

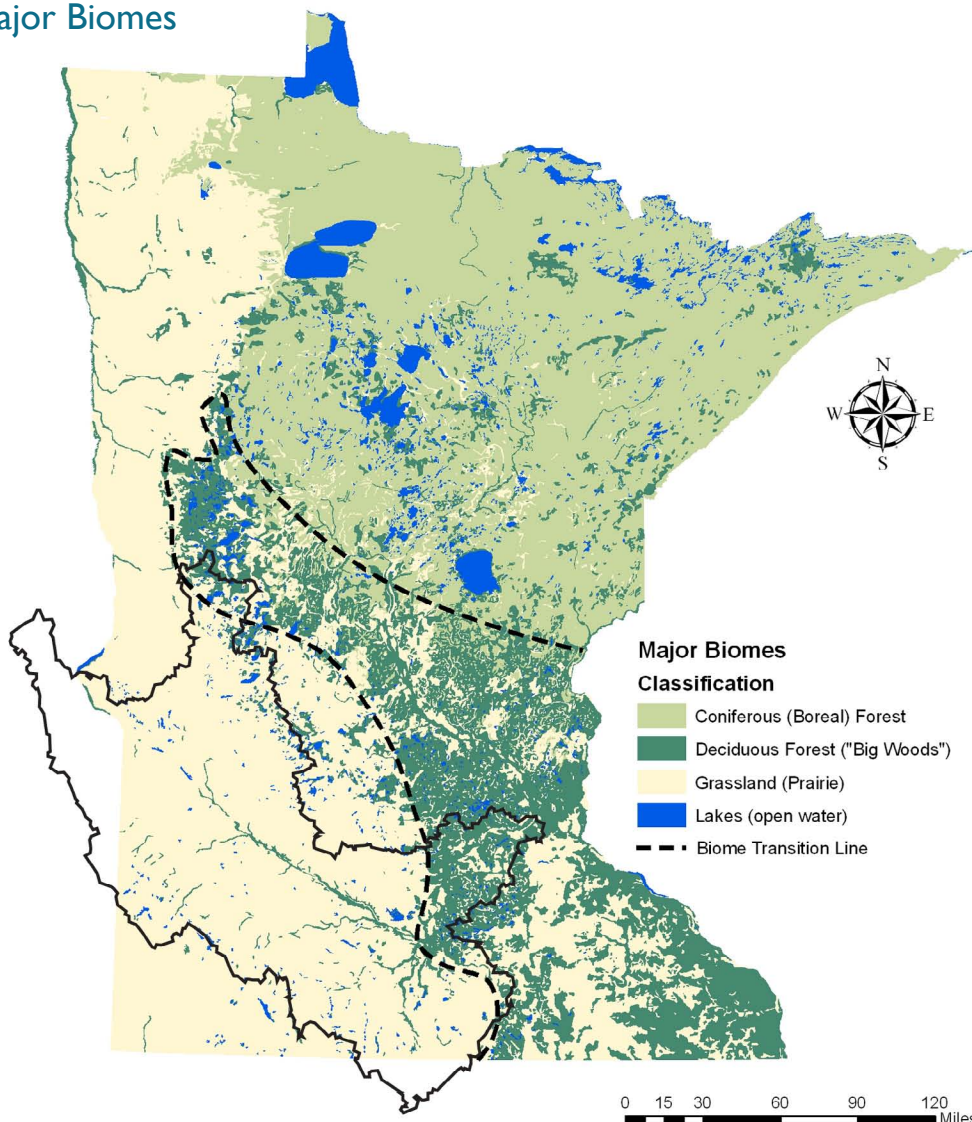
# PRE EURO-SETTLEMENT

## Prairie, buffalo, wild rice, and “lakes of grass” historically dominated the Minnesota River Basin

Early explorers accounts and paintings provide glimpses of what the landscape resembled before widespread European settlement. Many explorers wrote descriptions about the rich flora and fauna and Native Americans inhabiting the Minnesota River Valley in the 1700s and 1800s. They described a landscape covered in tall grass, wetlands, shallow lakes and forested areas with numerous American Indian tribes living along the Minnesota River.

“Early explorers ...described many features we can no longer see, including huge prairie fires roaring across the landscape, abundant prairie chickens and “prairie dogs”, flocks of whooping cranes feeding in wet meadows, and beds of wild rice in many lakes and Minnesota River backwaters. Bison and elk were vanishing by then. Though the explorers encountered many difficult circumstances, they often described the landscape with awe” (MCBS, 2007).

### Minnesota's Major Biomes



Prairies historically dominated the Minnesota River Basin (illustrated in tan above). The historic “Big Woods” forested landscape is shown in the north-eastern portion of the basin (shown in dark green). The map above shows the vegetation of Minnesota recorded in the Public Land Survey from 1847-1908 (Marschner Map).

## Prairie, River Valley, Lakes of Grass

[Proceeding westwardly from new Ulm], “the plateau that opens here presents neither hills nor woods. It is a high, grand, and beautiful prairie. The view to the south seems limitless, the verdure losing itself far away in the azure of the sky. The spectacle is full of grandeur because of its simplicity that contrasts agreeably with the varied and picturesque countryside the valley of the Minnesota presented to us during the last five miles. Our route continues in generally a westerly direction, leaving on the right and on the left a great number of swampy ponds or more often depressions in the soil that form in the springtime some many “lakes of grass” as the Indians say. The route is lovely and firm. The prairie plants, tall, plentiful, and varied, indicate that the soil is good.” — Joesph Nicollet, 1838



## Otters, Buffalo, Wild Rice, Ducks

“We paddled away at the rate of four or five miles an hour ... when the otters were seen swimming amongst the zizania. Milor said that buffaloes were killed here about five years ago, but that he thinks the animals have been so persecuted that they will never return. The musk-rats were already at work building their conical houses on the marshy grounds, with mud and straw of the wild rice, against the approach of winter. As we advanced through these low rice-grounds, clouds of wild ducks rose on the wing, and we killed them at our leisure from the canoe.”

—George Featherstonhaugh, 1835



“A most delightful country, abounding with all the necessaries of life that grow spontaneously . . . Wild rice grows here in great abundance; and every part is filled with trees bending under their loads of fruit, such as plums, grapes, and apples.”

—Jonathan Carver, 1766

All paintings by Seth Eastman Images courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society“

Ask an Expert about the Minnesota River” project profiles scientists and citizens answering questions about the health of the Minnesota River. More answers to questions about the Minnesota River can be found at: [mrbdc.mnsu.edu/learn](http://mrbdc.mnsu.edu/learn)

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