

# THE MINNESOTA SHARPTAILER

PUBLICATION OF THE MINNESOTA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY



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P.O. BOX 3338  
DULUTH, MINNESOTA 55803

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SUMMER 2011



## SHARPIES DOWN, RUFFS UP -- BOTH JUST A BIT

Bill Berg

*Note: MSGS thanks Mike Larson, DNR Grouse Biologist, for this DNR information*

The 2011 sharptailed grouse dancing ground surveys conducted by DNR Wildlife Managers and volunteers showed that sharptails experienced similar slight declines from 2010 in both the northwest and east-central ranges. In the northwest, dancing males slid by 16%, and in the east-central range, by 18%. Range-wide, the average of 10.2 sharptail males per dancing ground fell from 10.7 in 2010, and 13.6 (the highest since 1980) in 2009. This average has been as low as 7.0 in the last 25 years.

Ruffed grouse drumming counts conducted by DNR, several other natural resource agencies, and volunteers, showed a surprising range-wide 13% increase from 2010. It was surprising because after the 2009 peak of 2.0 drums per stop in 2009, drums fell 25% to 1.5 in 2010, and that looked like the beginning of the 10-year downward part of the "10 year cycle" for which ruffed grouse are famed. Drums were at 1.9 drums per stop in the Northeast (up 18%), 2.1 in the Northwest (up 16%), 0.8 in the Central Hardwoods (down 17%), and 0.4 in the Southeast (up 32%).

Reflections from an old retired grouse biologist (Bill Berg): Bill Berg had the privilege of working with the ruffed grouse drumming data (organized counts began in 1949), and the sharp-tailed grouse dancing ground surveys, which began in 1975. Gradually the drumming surveys picked up additional cooperators, and since about 1980 there have been about 120 routes run each year. The main changes have been a dramatic decline in the southeast, which used to have the highest counts in the state, and the gradual decline in the Central Hardwoods Zone. The drumming peaks in the last four decades, and their corresponding hunter harvests, have been much lower than the boom years of the early 1950s and the 1970s. There are many possible reasons for this, which might be summarized in another *Minnesota Sharptailer* issue. Ruffed grouse hunters with even short memories might recall that the grouse hunting forecast of 2009 fell far short of predictions, and that the 2010 grouse hunting far exceeded drumming count forecasts. That shows what one spring's boom and bust nesting and brood rearing weather can do.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of DNR Wildlife Managers in the northwestern and east-central parts of the state, the new (1975) sharp-tailed grouse dancing ground counts took off running, and crucial areas were set aside for management. Unlike drumming counts which are just run once a year, sharptail surveys use much more time and gas, as most leks are counted multiple times. In some areas, the loss of lek sites has been dramatic; for example, In Itasca County the number of leks declined from 11 in 1975 to one in 2008. In the last 2 decades, DNR's management of open grass-brush landscapes on both public and private lands has been extensive, thanks to a number of funding programs. But sharptails in Minnesota continue the long-term decline that started a good 60 years ago. Declines of a few percentage points in many years count up. Simply put, brushland management is expensive, and there is a strong possibility that without increased license revenues DNR will have to further scale back its brushland management efforts. Already, key DNR Wildlife positions in Baudette, Aitkin, and International Falls have been eliminated or unfilled.

dedicated to the management and restoration of sharptails  
in Minnesota for the benefit of hunters and non-hunters



## PHEASANTS FOREVER RECOGNIZED

The Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society formally recognized the contributions of Pheasants Forever (PF) towards the acquisition of sharptail habitat through the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council. Having worked with DNR for several years, PF clearly has the expertise to acquire habitat parcels, as evident by the hundreds of acquisitions initiated by PF. In this photo, Bill Berg presents a "thank you" sharptail plaque and pen set to PF's Joe Duggan at the April 15 Habitat Conference at Thief River Falls.



## CENTRAL LAKES COLLEGE AT THE FLING

Dr. Bill Faber (third from left) brought the entire Central Lakes College Natural Resources Class to the April 15-16 MSGS & MPCS Habitat Conference and Meeting. The students helped in many ways, and each one was signed as a member of MSGS and MPCS. Thanks, Dr. Bill!



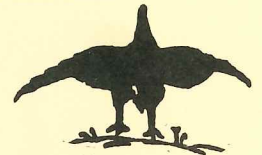


## KANABEC COUNTY 1,285 ACRE HABITAT ACQUISITION

In mid-June the partnership of the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society and Pheasants Forever, with the help of a grant recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, finalized the acquisition of a 1,285 acre parcel of land adjacent to the Kroschel Wildlife Management Area in Kanabec County. The Kroschel Wildlife management Area (WMA) is primarily managed for open lands wildlife species, and the new acquisition, formerly a cattle ranch, will be managed similarly. The Kroschel WMA is home to a healthy sharptail population, and is among the few remaining sharptail areas in the county. This acquisition will also be dedicated as a DNR WMA, and will make the present open landscape complex even better.

Besides funding from MSGS, Pheasants Forever, and the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, MSGS also thanks the Ruffed grouse Society, the Central Lakes College Natural Resources Club, a single anonymous \$4,000 donor, and the many MSGS members who donated to the "Save Our Sharptails" MSGS Acquisition Fund. There will be more details on this and other pending acquisitions in the popular Fall-Winter MSGS magazine issue.

## LITTLE FORK ROLLER CHOP PROJECT



Towards the end of this past winter, a roller chopper (pictured) was used for a sharptail habitat project on the Little Fork WMA near Little Fork. This was a 46-acre project funded by MSGS under a Heritage Enhancement Grant Agreement with DNR. This was the first roller chop project done by MSGS and DNR since the first Heritage Grants in 2002. In this case, the roller chopper is pulled by a shear dozer with the shear blade in the "up" position owned by All-Season's Contracting of Blackduck. The chopper blades are intended to sink into the soil just a few inches, and they then cut the aspen sucker roots so they don't regenerate for several years. Over the years there have been other Heritage Enhancement projects on the Little Fork WMA, including shearing, mowing, prescribed burning, and prairie grass planting.





**FROM:**

**MINNESOTA SHARP-TAILED  
GROUSE SOCIETY**

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POSTMASTER: ADDRESS CORRECTION  
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PAGE 4



MEMBERSHIP EXPIRES



ODAY!

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**2011 MSGS AND MPCS JOINT SPRING FLING -- WHAT A TIME!**

On April 15 & 16, 2011, the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGS) and the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society (MPCS) jointly hosted the "Conference on Habitat and a Future for *Tyrmanuchus*" (Friday April 15) and the "Spring Fling and Annual Meeting" (Saturday April 16) at the Best Western Inn and Conference Center in Thief River Falls. Both events were well attended, with about 100 on Friday, and 90 on Saturday. Dr. Bill Faber brought several enthusiastic natural resources students from Central Lakes College in Brainerd, and signed up each one as a member of MSGS and MPCS. Thanks, Dr. Bill!

On Friday we heard about partnerships, grazing, sharptails in Manitoba, habitat models, Minnesota's 25 year Landscape Conservation Plan, and the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council's program. This was followed by individual reports from land managers, and a group discussion on "factors limiting more and better habitat and how to address them." On Saturday we heard about prairie chickens and wind turbines, new prairie grouse areas, the sharptail's return to Agassiz, and we were entertained by yesteryear stories from Clifford Steinhauer and a photo essay by Craig Zlimen. Towards the end of the day, there was a joint MSGS and MPCS meeting, and then the two groups broke for individual Society meetings.

Both mornings provided the opportunity for field trips and viewing from blinds, except that several inches of wet snow Saturday morning halted the main field trip. Both groups agreed that the 2011 event was a tremendous success (they also met in 2005), and expressed interest in doing it again. Special thanks to Ross Hier and Jodie Provost for planning the event, to the Best Western of Thief River Falls for their hospitality, and to everyone who attended. Also, thanks to the fund-raising team of Norm Moody, Larry Olson, and Jerry Lehman, who used their sales skills to raise \$2,482, which was split 50:50 by MSGS and MPCS. And to you, the many members of MSGS who donated items, sincere thanks!