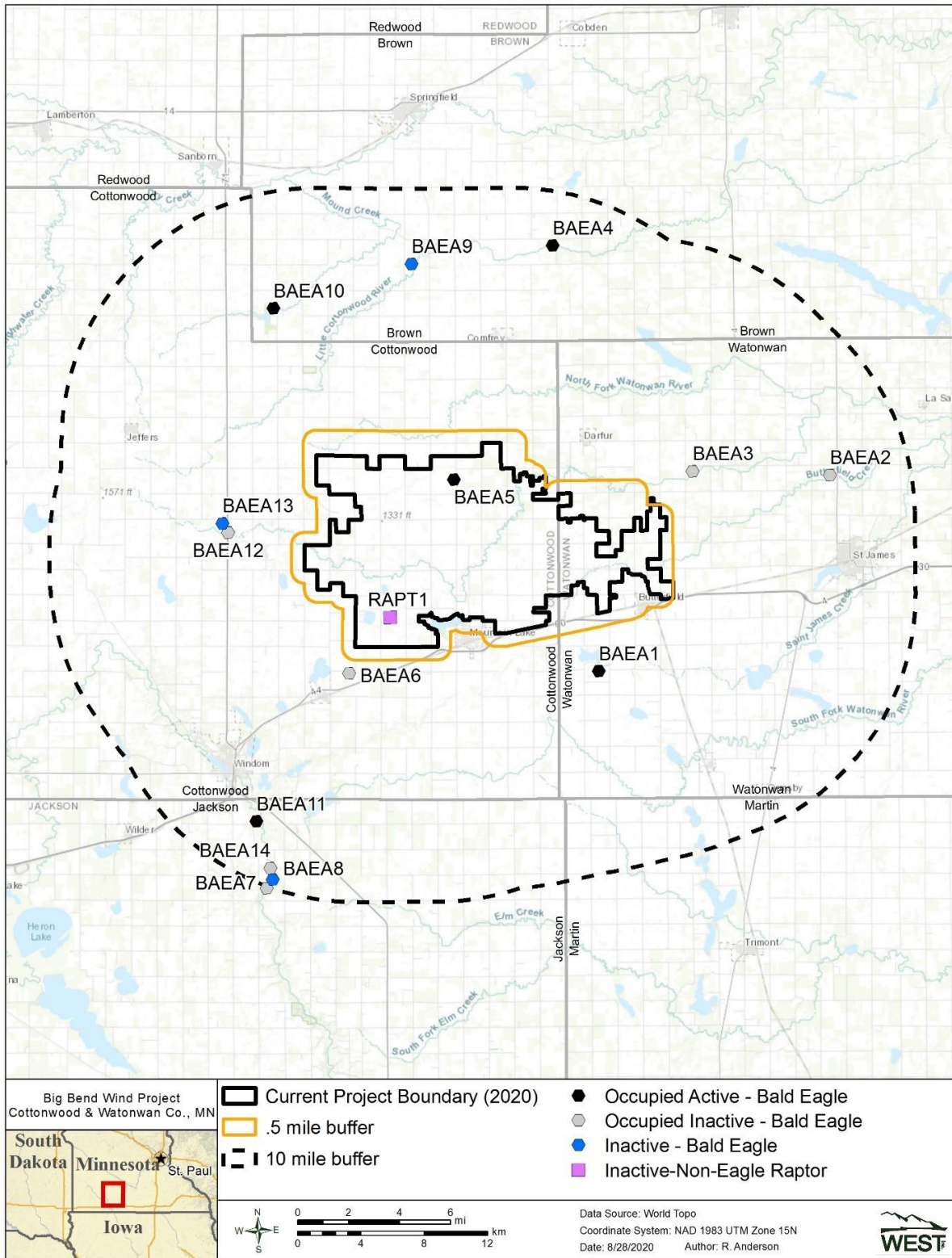
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<sup>1</sup> *The current boundary is slightly smaller than the boundary used during the 2020 aerial raptor nest survey.*



**Figure 2.5. Spring 2019 eagle nest survey results for the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota.**





**Figure 1.6. Spring 2020 raptor nest survey results for the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota**

### Eagle Nest Monitoring 2020

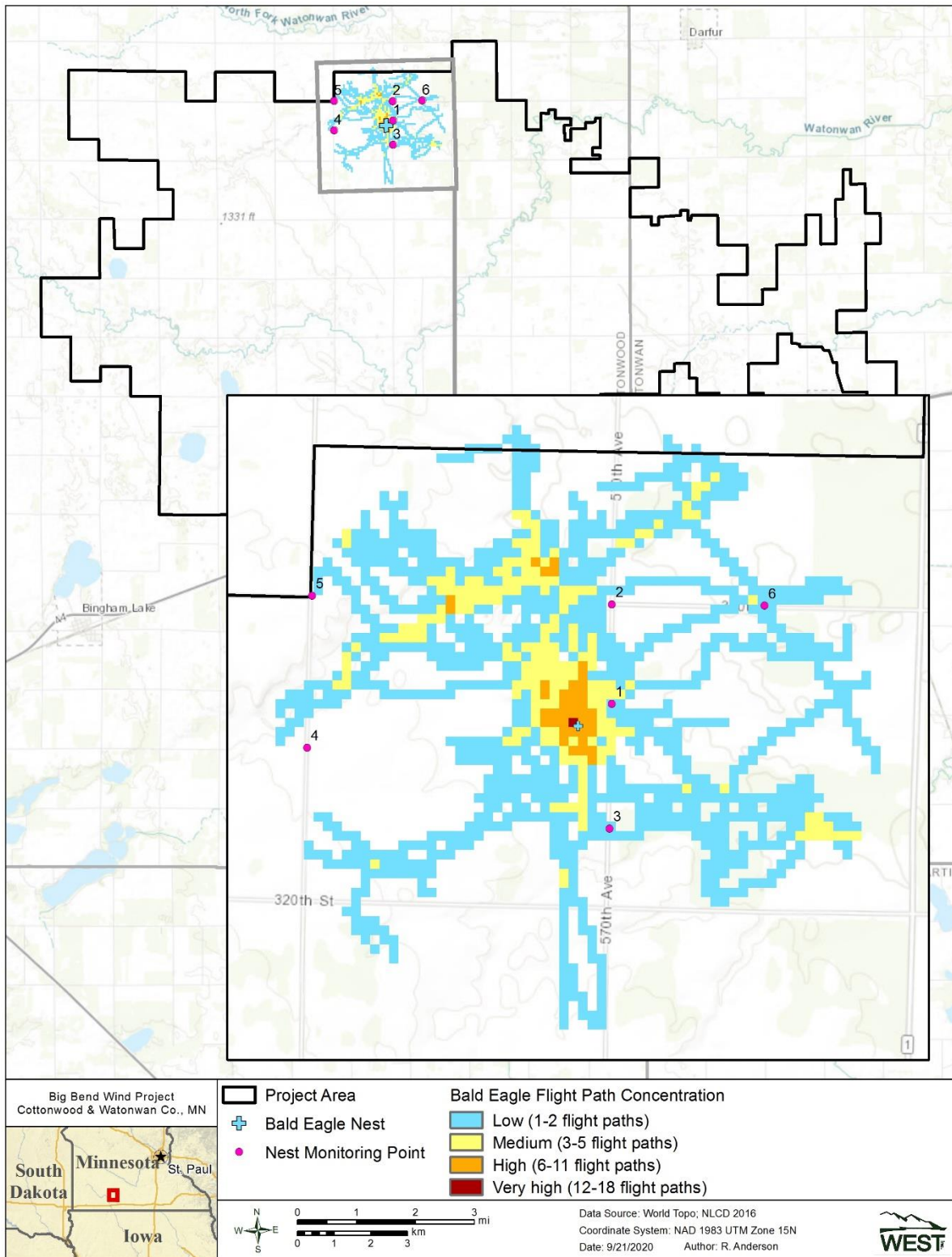
Eagle nest monitoring was completed by WEST from March 26, 2020 to August 1, 2020, at one known active bald eagle nest within the northern portion of the current project boundary. The objective of the eagle nest monitoring survey was to document how the eagles approached and left the nest location and how they used the area within 1.0 mile (mi) of the nest to inform infrastructure siting and assess potential risk to eagles (Foo and Bailey 2020). Bald eagle observations, behaviors, and flightpaths were recorded regardless of the distance from the observer. Each week, one-hour surveys were conducted at four survey points<sup>2</sup>; survey points were located on public roads and ranged in distance from 0.1 to 1.0 mi from the nest (**Figure 2.7**).

A total of 76 hours of nest monitoring were conducted and a total of 102 bald eagle observations were recorded. Relative to concentrations of flight paths observed within 1.0 mi of the nest, very high concentrations of eagle flights were observed within 100 m of the nest, with other areas of medium- and high-concentrations of flights along the tributary of the North Fork Watonwan River approximately 0.4-0.5 mi northwest of the nest (**Figure 2.7**). The farthest flight path observed at the nest extended approximately 2.0 mi from the nest. Aside from perching near the nest, eagle perch locations were primarily located northwest of the nest. One eaglet fledged from the nest in late June; therefore, the nest was successful in 2020.

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<sup>2</sup> Points 1 and 2 were replaced with points 5 and 6 in April 2020 to increase the surveyor's viewshed of the area surrounding the nest after leaf out.





**Figure 1.7. Bald eagle activity concentrations during eagle nest monitoring for the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota, from March 26 to August 1, 2020.**

### Wetland Avian Use 2020

WEST completed avian wetland use surveys for previously unsurveyed portions of the current Project boundary between March 26 and May 30, 2020, to determine the bird species associated with the wetlands and waterbodies in and around the area and to approximate overall wetland and waterbody use during the spring migration and early nesting period. Study design followed MNDNR-approved Biological Study Plan (LeBeau 2018), the 2018 wetland avian use surveys, and the MNDNR *Avian and Bat Survey Protocols for Large Wind Energy Conversion Systems in Minnesota* (Mixon et al. 2014).

Surveys were completed three times at three survey points established near waterbodies and larger wetlands within the portion of the current Project area that expanded into Watonwan County (**Figure 2.8**). Surveys were scheduled to occur so that at least one survey was completed during ice out and peak waterfowl migration. Surveys were completed for 60 min between dawn and 10:00 am or within three hours prior to sunset at each point within an 800-m radius circular plot. All species of large birds were recorded, but emphasis was placed on recording wetland/waterbody-dependent species, federal and state-listed species, and species of concern. This section will be updated upon completion of the survey report.

A total of 20 species (849 observations) were recorded over 9 hours of avian wetland use surveys. Waterfowl had higher mean use than any other bird type (82.11 observations/800-m plot/60-min survey), followed by shorebirds (7.00), gulls (3.56), and waterbirds (1.33; Foo and LeBeau 2020). Waterfowl accounted for 87.0% of all observations; the majority of use was attributed to Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*; 60.2% of all observations), mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*; 8.2%), and unidentified ducks (8.1%). Northern harrier was the only diurnal raptor species observed during surveys (n=2, 0.2% of all observations). Waterfowl were observed during 100% of surveys; shorebirds were observed during 88.9% of surveys, and waterbirds were observed during 44.4% of surveys.

No federally or state-listed threatened or endangered species or eagles were observed during avian wetland use surveys for previously unsurveyed portions of the Project (Foo and LeBeau 2020). Migrating waterfowl were observed at each survey point; however, the highest waterfowl use was observed at Point 88 (195.00 observations/800-m plot/60-min survey), primarily due to several large flocks of migrating Canada goose.

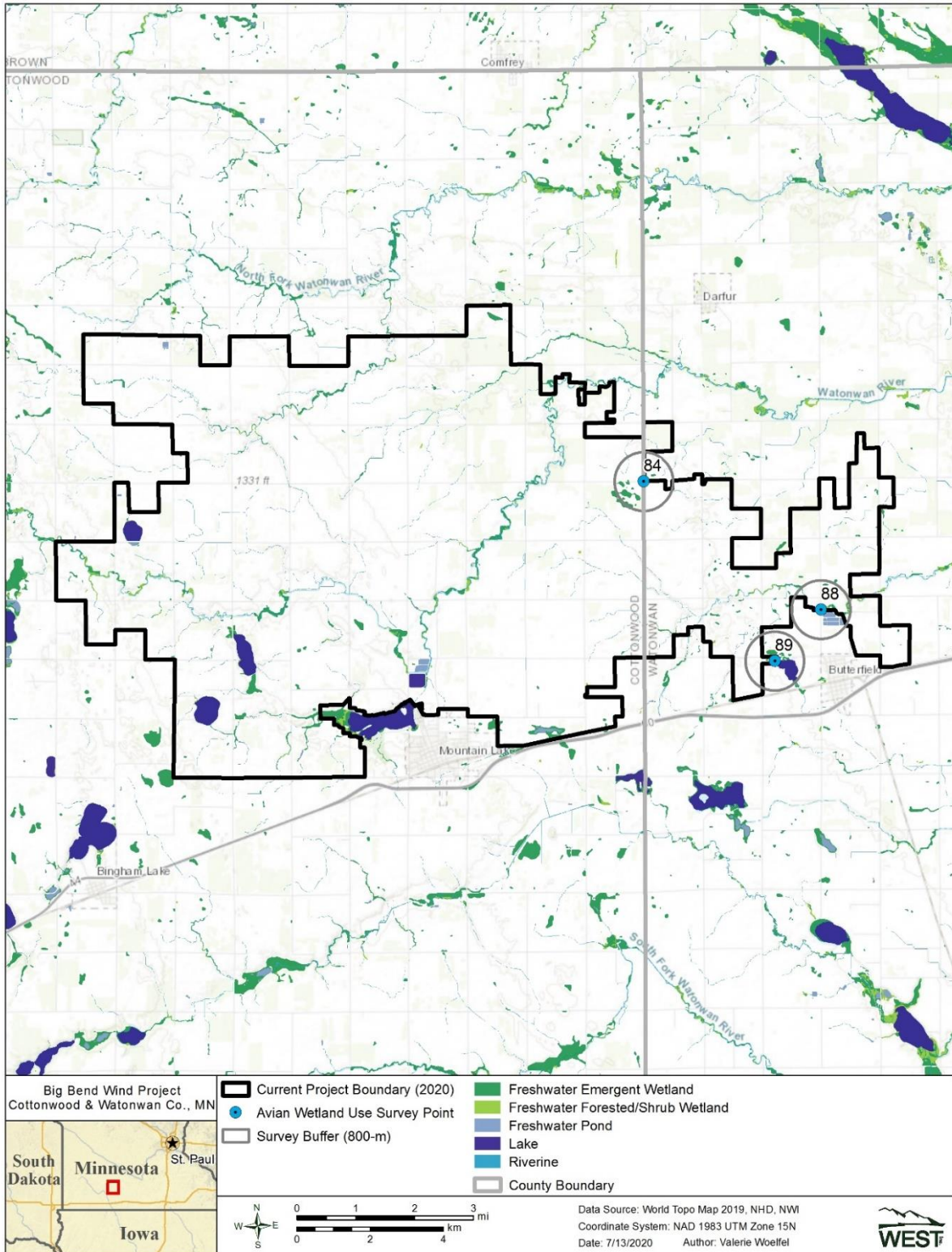


Figure 2.8. Avian wetland use survey points and plots at the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota from March 26, 2020 – May 30, 2020 (US Geological Survey National Hydrography Dataset 2017 and US Fish and Wildlife Service National Wetland Inventory 2017).

### Native Prairie Habitat Assessment 2020

The purpose of the native prairie assessment was to identify areas of potential native prairie grasslands within the current Project area to inform Project design, as well as to inform the Native Prairie Protection Plan if any Project-related impacts are proposed within those parcels. As defined in the Minnesota Statutes (Section 84.02, Subd. 5, 2019a), “native prairie” means “land that has never been plowed where native prairie vegetation originating from the site currently predominates or, if disturbed, is predominantly covered with native prairie vegetation that originated from the site.”

The preliminary assessment consisted of a desktop assessment and field visit conducted along public rights-of-way. The desktop assessment included a review of recent aerial photographs and other publicly available land cover databases including the MBS sites and MNDNR Native Prairie dataset. During the field visit, a qualified ecologist confirmed the locations of native prairie identified during the desktop assessment, to the extent possible from the roadsides, and looked for additional areas of potential native prairie (Markhart and Foo 2020). The ecologist also refined the boundaries of potential prairie areas identified during the desktop assessment, if necessary. The field study was completed on June 9 and June 10, 2020.

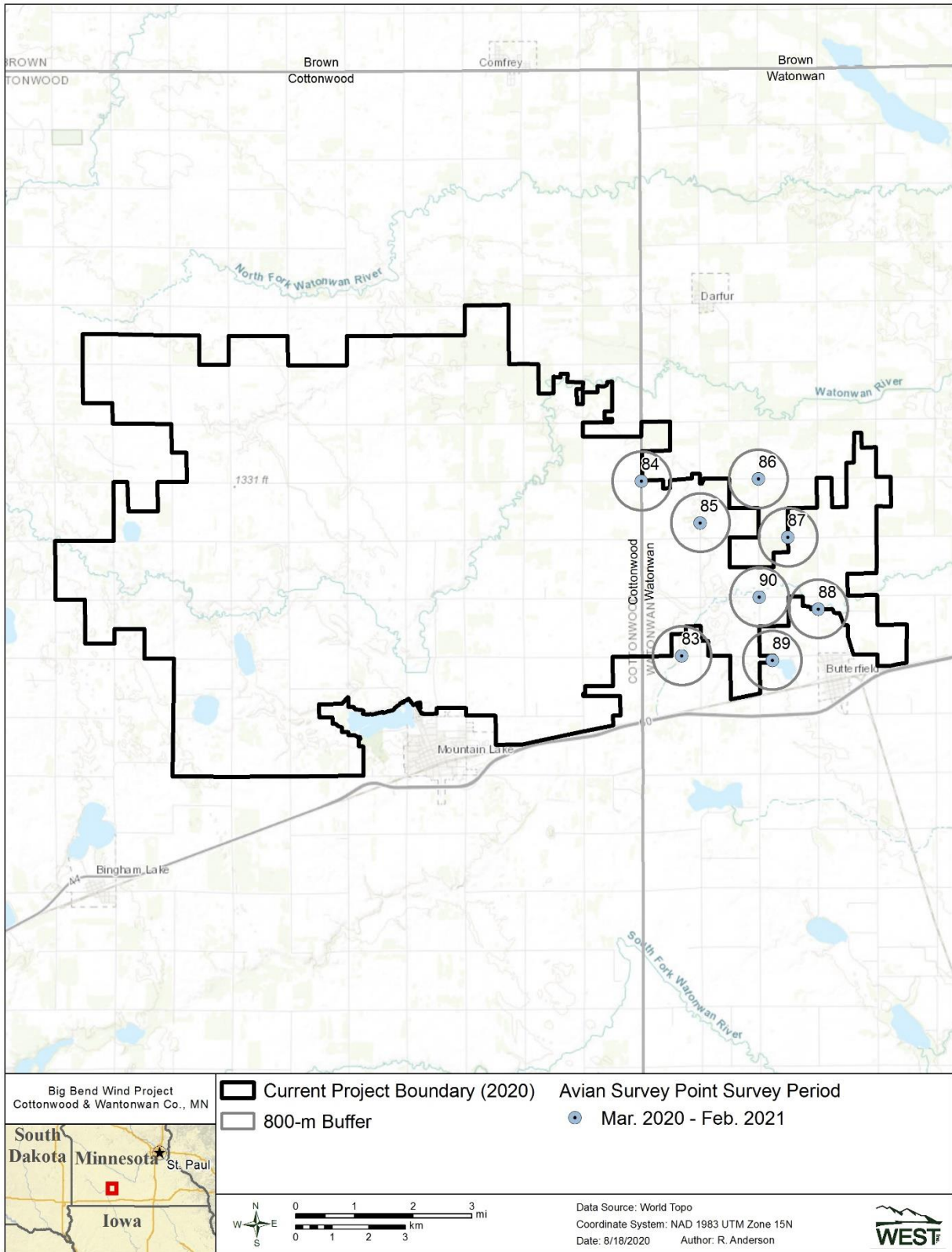
The preliminary desktop assessment identified 1,106 ac of potential native prairie. The field assessment eliminated approximately 640 ac of this due to the presence of non-native cool season grasslands, riparian areas, and evident disturbance (e.g., tree plantings, row crops, etc.) and verified 20 ac as untilled native prairie. The remaining 446 ac were considered potentially untilled native prairie and will be further assessed once Project design is finalized to confirm whether or not they constitute native prairie.

### Avian Use Surveys 2020-2021

Additional avian use studies of the current Project area are underway in Watonwan County. The objective of the study is to evaluate species composition and seasonal and spatial use of the previously unsurveyed portion of the current Project area by birds, with a particular focus on eagles and species of concern. The study methods are consistent with other avian use surveys conducted at the Project and with recommendations outlined in the USFWS 2012 *WEG*, Appendix C(1)(a) of the USFWS 2013 *ECPG*, and the USFWS 2016 *Final Eagle Rule*.

Monthly surveys began on March 27, 2020 and are scheduled to continue through February 2021 at eight survey points (**Figure 2.9**). Survey methods are consistent with Year 1 and Year 2 avian use surveys. This section will be updated upon completion of the survey report.





**Figure 2.9. Avian use survey points and plots at the Big Bend Wind Project in Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota from March 2020 – February 2021.**

## Acoustic Bat Survey

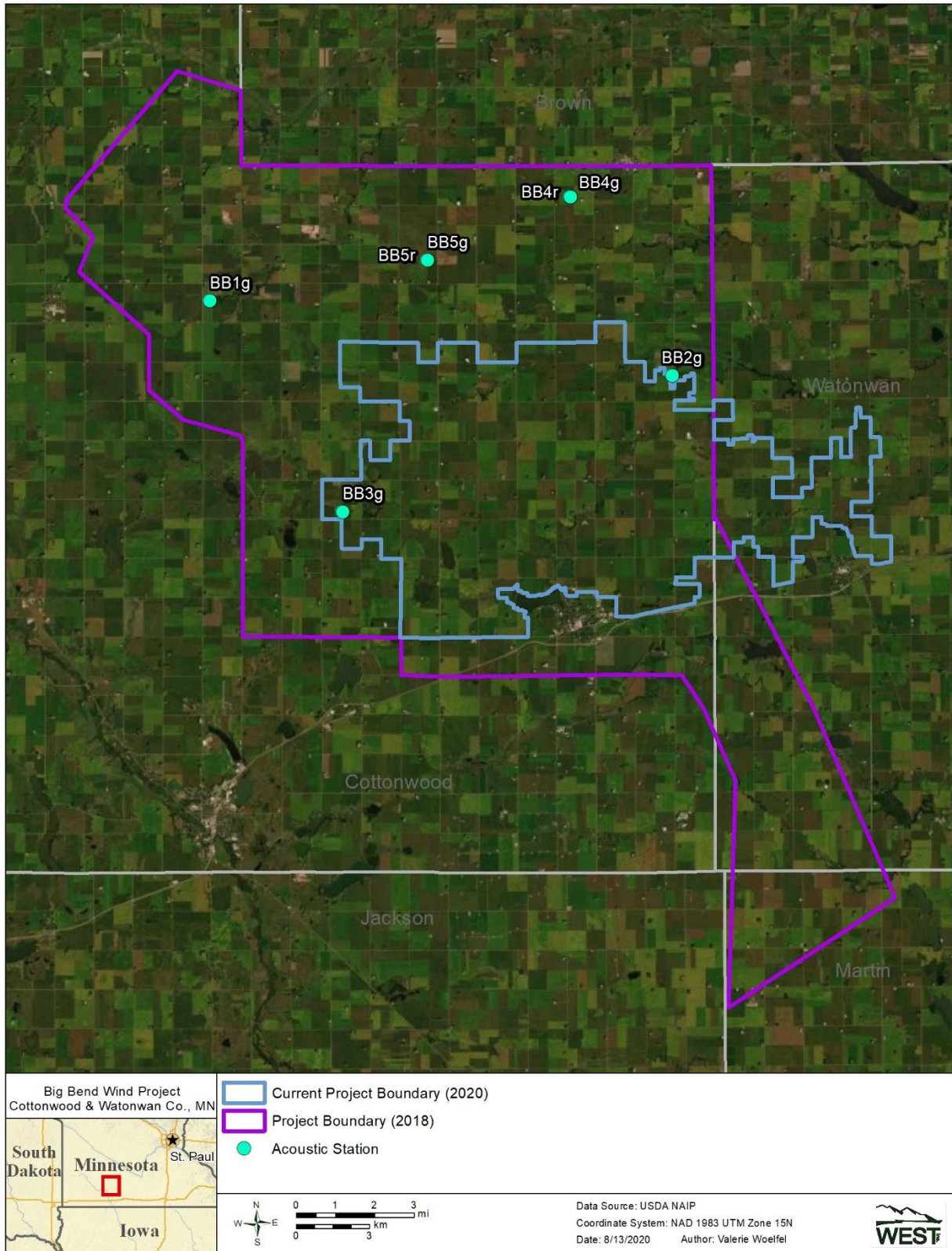
WEST completed a bat acoustic survey from April 20 to October 15, 2018 (Solick et al. 2019). The objective of the survey was to determine bat activity and species composition, and to assess the possible risk to bats by comparing bat activity within the 2018 Project boundary to activity at nearby operating wind projects (Elm Creek 1 and Elm Creek 2 Wind Energy Facilities) during summer maternity and fall migration seasons.

Acoustic surveys were conducted at two met tower stations in cropland habitat that was representative of potential turbine locations (i.e., 'representative' stations), and at three stations in habitat attractive to bats (i.e., 'bat feature' stations) within the 2018 Project boundary (**Figure 2.10**). At the turbine representative stations, microphones for Wildlife Acoustics SM3 detectors were paired at each met tower, with one placed near the ground at 5 ft and one elevated to 148 ft above ground level. The bat feature stations were placed in riparian forest habitat atop a 5 ft PVC pole.

Bat activity was monitored for a total of 1,004 detector nights. Detectors and microphones were operating for 88.9% of the sampling period. Of the total bat passes recorded, 78.8% were classified as low frequency (LF; e.g., big brown bats [*Eptesicus fuscus*], hoary bats [*Lasiurus cinereus*], and silver-haired bats [*Lasionycteris noctivagans*]), and 21.1% of bat passes were classified as high frequency (HF; e.g., tri-colored bats [*Perimyotis subflavus*], eastern red bats [*Lasiurus borealis*], and *Myotis* species). This proportion was similar among bat feature stations (77.4% LF, 22.5% HF) and among ground representative stations (83.2% LF; 16.8% HF).

The automated identification program Kaleidoscope 4.2.0 (KPro; Wildlife Acoustics, Concord, Massachusetts) identified calls for seven species that potentially occur in the assessment area. Big brown bats and hoary bats were the primary species recorded, present on 65% and 60% of detector nights, respectively. Eastern red bats were the third most frequently identified species (49% of detector nights), followed by silver-haired bats (43%). *Myotis* species (NLEB and little brown bats [*Myotis lucifugus*]) and tri-colored bats were detected on 25% and 11% of detector nights, respectively. KPro classified eight calls as potential NLEB calls; however, after qualitative review, none were confirmed to display characteristics indicative of typical NLEB call structures.

Overall bat activity at representative stations was approximately two times greater during the summer ( $14.61 \pm 1.48$  bat passes per detector night) than in the fall ( $6.78 \pm 1.34$  bat passes per detector night). Activity at representative stations was lowest during the spring ( $1.80 \pm 0.70$ ); however, data was only collected at one met tower during the spring due to a weather delay in the installation of the BB5 met tower. Bat activity averaged 13.38 bat passes per detector-night during the fall migration period. Weekly bat activity was relatively low at the start of the study period and increased from mid-July through the end of August, peaking from August 11 to August 17 (42.92 bat passes per detector night). Weekly bat activity decreased through September and was relatively low through the end of the study period.



**Figure 1.10. Location of bat detector stations during 2018 bat acoustic monitoring at the Big Bend Wind Project, Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota.**

Bat feature stations averaged  $92.38 \pm 6.92$  bat passes per detector night, representative ground stations averaged  $12.93 \pm 1.42$  bat passes per detector night and representative raised stations averaged  $8.40 \pm 0.97$  bat passes per detector night. Bat activity in the 2018 Project boundary varied among representative stations. At the paired ground and raised representative stations, bat activity was much higher at station BB5 than at station BB4 (**Figure 2.10**). Bat passes at representative ground stations outnumbered passes at raised stations at both BB4 and BB5.

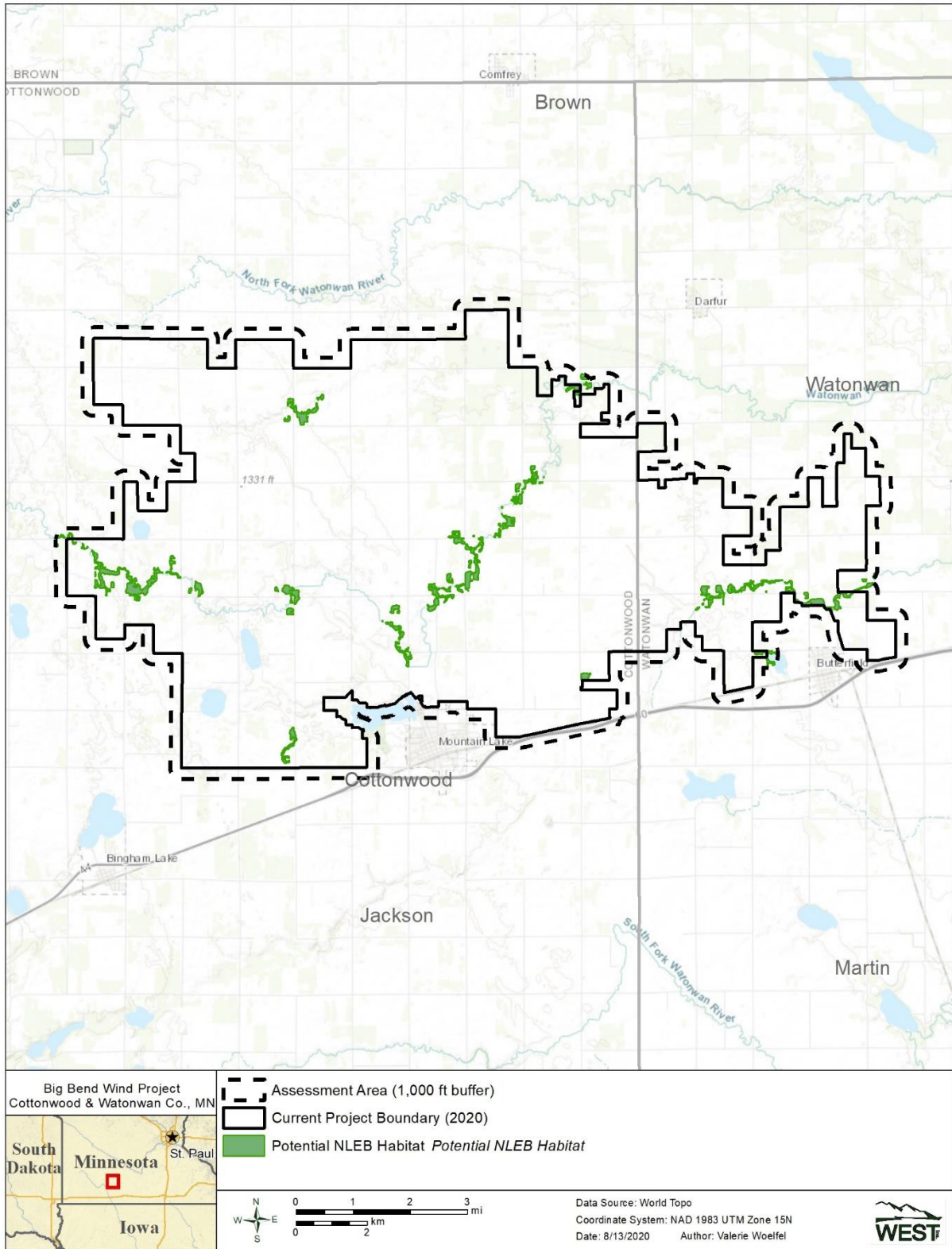
#### Northern Long-Eared Bat Habitat Assessment

WEST completed both a desktop and ground-based habitat assessment for the federally threatened NLEB for the current Project boundary in spring 2019 and spring 2020 (**Figure 2.11**). The purpose of the assessment was to identify potentially suitable summer NLEB habitat within the current Project area and 1,000-foot (ft) buffer. The assessment was completed in accordance with the USFWS *Range-Wide Indiana Bat Survey Guidelines* (USFWS 2019), which also applies to NLEB.

An initial habitat desktop review of the current Project area and 1,000-ft Project area buffer (Assessment Area) was completed using available Geographic Information System data. Forested areas and subsequent potential habitat were derived from a machine learning classification algorithm used to delineate mature forest patches. The results from the model were filtered and visually assessed for accuracy, whereby false positives were removed and forest boundaries were adjusted, if necessary. This information was used to identify potential areas of NLEB suitable forested habitat for subsequent ground-truthing.

A total of 756.0 ac (1.7% of the current Project area) of potentially suitable NLEB habitat was identified in the desktop analysis. During the site visits, the biologist determined 145.0 ac identified during the desktop analysis were not suitable NLEB habitat and identified an additional 12.6 ac of suitable habitat, for a total of 623.6 ac (1.4% of current Project area) of suitable habitat for NLEB within the Assessment Area (**Figure 2.11**). The majority of suitable habitat consisted of forested riparian areas scattered across the Assessment Area, particularly along the Watonwan River and Butterfield Creek in the southern portion of the current Project area. Unsuitable forest patches were either ornamental or in residential areas and did not meet criteria for suitable NLEB habitat.





**Figure 2.11. Potentially suitable habitat for federally listed NLEB at the Big Bend Wind Project, Cottonwood and Watonwan counties, Minnesota**

### 3 DISCUSSION AND IMPACT ANALYSIS

Following the WEG tiered process, Big Bend Wind’s initial screening of the broad geographic region determined areas where development may pose significant risks to species of concern and refined Project area to avoid such locations. The Tier 2 evaluation reviewed readily available desktop resources to assess potential adverse effects to wildlife and their habitats within the refined Project area. Part of that review was to determine potential occurrence of species of concern within the Project area. This review was conducted in 2017 and may not be applicable to the current boundary because of the reduction in size and changes in species status. A final review of both the IPaC and MNDNR Rare Species Guide occurred on August 11, 2020 within the current and final Project area (specific to the IPaC) and Cottonwood and Watonwan Counties (specific to the MNDNR Rare Species Guide). The IPaC search revealed that Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skipper no longer appear as species with the potential to occur within these counties or the Project area. The number of birds of particular concern with the potential to occur was reduced to five (bald eagle, black tern, Franklin’s Gull, lesser yellowlegs, and semipalmated sandpiper) further demonstrating Big Bend Wind’s ability to follow the WEG (USFWS 2017). No changes were associated to the MNDNR Rare Species Guide.

Tier 3 studies were implemented to better understand potential adverse effects to wildlife and their habitats identified in the Tier 2 evaluation. While many of those studies were designed using various iterations of the Project boundary as it evolved, they all are applicable to understanding potential adverse effects to species that occur within the current and final Project boundary. Information from all of these studies were used to answer Tier 3 questions posed in the WEG specific to the current and final Project boundary (**Figure 3.1**).

#### 3.1 Tier 3 Questions

<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>
Do field studies indicate that species of concern are present on or likely to use the proposed site?	<p>Field studies indicate that species of concern are present in low numbers and certain species will likely use the Project area (Solick et al. 2019, Foo et al. 2019, Bailey et al. 2020).</p> <p>No federally listed species were recorded during two years of avian use surveys.</p> <p>One state endangered species, Henslow’s sparrow (<i>Ammodramus henslowii</i>) was recorded incidentally in summer during Year 1 surveys.</p> <p>Year 1 and Year 2 of avian use surveys indicate that bald eagles are present in the Project area and vicinity.</p>

**Table 3.1. Predicted impacts of the Big Bend Wind Project: Responses to questions posed in Tier 3 of the Land-Based Wind Energy Guidelines (USFWS 2012).**

Question	Response
	<p>Two birds of particular concern (black tern [<i>Chlidonias niger</i>] and Franklin’s gull [<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>]) were observed in the Project area.</p> <p>The Project area is within the range of NLEB and potential NLEB habitat exists within the Project area; however, no NLEB calls were identified during acoustic monitoring (Solick et al. 2019, Hyzy et al. 2020).</p>
<p>Do field studies indicate the potential for significant adverse impacts on affected populations of species of habitat fragmentation concern?</p>	<p>Field studies indicate that due to relatively limited habitat and preexisting fragmentation from intensive agricultural cropland production, the Project area is considered unlikely to create adverse effects to the bird or bat populations of habitat fragmentation concern.</p>
<p>What is the distribution, relative abundance, behavior, and site use of species of concern identified in Tiers 1 or 2, and to what extent do these factors expose these species to risk from the proposed wind energy project?</p>	<p>Data indicate that development of the current Project area is unlikely to trigger substantial impacts to small or large bird populations, including listed species or birds of particular concern. The majority (96.0%) of the current Project area consists of cropland and developed areas, with little preferred habitat for species of concern. Most species observed are relatively widespread and abundant in the region, signifying a moderately low risk of adverse impacts to bird populations.</p> <p>Franklin gulls and bald eagles were the only species of concern found in relatively high numbers compared to other species of concern during Tier 3 surveys. Flocks of migrating Franklin’s gulls may occur within the current Project area on occasion, but the species is not expected to occur frequently. The majority (95.1%) of Franklin’s gull observations were recorded below the estimated RSH; most observations occurred in one large flock in a tilled field at Point 74 along the southwest boundary of the Project. Only two Franklin’s gull fatalities have been reported in publicly available records from operating wind farms in the Midwest (Bay et al 2017, Osborn et al. 2000).</p> <p>Bald eagles were observed throughout the Project area, during all seasons and not concentrated in a particular portion of the Project area but were generally observed near rivers and lakes during both study years. One bald eagle nest was detected within the Project boundary in 2020. The majority of flights observed during the monitoring of this nest were in the immediate vicinity of the nest and 0.4-0.5 mi northwest of the nest, along a tributary of the North Fork Watonwan River.</p>

**Table 3.1. Predicted impacts of the Big Bend Wind Project: Responses to questions posed in Tier 3 of the Land-Based Wind Energy Guidelines (USFWS 2012).**

Question	Response
	<p>Seven bat species were identified as potentially occurring in the current Project area, including the federally threatened NLEB. No NLEB calls were qualitatively identified by a qualified bat biologist (Solick et al. 2019). It is likely that migratory tree bat species will utilize forested habitat within the Project area; however, implementing conservation measures should minimize the potential take of all bat species using these habitats.</p>
<p>What are the potential risks of adverse impacts of the proposed wind energy project to individuals and local populations of species of concern and their habitats? (In the case of rare or endangered species, what are the possible impacts to such species and their habitats?)</p>	<p>Bird and bat species are susceptible to collision impacts but these potential impacts are not expected to adversely impact populations. The Project area is located in highly fragmented landscape. Given that previous fragmentation and conversion to cropland has likely already negatively affected the bird and bat populations, the Project area is not expected to further adversely impact bird and bat populations.</p> <p>The closest operating wind-energy facilities to the Project area with public post-construction fatality data are the Elm Creek 1 and Elm Creek 2 Wind Energy Facilities, located approximately 5.0 mi and 6.2 mi from the Project area. Both projects are in cropland similar to the Project area. Bat casualty rates at Elm Creek 1 and 2 ranged from 1.49 – 2.81 bats/MW/study periods, respectively (Derby et al. 2010, 2012). Based on the proximity of these wind facilities to the Project area, it is expected that bat fatality rates observed at these facilities would be similar to fatalities observed in the Project area assuming wind turbines are sited in a similar cropland dominated habitat (Solick et al. 2019).</p> <p>With impact avoidance and minimization measures in place and the relatively low levels of use observed during surveys, the Project area is not likely to cause population-level impacts to birds, including diurnal raptors or sensitive birds, or to bats.</p>
<p>How can developers mitigate identified significant adverse impacts?</p>	<p>No mitigation is warranted because risk during construction will be minimized to the greatest extent practicable, and risk during operations to species of concern will be relatively low.</p>
<p>Are there studies that should be initiated at this stage that would be continued in post-construction?</p>	<p>No additional studies are needed.</p>

## 3.2 Results and Impact Analysis

### 3.2.1 Birds

No federally threatened or endangered bird species were observed during surveys. One state-listed endangered species, Henslow's sparrow, a species that has often been recorded during baseline surveys at other regional wind energy facilities in southwestern Minnesota, was recorded incidentally during Year 1 avian use surveys. However, no Henslow's sparrow fatalities at wind energy facilities have been reported in publicly available data, so overall risk is anticipated to be relatively low (Foo et al. 2019). No state-listed species were recorded during Year 2 of avian use surveys.

Three birds of particular concern (bald eagle, black tern, red-headed woodpecker) were observed in the current Project area during surveys at comparatively low levels during Year 1 and one bird of particular concern (Franklin's gull) was observed incidentally. Two birds of particular concern were recorded during Year 2 (bald eagle, Franklin's gull). Approximately 96% of the current Project area consists of cultivated crops and developed areas, leaving limited preferred herbaceous (0.5%) and open water (0.9%) habitat available to species of concern. The majority of species of concern were recorded infrequently and in low numbers, suggesting low use of the Project area.

Bald eagles were observed using the Project area during all seasons in Year 1 of avian use surveys and in fall, winter, and spring during Year 2 of avian use surveys, which is typical of the region. Overall bald eagle use was not concentrated in a specific portion of the Project area, although higher use was generally associated with areas in close proximity to rivers and lakes. A bald eagle nest was discovered within the Project area during 2020 aerial nest surveys and eagle use around this nest is expected to be high if occupied in the future. The majority of flights observed during the monitoring of this nest were in the immediate vicinity of the nest and 0.4-0.5 mi northwest of the nest, along a tributary of the North Fork Watonwan River; siting of turbines near the nest may increase eagle collision risk during Project operation. Bald eagle use and proposed minimization and avoidance measures are discussed in further detail in the Eagle Management Plan (Big Bend Wind, LLC 2020).

Project survey results indicate that development of the Project area is unlikely to adversely impact small or large bird populations, including diurnal raptors or species of concern. Most species observed are prevalent and abundant, and their populations are therefore at low risk of adverse impacts from the Project. Analysis of data collected during raptor and eagle surveys suggests there is minimal potential for the Project to create instability in local or regional nesting diurnal raptor populations.

Results from Tier 1, 2, and 3 studies suggest that with the implementation of the Avoidance and Minimization Measures (AMMs; Section 4.0), the Project is not likely to create substantial risk to birds.

### 3.2.2 Bats

The current Project area is within federally threatened NLEB range; however, no known hibernacula or maternity colonies exist within the Project area, and the nearest known hibernacula is approximately 50 mi northeast. Potential NLEB habitat does exist within the Project area, and it is likely that tree-roosting migratory bat species will utilize the Project area, including NLEB and other state-listed species of concern. Although NLEB were not documented as occurring within the Project area during the acoustic bat surveys, Big Bend Wind will implement best management practices recommended by USFWS and MNDNR to minimize take for all bat species (Baerwald et al. 2008, Arnett et al. 2010, Good et al. 2011). These measures include siting turbines more than 1,000 ft (305 m) from suitable habitat, minimizing tree removal to the greatest extent possible including focusing any necessary tree removal in winter, and locking or feathering blades to manufacturer's cut in speed from one half hour before sunset to one half hour after sunrise from April 1 to October 31.

## 4 IMPACT AVOIDANCE AND MINIMIZATION MEASURES

This section discusses the measures that Big Bend Wind has implemented, or plans to implement, to avoid and minimize potential impacts on birds and bats. For fatality monitoring measures, please see **Section 5**. These AMMs were informed by pre-construction studies (**Section 2**) and Big Bend Wind's experience developing and operating environmentally responsible wind energy facilities. Additional measures to avoid and minimize potential impacts to eagles are described in the Eagle Management Plan (Big Bend Wind, LLC 2020).

### 4.1 Project Layout and Design

Big Bend Wind adopted the following industry-standard and also agency-informed best management practices (BMPs) to avoid, minimize, and reduce potential impacts to birds and bats during the planning/design stage of the Project:

- The Project area has been sited in disturbed agricultural lands away from major wildlife use and habitat areas.
- The Project has been sited to avoid all areas identified by the Minnesota Biological Survey as having moderate or high biodiversity significance.
- The Project has been sited to avoid calcareous fens and native prairies as defined by the Minnesota Statutes (Section 84.02, Subd. 5, 2019), to the extent practicable.
- Turbines will be sited more than 1,000 ft from suitable NLEB summer habitat to minimize risk to roosting bats.
- Tree clearing will be minimized by utilizing existing roads and minimizing the size of clearings needed around turbines, to the maximum extent practicable. This measure minimizes potential disturbance to bats as well as conversion of natural areas to Project facilities (habitat loss).

- The electrical collection system will be placed underground. This measure will eliminate collision risk and electrocution hazards for birds using the Project area and allows habitat to regenerate.
- The length of the 161kV aboveground transmission line necessary to connect the Project to the regional grid will be minimized to the extent practicable.
- Permanent fencing will only be used around the substation and operations and maintenance building as necessary for security and human safety.
- Turbines will be sited as far away as practicable from any "natural" areas likely to have higher avian activity or diversity.
- Areas of disturbance have been minimized:
  - Infrastructure footprints associated with roads and other infrastructure have been minimized to the extent feasible
  - Area disturbed by pre-construction monitoring and testing activities were minimized to the extent feasible; and
  - The length and number of access roads were minimized and existing roads were used when feasible

## **4.2 Construction**

Big Bend Wind will employ industry-standard BMPs to reduce potential impacts to birds and bats during the construction stage of the Project:

- To avoid and minimize impacts to roosting bats during the maternity season, tree removal will be minimized to the greatest extent possible, and Big Bend Wind will attempt to conduct any necessary tree removal in winter.
- Wildlife-friendly erosion measures will be used during construction to minimize entrapment and potential mortality of small animals and reptiles.
- All employees and contractors working on the site will receive worker awareness training for identifying and responding to encounters with sensitive biological resources, including avian and bat species. Training will include:
  - Reducing the potential for vehicle collision by adhering to posted speed limits, being alert for wildlife, and using additional caution in low visibility conditions.
  - Confining construction vehicle activity to the limits of disturbance.
  - Avoiding harassing or disturbing wildlife, particularly during reproductive seasons.
  - Keeping any dogs on site on leashes to avoid the potential for unleashed dogs to harass wildlife within the Project.
  - Storing food-related trash and waste in containers and remove on a regular basis to reduce attractiveness of the Project to scavengers and their prey.

- Eliminating ponding water following construction to minimize on-site attractants to bats.
- Reviewing the Wildlife Incident Reporting System (WIRS) so that the construction team understands the procedures for recording avian and bat species found in the Project (**Section 5**).

### 4.3 Operations

Big Bend Wind intends to adopt the following industry-standard BMPs to reduce potential impacts to birds and bats during the operational stage of the Project:

- Lock or feather blades for all turbines up to manufacturer's cut-in speed from one-half hour before sunset to one-half hour after sunrise from April 1 to October 31 to minimize impacts to bats.
- An Aircraft Detection Lighting System (ADLS) will be utilized at the Project to reduce the frequency of blinking lights at night.
- Lighting will be minimized to the extent practicable. An ADLS will be installed, and downward projecting lights or motion sensor activated lights will be installed as practicable to minimize attractants to birds/bats.
- Lighting that does not escape the nacelle will be used, or nacelle lights will be turned off at night as practicable to minimize attractants to birds/bats.
- Minimize the number of storm water control features (sediment retention ponds) to minimize on-site attractants to bats.
- Wildlife carrion and livestock carcasses in proximity to the turbines will be reported for removal as practicable. This measure reduces the attractiveness of the Project to avian scavengers and their prey.
- All employees and contractors working on the site will receive worker awareness training for identifying and responding to encounters with sensitive biological resources, including avian and bat species. Training will include:
  - Reducing the potential for impacts to wildlife by turning off lighting, adhering to posted speed limits, managing food-related trash and waste appropriately, etc.
  - Identification of state- and federally listed species as well as eagles so that this information can be relayed to the appropriate entity in a timely manner and operational adjustments implemented if appropriate.
  - Reviewing the WIRS so that the operations team understands the procedures for recording avian and bat species found in the Project.



## 5 OPERATIONAL MONITORING AND WILDLIFE INCIDENT REPORTING

### 5.1 Fatality Monitoring

Big Bend Wind will conduct post-construction mortality monitoring (PCM) surveys following construction to assess and monitor for potential direct impacts to birds and bats. The post-construction mortality monitoring study will address Tier 4 of the WEG and also will be consistent with the MNDNR's *Avian and Bat Survey Protocols for Large Wind Energy Conversion Systems in Minnesota* (Mixon et al. 2014). At least one year of bird and bat PCM will be conducted, the details of which will be developed through coordination with the MNDNR and Minnesota Department of Commerce (MNDOC, Energy and Environmental Review & Analysis Unit). Any eagle-specific PCM protocols will be developed through coordination with the USFWS as part of the EMP development. Searcher efficiency and carcass removal trials will be completed during each survey season to capture seasonal variations and aid in determining estimated bird and bat fatality rates for the Project.

After the first year of monitoring is completed, a mortality analysis will be completed that evaluates species, number, location, and distance from the nearest turbine for each recovered bird or bat. At a minimum, the mortality analysis will consider the following:

- Number of annual mortalities per turbine and estimate of facility-wide fatality rates; and
- Comparison to existing public data on bird and bat mortality at projects with similar habitat types and study methodology.

The survey results will be provided to the USFWS, MNDOC and MNDNR no later than March 15<sup>th</sup> of the year following the surveys.

### 5.2 Wildlife Incident Reporting System

If injured or deceased species protected under the federal ESA or BGEPA are discovered at the Project, Big Bend Wind or its representatives will contact the USFWS-Minnesota Twin Cities Field Office (952-252-0092) within one business day, or as soon as possible thereafter in the event of unique circumstances that would prevent such immediate contact.

If species protected under the Minnesota Endangered Species Protection Act are discovered at the Project, Big Bend Wind or its representatives will contact the MNDNR within one business day, or as soon as possible thereafter in the event of unique circumstances that would prevent such immediate contact.

Big Bend Wind shall notify the Public Utilities Commission, USFWS, and the MNDNR within 24 hours of the discovery of any of the following: (a) five or more dead or injured birds or bats within a five day reporting period; (b) one or more dead or injured state threatened, endangered, or species of special concern; (c) one or more dead or injured federally listed species, including species proposed for listing; or (d) one or more dead or injured bald or golden eagle(s).

In the event that one of the four discoveries listed above should be made, Big Bend Wind will file with the Public Utilities Commission within seven days, a compliance report identifying the details of what was discovered, the turbine where the discovery was made, a detailed log of agencies and individuals contacted, and current plans being undertaken to address the issue.

## **6 ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT**

The WEG describes adaptive management as the process of assessing various management actions and then designing and implementing the management action that is determined to be the most appropriate for the situation. The management action is then assessed through monitoring and evaluation to determine if the desired results are being met or if adjustments to the management action are warranted.

Big Bend Wind has sited the Project and incorporated measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts to birds and bats, and to avoid and minimize take of NLEB. Post-construction monitoring results will be evaluated in coordination with the USFWS, MNDOC and MNDNR, and Big Bend Wind will work with the wildlife agencies to determine appropriate additional measures should impacts exceed anticipated levels. Otherwise, Big Bend Wind will continue operating under the existing protocols.

Big Bend Wind is committed to understanding potential impacts to birds and bats resulting from Project operations. Adaptive management will be implemented, if necessary, to further avoid, minimize, or mitigate unexpected impacts to birds or bats. The following adaptive management framework will be implemented, if appropriate, based on findings:

- Based on the results of the first year of post-construction monitoring, Big Bend Wind will confer with MNDNR and MNDOC to determine if additional monitoring may be warranted, and if so, if modifications to the survey protocol should occur.
- Big Bend Wind will work with the USFWS and MNDNR to evaluate the data and determine if additional avoidance or minimization measures are necessary to reduce risk to acceptable levels.
- Should USFWS and/or MNDNR list or change the listing status of species that have potential to occur with the Project area, Big Bend Wind will evaluate the potential risk to the newly listed species posed by the Project and meet with agencies, as deemed appropriate.
- If an eagle fatality occurs, Big Bend Wind will evaluate the potential cause and determine whether further studies are warranted to reassess risk.
- Details of adaptive management measures, if deemed necessary, will be determined from the site-specific assessment and will focus on:
  - impacts that may be reasonably considered to cause significant population level impacts, and

- reducing mortality relative to what has been observed beyond anticipated levels.

Discovery of a cluster (5 or more carcasses) of bird or bat fatalities in space (i.e., at one turbine or other component of Project infrastructure) or time (i.e., found or estimated to have occurred on the same day) will trigger the following response:

- Completion of a root cause analysis and implementation of appropriate measures or consultation with the USFWS to determine next steps.

Adaptive management responses or mitigation will be commensurate with identified impacts and will be limited to activities that do not significantly affect wind energy production. Big Bend Wind may submit a new or revised BCS or monitoring plan in the future to USFWS for review if new information suggests revisions are warranted. The adaptive management plan will apply throughout the life of the Project.

## **7 MITIGATION AND CONSERVATION DURING DECOMMISSIONING**

In the event of decommissioning at the end of the operational life of the Project, Big Bend Wind will reclaim disturbed areas in accordance with lease requirements with landowners or as specified by applicable regulations within the Big Bend Wind-approved Decommissioning Plan. Decommissioning may include removing any and all aboveground equipment, including towers, concrete pads, anchors, guy wires, fences, fixtures, materials, buildings, structures, improvements, and personal property installed by the Project or the Project's affiliates..

The following decommissioning BMPs, as outlined in the WEG, will be implemented during the decommissioning process:

- Decommissioning methods will minimize new site disturbance and removal of native vegetation, to the greatest extent practicable.
- Foundations will be removed to a minimum of 4 ft below surrounding grade (or as specified by the landowner or otherwise required by state regulation and the approved decommissioning plan), and so that subsurface structures do not substantially disrupt ground water movements.
- If topsoil is removed during decommissioning, it will be stockpiled and reused when restoring plant communities. Once decommissioning activity is complete, topsoil will be restored to assist in establishing and maintaining pre-construction conditions to the extent possible, consistent with landowner objectives.
- Surface water flows will be restored to pre-disturbance conditions consistent with storm water management objectives and requirements. This will include removal of stream crossings, roads, and pads.
- Overhead power lines that are no longer needed will be removed.

- After decommissioning, erosion control measures will be installed in all areas of disturbance where potential for erosion exists, consistent with storm water management objectives and requirements.
- Fencing will be removed unless the landowner wishes to utilize the fence.

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