12 Actionable Insights from Award-Winning Pollinator Projects

Each year, the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign (NAPPC) selects an exemplary roadside pollinator habitat project to receive the Pollinator Roadside Management Award. Each awarded project contains its own challenges and regional considerations. Each project also has important lessons and takeaways that can be applied to other roadside habitat projects in North America. In this document we will provide the top 12 insights from Pollinator Roadside Management Award winners, all gathered from past NAPPC awardees. This document reflects the collective insights and perspectives shared by participants through a series of interviews. We gratefully acknowledge their time, expertise, and thoughtful contributions.

1 Your Biggest Challenge Will Probably Be Organizational, Not Ecological

Project managers consistently described challenges related to internal buy-in, competing priorities, and coordinating across departments. One award winner put it bluntly: "The people are the hardest part." Across multiple interviews, project leaders emphasized that relationship-building became as important as ecological planning.

2 Start by Understanding What Habitat You Already Have

Several winning projects described a surprising realization: they already had more pollinator habitat than they thought. One project leader explained that once they began looking closely at roadside vegetation, they discovered native grasses and flowering plants already present throughout the system. Another noted that reducing disturbance allowed existing native species to reappear without extensive restoration efforts.



3 Bring Maintenance Staff into the Conversation Early

Multiple interviewees emphasized that long-term success depended on collaboration with maintenance staff. One project owner described maintenance personnel as some of their most important partners because they controlled mowing schedules and day-to-day roadside management. Another noted that many maintenance employees already cared deeply about conservation but had never been asked to participate in habitat initiatives.

4 Focus on Management Practices Before Focusing on Planting Projects

Many award-winning programs concluded that management changes produced larger benefits than new plantings alone. Three separate projects specifically highlighted mowing as one of the most important factors influencing pollinator habitat. As one interviewee explained, changing mowing practices across thousands of acres often has a much larger impact than establishing a few demonstration plots.



Simple modifications to mowing schedules can play a major role in supporting pollinator habitat along roadsides

5 Site Preparation Is One of the Best Investments You Can Make

Several projects learned this lesson through failure. One project leader described repeated planting efforts that were overwhelmed by existing roadside grasses despite using carefully selected native species. Another explained that aggressive invasive plants consistently outcompeted new plantings unless preparation was addressed first.

6 Build Your Case Around Transportation Goals, Not Just Pollinators

The most successful project leaders learned to tailor their message to different audiences. One participant explained that they rarely led with pollinator conservation alone. Instead, discussions that focused on erosion control, reduced mowing costs, beautification, safety benefits, or operational efficiencies were the most productive.





Tara Van Waus (left) and Rachel Harris with the Iowa Department of Transportation support integrated roadside vegetation management across the state. Along with saving costs in the long-run, they say native plants are better at absorbing heavy rainfall, tolerating drought, preventing erosion, and supporting wildlife compared to many non-native seed options. Photo: Rachel Cramer, Harvest Public Media.

7 Start with a Pilot Project and Let Success Build Momentum

Nearly every successful program interviewed started small. One project began with a handful of demonstration sites. Another focused on a single district before expanding broadly. Participants repeatedly described pilot projects as a way to build credibility and reduce organizational risk.

8 Plan for Administrative Challenges as Carefully as Ecological Ones

Several interviewees described administrative barriers as more difficult than ecological challenges. Common examples included delayed budgets, procurement requirements, reimbursement processes, and contracting timelines. One project leader recalled missing an entire planting season because funding arrived after the optimal installation window.

9 Make Your Successes Visible

Many award winners intentionally created highly visible projects. Examples included roadside demonstration plots, pollinator gardens, signs, stewardship awards, and public recognition programs. One participant described visibility as essential because people need to see it to believe it.



Signage can be effective for both informing the public about management and promoting successful projects Photo: Kentucky Transportation Cabinet.

10 Partnerships Can Multiply Your Capacity

No interviewee described long-term success as a solo effort. Award-winning programs repeatedly cited partnerships with universities, conservation organizations, wildlife agencies, and other stakeholders. One project leader explained that external partners provided expertise they could not access internally.

11 Design the Program So It Can Survive Leadership and Funding Changes

Many project leaders stressed the importance of building programs that can survive beyond a single grant or champion. One interviewee described efforts to move habitat work into standard operating procedures so the program would continue regardless of leadership changes.



Photo: Lanark County

12 Think of Pollinator Habitat as a Long-Term Stewardship Responsibility

The most experienced practitioners consistently described habitat management as an ongoing commitment rather than a project with a finish line. Roadsides should be seen as a permanent management strategy that require continuous adaptation as vegetation changes and invasive species emerge, rather than a short-term restoration activity.



Summary

Perhaps the most consistent message across all interviews was that pollinator programs rarely succeed because of a particular budget, seed mix, or restoration technique. They succeed because project owners build relationships, align their project with their organization's priorities, demonstrate early wins, and gradually embed pollinator conservation into the culture and everyday practices of their organization.

NAPPC's mission is to encourage the health of resident and migratory pollinating animals in North America. Learn more at Pollinator.org/nappc

For questions, please reach out to nappc@pollinator.org