Winter 2016

THE MINNESOTA SHARPTAILER

Publication of the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society

Dedicated to the management and restoration of Sharptails in Minnesota for the benefit of hunters and non-hunters.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

Next march of 2016 marks 30 years of MSGS existence. Was about this time in 1985 that I sent off a note to Bill Berg with the MN DNR up in Grand Rapids asking what can be done to save our Minnesota sharptails. Bill's response was pretty clear. Form a group dedicated to the Sharptail's preservation in Minnesota. That we did and with a lot of help from many we made numerous strides over the years.

But of all the threats sharptails have faced, from pines being planted in old farm fields to clean farming practices, to urban sprawl, the one battle that seems the most insurmountable is natural succession, or the growing up of the forest edge.

As many of you know, sharptails 'follow the fire' so to speak. The Indians used to call them the "fire bird". I can't tell you how many times I have heard: "You should have been here 30 years ago. There were flocks of hundreds of chickens". What was different back then from now? Quite simply, the horizon has changed. Just look around at some the old spots where you used to see birds. The horizon was miles away and fairly low. I recall back about 20 years a bulldozing contractor was up on a shearing project on highway 7 up by cotton and he told me he could look east and see the cars on Highways 53 about 7-8 miles to the east, very open and lots of birds. Go there today and you are doing well to see anything beyond a mile.

Sharp-tailed grouse need room and they are losing it fast.

I am not sure quite frankly how we are going to win this battle, but I can tell you MSGS will not quit battling. We have too many committed people in this group to give up the fight. Thank you to all who have helped over the years whether financially or on the ground.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the Sharptailer.

Roche Lally
President

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Front Cover photo by Matt Breuer
+ Bob Sh[illegible] of PF

GUN LAKE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

By Dave Dickey, DNR Retired

As previous readers may recall, this unit in Aitkin County, contains the Gun Lake lek, the site of observation blinds for many years. MSGS acquired the original 80 acres through fund raising efforts known as Save our Sharp-tails or SOS. We were then able to acquire an additional 762 acres using Legacy funds with the help of Pheasants Forever.

We thought that restoration of the area would be completed before the land was turned over to the DNR but this did not happen. So what is the status of the land?

To date the property has been surveyed and the boundary posted with WMA signs so it is open to public hunting except for a refuge area around the lek. There was an old home site in the northeast corner that contained a well and the well has been sealed. There are some buildings that have to be removed.

Since the previous land-owners had spent time and money improving the land for crops, it was agreed that they could rent some of the land for crops for a few years, This agreement covers 688 acres with the "rent" being ¼ of the value to be exchanged for services such as mowing, removal or plugging of drain tiles, and other needed restoration activities. Also included in the agreement is a 50 foot buffer along existing drainage ditches.

Yet to be done is building removal, fence removal, drain tile removal or plugging, and a vegetation restoration plan. Meanwhile, the original 80 acres will be maintained through mowing and/or prescribed fire.

DEER RUN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

By Dave Dickey, DNR Retired

This was a WMA project proposal that I submitted prior to my retirement in 2010. It was approved and Gary Drotts, who assumed management of Aitkin County, then completed acquisition of 2 tracts of the proposal totaling 720 acres.

Tract 1, 320 acres, had originally been developed for agriculture but did not pan out. The land was purchased by Deer Run LLP, and became a wetland bank. Once they had sold all of the wetland credits, they put it up for sale but once interested buyers found out that they could not do much with the land, not even put up a hunting shack since it was wetland, no one wished to purchase it.

Since there are sharp tails in the area I decided to submit the proposal and also included adjacent parcels of suitable brush land habitat. The only other real option the landowner had was to allow it to go tax forfeit. In that case, the county would end up with it, could not really manage it, and would not have any income from it. With state purchase, the county will receive in-lieu of tax payments. This parcel has extensive brush land along with some tamarack and spruce.

As mentioned, sharp tails are present as well as a lek that has history going back to the late 50's and early 60's. At one time we did have a viewing blind but it was somewhat difficult to get to. The highlight occurred several years ago when a lone prairie chicken showed up along with the sharp tails.

The unit is located about 6 miles north of Aitkin on the east side of CSAH 1. The boundary has been surveyed and posted with WMA signs. The area wildlife office conducted a prescribed burn this past spring that included some adjacent private land. It was not the best burn but it was a good start on habitat management. Sometime in the future this might be a site for the MSGS brush cut outing.

ISLE ROYALE SHARPTAILS - A LITTLE KNOWN PIECE OF GROUSE HISTORY

By Bill Berg, DNR Wildlife Biologist, Retired

I have always known there were once sharp-tailed grouse on Isle Royale, located in the northwest portion of Lake Superior, and have asked questions like "when and how did they get there?" and "how long did they last?" It's easy to visualize a few sharptails sitting on the logged and burned Lake Superior shore 150 years ago and watching the smoke of an Isle Royale wildfire, and saying (if sharptails could talk) "hey—look at that smoke! Let's fly over there and see what's up!" And, except for the sharptails not talking, that's just about what actually happened.

Recently, I learned from Washburn, Wisconsin USFS Biologist Tom Doolittle that there is a M. S. Thesis on Isle Royale sharptails, and thinking that it would be from the 1930s, I was surprised to learn that is was dated 1988, and authored by a University of Minnesota Graduate Student, Christian J. Martin, and that Dr. Peter Jordan was Martin's Graduate Advisor. Tom Doolittle checked it out from the Isle Royale National Park (hereafter IRNP) library and forwarded it to me.

No one needs an introduction to IRNP. Everyone knows of the classic moose and wolf work that has been done there, first conducted by the late Durward Allen and by my personal friends Dave Mech and then by Rolf Peterson. But so few folks know about the other critters that live there, past or present. For example, before wolves got there, IRNP had coyotes, and lots of them. But the wolves took care of them, in relatively short order. And that there are no ruffed or spruce grouse. Unbelievable!

In spring 1985, Martin was to conduct a sharptail behavioral study on IRNP, but found that just about all the sharptails were gone. In fact, there was just one left, a male. So Martin changed his study objective to research the history of sharptails on IRNP. What he found was amazing. While no one knows when sharptails were first present in geologic time, Martin estimates they first arrived in recordable history in the 1850s, on the heels of the logging, mining, and settlement era that was accompanied by wildfires.

Back in the mid-1800s, sharptails inhabited every Minnesota county, including St. Louis, Lake, and Cook Counties, especially where large fires had created a continually changing mosaic of grass-brush landscapes. The mid-1850s were extreme wild fire years, as were 1870, 1879-80, and 1885-86, followed by the period of 1909 to 1927, and the last big one in 1936. Settlers called the sharptail the "burr oak grouse" because of all the oak and pine barrens the fires created. The first sharptails were documented in far northeastern Minnesota in 1863, and by 1880, they were listed as "common." By the late 1800s sharptails has settled in northwest Ontario, especially along the Canadian Pacific Railroad route around the north side of Lake Superior to Mattawa, Ontario, and then all the way to the Quebec border. Northward, they extended to Hudson Bay and east to James Bay.

Greater prairie chickens followed the sharptails in many areas. In 1901, they were in northwest Ontario, and large flocks were observed along the Canadian Pacific Railroad all the way to Thunder Bay. The last Ontario prairie chickens were seen in a mixed flock with sharptails near Kenora in 1959. In the early 1930s they were in Lake and Cook Counties, and in many areas in the Superior National Forest, and the last chickens in the Duluth area were in 1952. The last prairie chickens in St. Louis and Aitkin Counties were in about 1958. Similar sharptail and prairie chicken range incursions occurred in northern Wisconsin and Michigan.

I was surprised that there are no ruffed or spruce grouse on IRNP. You would think that over the eons, they would have gotten there, but neither of these forest dwellers is capable of sustained flight of more than a mile. Thus even the closest Ontario shore 15 miles away from IRNP has been an effective barrier for both species. In contrast, sharptail and prairie chicken flocks have historically been seen over Lakes Superior and Michigan up to 20 miles from shore.

Martin documented four mass irruptions of sharptails in the 125 years preceding his study. All occurred in autumn, and following an exceptionally high population year. These were in 1865, 1896, 1932, and 1967. Sharptails might have immigrated to IRNP in any of these years, but colonization was likely during the mid-1800s, in conjunction with the wildfire era. Although Martin reviewed many historical notes and journals (many of which noted the abundance of passenger pigeons), even from biological explorations, the first reference to sharptails on IRNP was in 1888, when a lighthouse keeper shot three "prairie chickens." These and following observations of prairie chickens were

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most likely of sharptails. Shortly thereafter, sharptails became much more common, often frequenting large burned areas near abandoned mines. Early miners purposely burned large areas prior to explorations. No estimates exist for the total IRNP sharptail population, but it appears that the population peaked between 1900 and 1915, and with secondary succession following the large burned areas, and abandonment of human settlements, the population declined during 1916-1935.

Then in 1936, a large 27,000 acre wildfire burned 19% of the total IRNP area, and sharptails temporarily rebounded. They don't call it the fire bird for nothing! The birds probably peaked again in the 1950s, aided by high reproductive success, and then began their last prolonged slide downward. The birds used the remains of heavily burned area near ridge tops, and surprisingly, areas that were kept open by heavy browsing from moose. Can you imagine moose as managing sharptail habitat?

In the absence of habitat disturbance, he birds continued to decline as succession advanced. A few birds were seen in the early 1980s, but very likely the last bird was the one Martin observed. To quote Martin on Management Recommendations (page 71): "With the disappearance of the last sharptail, one chapter of the human-related habitat change on Isle Royale is completed and another is opened. The challenge facing those who will manage Isle Royale in the 21st Century is to manage a fire regime typical of pre-settlement times and that includes early successional areas as well as mature forest stands."

So might sharptails ever return to IRNP? Today, with no North Shore sharptails watching smoke across the water and wondering "what's over there?" and taking a 10 minute flight to find out, chances are slim. But in the course of geologic time, only time will tell.

Except for a few editorial additions, information contained herein is excerpted from: Martin, C. M. 1988. An Ecological History of Sharp-tailed Grouse on Isle Royale National Park. MS Thesis. University of Minnesota. 120 pp. I sincerely thank Christian Martin for documenting this excellent piece of history.

Article excerpted from the Two Harbors Chronicle on opening weekend of the 1940 grouse season. Drummond, Jordan, and McNair were settlements near Two Harbors, Minnesota, and are now just dots on an old map.

1940 PRAIRIE CHICKEN ARE PLENTIFUL

It is estimated that more than sixty prairie chicken were bagged in the vicinity of Jordan and McNair on the opening day of the season. Fritz Temme got his limit and brought the crops of two birds to the Chronicle to show the feeding habits of the birds. One bird shot near Drummond had more than 300 grasshoppers in its crop, while another shot on a nearby farm had its crop filled ground beetles and weed seeds.

PF FARM BILL BIOLOGIST PRIVATE LAND UPDATE

By Jake Granfors

When you hear Pheasants Forever (PF), do sharp-tailed grouse, American woodcock, or ruffed grouse come to mind? My guess is probably not, but these are the species I am benefitting in Aitkin and Carlton Counties. You may be puzzled when you hear that Pheasants Forever has a Farm Bill biologist working outside of the traditional pheasant range in Minnesota.

To clear up confusion about a PF Farm Bill biologist promoting habitat for these species, I'll provide a little history. PF was co-founded in 1982 by a dedicated group of concerned individuals who recognized a need for habitat restoration and preservation to ensure the future of pheasants and other wildlife. Since then, PF has become known as "The Habitat Organization". In 2005, it expanded its mission to include quail and other wildlife through the formation of Quail Forever. As a result of PF's mission, the organization has expanded across much of the United States and into parts of Canada. Today, PF has over 100 Farm Bill biologists working to promote habitat for pheasants, quail, sage grouse, lesser prairie chicken, sharp-tailed grouse, golden-winged warbler, and mule deer.

It is hard to believe it has been nearly two years since I started working with Pheasants Forever in Aitkin and Carlton Counties. I guess time really does fly when you are having fun. I have been very busy working with private landowners. My main job duties are promoting

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Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easements on wild rice lakes and promoting sharp-tailed grouse habitat on private land. I am happy to report that business is thriving. Ten wild rice lake conservation easements are in the closing process and eight have already been finished. For a total of nearly 800 acres and 8.75 miles of shoreline protected. Landowner's get 60% of their county assessed land value in exchange for sub-development, development, and cropping rights. This protection keeps fragile wild rice lakes as natural as possible.

For sharptail projects, 13 projects are ready for implementation this winter. They account for 610 acres of brushland management. In addition, 11 applications are completed and waiting on funding from the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Qualities Incentive Program (EQIP). These projects account for another 470 aces if approved. I am optimistic that by the next EQIP deadline in mid-November, I will have received even more applications to be ready for next year.

If interested in sharptail habitat or wild rice lake easement projects, I can always be contacted at jgranfors@pheasantsforever.org, 218-434-0929, or by stopping in the Aitkin NRCS office at 130 Southgate Drive.

2ND MSGS/MPCS PRAIRIE GROUSE CONFERENCE & JOINT MEETING - A TAIL FEATHER SHAKIN' GOOD TIME!

By Jodie Provost, Minnesota DNR Private Land Specialist

Minnesota's leading prairie grouse enthusiasts did it again! The Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGS) and Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society (MPCS) held their 2nd Prairie Grouse Conference and Joint Meeting last April 17-18 at the very welcoming Deep Portage Learning Center near Hackensack. These two vital societies last met in April 2011 at Thief River Falls. Their second event was no less of a success than their first, with nearly seventy people partaking in presentations, discussion, socializing, a field tour, business meetings and fund raising.

The Prairie Grouse Conference on Friday was again tailored to managers and researchers. Moderators Stacy Salvevold, USFWS, and Jodie Provost, MDNR, welcomed the co-mingled flocks. The day's presentations began at the continental level and worked down to Minnesota interests. Steve Riley, North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) President and CEO, shared information about the NAGP, encouraged collaboration with the Upper Midwest/Great Lakes States, and a bit about the proposed interstate work group(s) that plans to develop a range-wide plan for sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chicken. A summary of the December 2014 Pheasant Summit and follow up to it, such as the buffer initiative and Pheasant Action Plan, were then given by Joe Duggan, Pheasant Forever, and Kevin Lines, MDNR.

Emily Hutchins, MDNR, followed, explaining the great effort of local technical teams to implement our Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan. These teams are "where the rubber meets the road", where the challenges occur, and the rewards are sweet! The morning peaked with Laurie Fairchild, USFWS, enticing our inner pyro and cowboy to patch burn graze and John Toepfer, Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd., sharing one of his always provocative presentations on prairie chicken research findings from Nebraska and Minnesota.

Friday afternoon began with Bob Hanson, Wisconsin DNR and Tom Doolittle, USFS, enlightening the crowd about Wisconsin's Northwest Sand Barrens Project to improve and connect habitat, as well as possible plans to boost the meager sharp-tailed grouse population at Moquah Barrens which is undergoing a 15,000 acre pine barrens restoration. Managers from across Minnesota's prairie grouse range then each shared a few minutes about adventures from their work areas, including how their local populations are faring and habitat projects. This program portion is always one of my favorites. It's these hard working, dedicated folks that make the difference.

Next, a much awaited discussion occurred on potential for disease transfer between wild and pen-reared game birds – a hot topic considering the recent outbreak of avian influenza in Minnesota turkey farms. Michelle Carstensen and Chris Jennelle of the MDNR Wildlife Health Program presented on avian influenza, and then discussed and answered questions with Kelly Anderson, MDA and game farm and hunting preserve operators, Dennis Udovich and Darrell Forsgren.

Phil Delphey, USFWS, then informed the audience about recovery of two smaller prairie dwellers, the Dakota Skipper and Poweshiek Skipperling, butterflies listed under the Endangered Species Act. Charlotte

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Roy, MDNR, grouse project leader, topped off the day with tantalizing tidbits on current and upcoming prairie grouse research, including landscape genetics, presence of neonicotinoids, fall treatments response, and impact of CRP. The evening brought a delicious supper, a lot of socializing with new and old friends, and a little tail feather shaking.

The Joint Meeting on Saturday appealed to all by dawning to two field trip options – A "funeral procession" to former prairie chicken booming grounds west of Backus led by Erik Thorson and Tom Stursa of MDNR and Larry Olson, retired Cass County biologist, or a hike to bird watch and learn about habitat management at Deep Portage by Dale Yerger, Deep Portage Executive Director.

After a hardy breakfast, Ross Hier, MPCS Vice President, and Roche Lally, MSGS President, welcomed attendees and the day got rolling with reports on the morning field trips. Greg Hoch, MDNR, then had the crowd in stitches over his "Ladies Choice: Life on the Lek" presentation. History on the rise and fall of the prairie chicken population in central Minnesota and recollections from east-central Minnesota were shared by Amy Westmark, MDNR, and Bill Berg and Dave Dickey, both retired MDNR.

The afternoon found our flocks learning about insecticide use for livestock on public grazing lands from Kelly Anderson of MDA, and pondering possible impacts to insects and grouse, particularly since conservation grazing is encouraged as a habitat management tool by agencies. Lindsey Shartell, MDNR, polished off the presentations by sharing details of the first two years' results of a three year study on sharp-tailed grouse habitat selection, nest success and survival in east-central Minnesota. Everyone pulled for her to have a more "typical" spring (is there such a thing in Minnesota!?), as the last two were late and snowy affecting trapping.

MPCS and MSGS membership meetings and fundraising ended the joint event. A much sought after turkey blind went to none other than the kind man who brought it all the way from the Cities, Terry Lydell. And as always, Ross Hier's art about caused a wrestling match, with Brian Goodspeed walking away with his beautiful work. A huge thank you to all that contributed fundraiser items, including Clam Corporation for the blind.

Finally, thank you to moderators, presenters, attendees, the MPCS and MSGS boards, Deep Portage staff and all involved with making this event happen. If interested in greater detail on presentations and discussions, we can help connect you with the presenters. The fellowship, networking, learning, and inspiration that occurs among our flocks, from spry chicks to old seasoned boomers, is priceless. We look forward to gathering again!

MINNESOTA DNR SPRING 2015 GROUSE SURVEY RESULTS

Charlotte Roy, Minnesota DNR Grouse Project Leader

Each spring, Minnesota DNR coordinates statewide ruffed grouse and sharp-tailed grouse surveys with the help of wildlife managers, cooperating agencies, and organizations (e.g., tribal agencies, U.S. Forest Service, college wildlife clubs). Ruffed grouse are the most popular game bird in Minnesota, with an annual harvest averaging >500,000 birds. Ruffed grouse hunter numbers have been as high as 92,000 during the last decade, although hunter numbers did not peak with the recent peak in grouse numbers, as they have traditionally. Sharp-tailed grouse are also popular among hunters, with an annual harvest of 6,000-22,000 birds since the early-1990s and 5,000-10,000 hunters in Minnesota.

Sharp-tailed Grouse Counts Remain Steady

Sharp-tailed grouse were first surveyed in Minnesota between the early-1940s and 1960. The current survey is based on counts at dancing grounds (leks) during the spring and was first conducted in 1976. In 2015, surveys were conducted between March 13 and May 8, with 2,019 birds observed at 206 leks. More leks (14%) were observed in 2015 than during 2014, in part due to the filling of several DNR Wildlife staff vacancies and increased survey effort in the East Central (EC) region this year.

In the EC survey region, 208 grouse were counted on 39 leks. In the Northwest (NW) region, 1,811 grouse were counted on 167 leks. The mean numbers of sharp-tailed grouse/lek were 5.3 in the EC survey region, 10.8 in the NW region and 9.8 statewide. Statewide sharp-tailed grouse counts on leks were similar in 2015 compared to 2014 on both the regional and statewide levels. This year's statewide average of 9.8 grouse counted per dancing ground was similar to the long-term average since 1980.

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The 2009 average of 13.6 sharp-tailed grouse/lek was as high as during any year since 1980. During the last 25 years, the index has been as low as 7 birds/lek. Sharp-tailed grouse population index values peaked with those for ruffed grouse in 2009, and appear to have troughed with them in 2013, although sharp-tailed grouse peaks can follow ruffed grouse peaks by as much as two years.

Ruffed Grouse Counts Similar to Last Year

Ruffed grouse populations, which tend to rise and fall on a 10-year cycle, are surveyed by counting the number of male ruffed grouse heard drumming on established routes throughout the state's forested regions. The first surveys of ruffed grouse in Minnesota occurred in the mid-1930s, and the first spring survey routes were established along roadsides in 1949. By the mid-1950s, ~50 routes were established with ~70 more routes added during the late-1970s and early-1980s. Since that time, spring drumming counts have been conducted annually.

This year ruffed grouse surveys were conducted between April 14 and May 16, with one route run later. Observers recorded an average of 1.1 drums per stop statewide. The averages during 2013 and 2014 were 0.9 and 1.1 drums per stop, respectively. Counts vary from about 0.6 drums per stop during years of low grouse abundance to about 2.0 during years of high abundance. In the NE survey region, core of Minnesota grouse range, counts were 1.3 drums per stop. In the NW, there was 1.0 drum per stop; in the Central Hardwoods, 0.7 drums per stop; and in the Southeast, 0.4 drums per stop.

Compared to 2014's survey, 2015 survey results showed no significant change in all regions of the state. This follows a significant increase of 34 percent from 2013 to 2014. It is suspected that the cold, wet spring of 2014 may have hurt grouse production, along with comparatively little snow for roosting in 2015 that may have influenced overwinter survival.

The full DNR 2015 grouse survey report is available on the Minnesota DNR website.

31ST PRAIRIE GROUSE TECHNICAL COUNCIL MEETING

By Jodie Provost, Minnesota DNR Private Land Specialist

The 31st Prairie Grouse Technical Council (PGTC) Meeting was recently held in Nevada, Missouri on September 22-24, 2015. This biannual assembly of Great Plains prairie grouse researchers, managers, and enthusiasts serves many purposes - to share information and new ideas about conservation of our iconic prairie grouse, tackle challenges, welcome new members, network, socialize, honor the dedicated, celebrate successes and inspire. Participants range from those working in relatively stability in the heart of a species' range to those working with isolated populations at the edge of a range, administering an Endangered Species listing, or a closely-managed hunting season. They are bound by the common effort to sustain habitat and buffer impacts of agricultural policy, energy development and other factors.

This PGTC Meeting was my third. The first was 20 years ago in 1995 at Medora, North Dakota. I clearly remember the distinguished Nova Silvy and other scientists presenting; Dan Svedarsky receiving the coveted Hamerstrom Award; hunkering down in a tent with Martha Minchak at the campground under the winds of a prairie thunderstorm one night, wondering if we'd be flattened by a cottonwood; and relishing the field tour, jealous of how easy it must be to find and count sharp-tailed grouse on leks in the dry, rolling grasslands (versus the flat wetlands of Kittson County, and now Aitkin County). How time flies!

This PGTC gathering did not disappoint either. The Missouri crew, led by Max Alleger, Grassland Coordinator for Missouri Department of Conservation, did a wonderful job hosting. Tuesday evening consisted of a social and registration. Wednesday morn entailed presentations ranging from history of the greater prairie chicken in North America to proposed interstate work groups for greater prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse, conservation banking, landscape management, translocation efforts, and the Great Plains Fire Science Exchange.

After lunch, we found ourselves whisked by bus to the Wah'Kon-Tah Prairie, a remnant of the prairie ecosystem that once covered more than one-quarter of Missouri.

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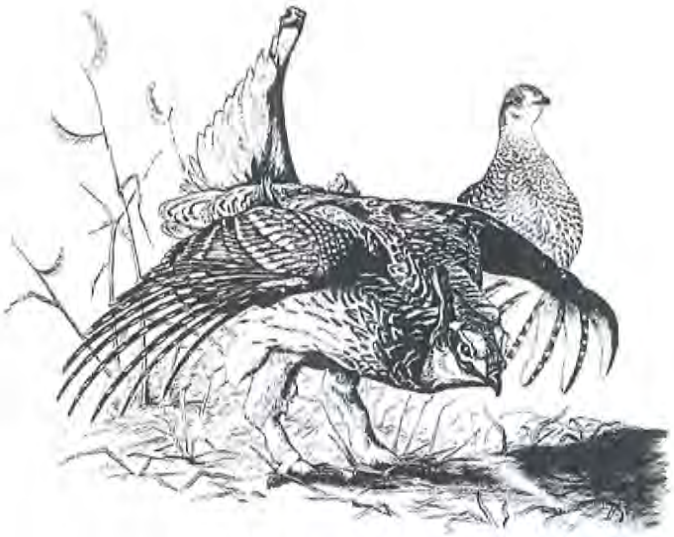
We viewed and engaged in discussion on prairie seed harvest, restoration, invasive plants, grazing, prescribed burning and other management tools, including hearing from a couple 'rock star' ranchers that aren't afraid to step out of the norm. The day ended with supper on the prairie, the coolest prairie grouse cake ever served, and even a band that sang "Catching Chickens in the Dark".

Thursday was another full day. Shared information included more on translocations, Attwater's prairie chicken restoration efforts, genetics, habitat use, fire and grazing, weather, modeling, movements, production, survival, and even whether booming vocalizations are used to recognize individuals among greater prairie chickens. An efficient business meeting of the PGTC was also held.

The afternoon ended with a brief meeting for those interested in the proposed interstate work groups for greater prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse to develop range-wide management plans. Jon Haufler of the Ecosystem Management Research Institute (EMRI) led discussion. Project intent is to be pro-active and utilize lessons learned through lesser prairie chicken conservation, development of its range-wide plan, and its possible listing under the Endangered Species Act. The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) instigated the project under their Grassland Initiative and the Midwest AFWA is supportive and ready to be involved. The North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) will provide administrative, communication and coordination assistance, while EMRI will provide planning and technical services. Greg Hoch, Minnesota DNR Wildlife's prairie habitat team lead, and I will serve on the greater prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse work groups, respectively, for DNR.

Thursday eve wrapped up with a silent auction fundraiser, poster session, delicious banquet, entertaining presentation by Glenn Chambers, and awarding of not one, but two Hamerstrom Awards. Glenn is an amazing wildlife photographer, having worked for National Geographic, Audubon and more. He shared a photo slideshow and amusing stories of his pet otters used for speaking engagements and a crazed male prairie chicken that attacked his pant leg! The Hamerstrom Award was established in honor of Fred and Fran Hamerstrom, pioneers in prairie grouse research and management. Back in college, I was very lucky to hear them speak at a student conclave of The Wildlife Society in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The award bearing their name was bestowed this year upon Patricia "Tish" McDaniel, CHEMM, and Dave Haukos, Kansas State University, topping off a magnificent two days.

Charlotte Roy, Minnesota DNR grouse project leader, and I are very thankful to have had the opportunity to partake in the 31st PGTC Meeting. Others from our neighborhood that also attended were Dan Svedarsky, U of M Crookston, John Toepfer, Sutton Center, and Thom Soule, retired Minnesota DNR biologist and active prairie steward. If you are interested in meeting proceedings, the PGTC board plans to place them on their webpage on the NAGP's website, or feel free to give me a holler. Aaron Robinson, upland game biologist with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, kindly offered to host the 32nd PGTC Meeting in North Dakota in fall 2017. I will look forward to the dry rolling grasslands! Hope to see you there.



MSGS would like to congratulate Pheasants Forevers Joe Duggan on his recent "non-retirement". MSGS's Ward Julien and Gregg Nelson attended Joe's "non-retirement" party in May to personally thank Joe for everything that he has done.

Thanks Joe and good luck!

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AITKIN COUNTY & MSGS LOSE A FRIEND OF BIRDS

by Pam Perry

Warren Nelson was a birder, photographer, columnist, speaker and author. He passed away on Dec. 30, 2014, at the age of 65. He graduated from Aitkin High School in 1967 and attended St. Cloud State University, earning a Bachelor of Science degree. He lived most of his life in Aitkin and knew the county and its backroads well. His passion for birds and teaching others about them was legendary. Warren had an Aitkin County life list of 300 species, the highest recorded for that county. He received the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Thomas Sadler Roberts Award in 1990 for lifetime achievement in ornithology.

Warren had a great interest in certain birds that were Aitkin County specialties such as the Great Grey Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, Snowy Owl, Yellow Rail and Sharp-tailed Grouse. He was a well-known bird guide and often brought people to locations to see northern owls or out to a blind in the spring to see sharptails dance. Warren shared his love of brushlands and birds a couple times over the years at MSGS Spring Fling presentations, as well as providing an article or two for the MSGS newsletter. One is re-reprinted in this issue for your enjoyment.

In the spring of 2015, Warren's friends partnered with Friends of the Sax-Zim Bog to purchase a 40-acre tract of land to honor him. A total of $37,360 was raised from 213 donors. On Saturday, October 10, a dedication of the property was held with Warren's friends and family on hand to view the memorial land parcel. The parcel of lowland conifer forest preserves habitat for numerous boreal birds including the Great Gray Owl, Boreal Chickadee, Black-backed Woodpecker and Connecticut Warbler. It will be known as the "Warren Nelson Memorial Bog" and is located along Blue Spruce Road, about a half mile north of St. Louis County Road 133. The Sax-Zim Bog complex is part of the same Tamarack Lowlands landform that extends into Aitkin County, providing habitat for many of the birds that Warren loved.

BRUSHLAND HABITAT FROM A BIRDER'S VIEWPOINT

by Warren Nelson
Birding Enthusiast, Aitkin Mn.

A long time ago, when I was in high school and into my college years, I used to hunt ducks and grouse. Since then, I have given up hunting with a gun in favor of hunting with a camera. For me, it is much more of a challenge to get a good picture of the bird. I do think that having done both has given me a unique perspective of being able to see the joy of each sport. If you think about it, hunting and birding are not that different. The best part of each sport is the joy of just being out in nature with your friends and lets face it, the worst day out in nature is better than the best day at work.

Both hunters and birders can be called conservationists. Hunters belong to the Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, the Ruffed Grouse Society, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, the Deer Hunters Association, etc. Birders belong to the local bird clubs, Such as Audubon. I have given programs to both hunters and birders and they can both definitely be called conservation-minded. Money from buying hunting stamps goes to maintain Wildlife Management Areas, which birders have found out to be wonderful places year round. And in recent years, more birders have started to buy duck stamps, pheasant stamps and small game licenses in support of these areas — and they are encouraged to do so by the state agencies like DNR. They realize the need for these unique wildlife areas.

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Brushland habitat areas are probably considered to be areas created primarily for sharp-tailed grouse, but they are habitat for many more species of nongame birds. Sandhill cranes have made a big come back to the state due in part to these areas. They are one of the gentle giants of the bird world. For the loggerhead shrike, brushland habitat is necessary to exist. This habitat is also great for the Wilson's snipe, alder flycatcher, northern harrier and several species of warblers and sparrows, to mention a few. The American bittern uses both marshes and brushland habitat. Anyone who is lucky enough to witness the male Bittern's spectacular spring courtship ritual of displaying its epaulettes, gulping air and then seemingly belching out its bump¬pa-bump call will always remember it.

I do have a favorite bird to see in the brushland habitats - the beautiful short-eared owl. This bird is not a common bird in our area, but there are usually at least a few that show up around Aitkin County. For years, birders have come to watch these little owls hunt prey at dusk, fluttering around like giant moths and appearing almost ghost-like as they float in and out of the alders and willows. At times, they seem really inquisitive, coming in close to the birders to get a good look, then disappearing into the night. A few years ago, a survey was made of professional wildlife artists. They were asked to name the birds that they thought were the most beautiful in the world and most interesting to paint. As you would think, most of the birds were exotically colored birds from South America and Africa. But the short-eared owl was among the top ten.

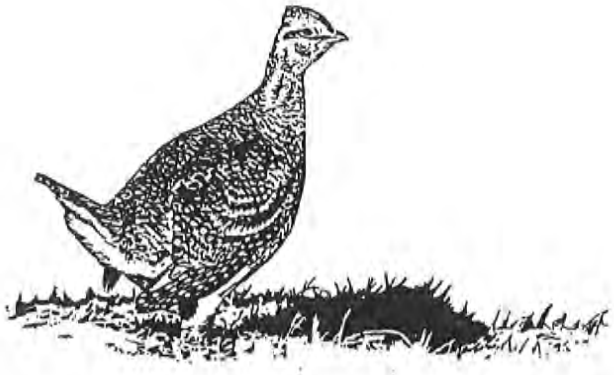
The short-eared owl is only 15 inches long and a tawny brown in color. They are heavily streaked on the breast. In flight, they show a buff-colored patch on the upper wings and dark patches at the bend of the wing on the undersides. They have very short ear tufts, which give them their name, and are hard to see unless you are very close. But the real striking part of this bird is their face. It has a large-appearing head with black feathers surrounding its bright yellow eyes. Its face is highlighted with a facial disc that seems to all but glow in the dark. It is no wonder that so many people are drawn to them.

Most species of owls nest in abandoned stick nest or old woodpecker holes. Short-eared owls are a different breed — they nest on the ground in marshes, fields and willow brush. The nest site is picked by the female and is usually just a depression in the ground with a few grasses it is well camouflaged by the surrounding plant life. The female lays four to six white eggs which she incubates alone for about 21 days. While she is on the nest, the male guards it and provides prey for her meals. The parents feed the young a wide variety of meals — mice, voles, insects, snakes, small rabbits, etc. — which is another reason for them picking this habitat. Brushlands are great breeding grounds for their prey too. The young are able to make their first flights at about 42 days of age.

One of my favorite experiences in nature took place a few years ago on Aitkin County Road 18 near one of the brushland habitat areas. I was headed for home just after dark when I saw something on the road ahead. As I got closer, there in my car's headlights was a short-eared owl. And just past it was another one, then another and another and another. That evening I counted 14 short-eared owls sitting on the road. As close as I could tell, there were three separate family groups of owls, all sitting on the road. I had seen a couple floating over the brush a few weeks before, but I had no idea that there were three pairs. You could idle the car right up to the owls and flash pictures almost straight down at them. What a sight! But why were they all sitting on the road? I sat and watched for a while. It didn't take very long to find an explanation. There were huge numbers of frogs crossing the road and the owls were just sitting there letting the prey come to them. Why waste energy in hunting for food if it is going to come right to you? They were gulping down dozens of them. Yes, short-eared owls are a lot smarter than you think - or at least a lot smarter than the frogs. I went back there with friends each of the next four nights with the same scenario. Just after dark, there were the owls -and my friends were truly thrilled.

Nature is something that should be enjoyed by all and brushlands can be some of the most entertaining.

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Fall 2006 edition of the Sharptailer



"WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD" - OPEN LANDSCAPE & EARLY SUCCESSIONAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT BY MINNESOTA DNR & PARTNERS IN NORTHWESTERN, NORTHEASTERN AND EAST-CENTRAL MINNESOTA

Compiled & Submitted by
Minnesota DNR Assistant Area Wildlife Managers
Jessica Parson and Jessica VanDuyn

WHY MANAGEMENT?

Sharp-tailed grouse rely heavily on habitat that features early stages of succession for their varying seasonal requirements. Good habitat for these birds contains a mixture of open vegetative foraging sites and dense vertical structure for nesting, habitat that is often found in various parts of Minnesota. Historically, early successional habitat was maintained by naturally occurring wildfires, seasonal flooding, and other disturbances. Farming, housing development, and other types of infrastructure are not compatible with these disturbances, so these events are suppressed. This leaves open landscapes vulnerable to ecological succession, essentially the progression of open land to brush dominated and wooded landscapes.

In addition to loss of habitat due to succession, the continued decline of acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is becoming more of a concern. According to a recent news release by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), "Minnesota has lost [more than] 153,492 acres of CRP since last year and greater than 247,000 acres of CRP since 2007. Many more acres - likely more than 495,000 acres - could expire by 2018 if contracts are not renewed or new acres are not enrolled into the program." Loss of these lands will decrease the amount of available nesting habitat for many bird species, including sharp-tailed grouse. This loss will also increase fragmentation of suitable habitat which, for many species, can pose significant problems, including lack of escape routes from predators, challenges in locating resting and nesting sites, difficulty finding mates, or problems foraging for food. Education about the importance of CRP and how it can provide habitat corridors between larger expanses of habitat is important in peaking and maintaining public interest in CRP enrollment.

Managing our public land is more important than ever as these threats to our open landscapes continue. Management by recreating natural disturbance using methods such as prescribed burning, mowing, and mechanical woody removal treatments, are common practices. The MNDNR, along with many other organizations, strives to identify and implement management projects that maintain the characteristics of our open land. Not only can these types of projects benefit prairie grouse, but many other species as well, including (but not limited to) white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, woodcock, golden-winged warblers, and many other species that are dependent on these types of habitats.

RECENT & UPCOMING MANAGEMENT

Planning habitat improvement projects can be challenging. First, potential treatment sites must be identified and site objectives, condition, and appropriate management techniques selected. A project manager must estimate cost, and funding source must then be secured, which can often be the biggest obstacle to overcome. Other challenges may also arise such as staffing shortages or unfavorable weather conditions. When public and private organizations with common goals collaborate on projects, some of these challenges can become more manageable by pooling resources, knowledge, and staff. The following are reports of current work being done in Minnesota that illustrate some of the unique partnerships that have been explored to accomplish local projects.

In Northwest Minnesota
By Minnesota DNR Wildlife Areas:

Thief Lake

"In the winter of 2014/15 we mowed 347 acres and sheared 634 acres. We coordinated with the **American Bird Conservancy** on 200 acres. Very recently, with help from **MN DNR's Region 1 Roving Crew**, we were able to burn an area that sees a lot of sharp-tail use. Much of our work is weather dependent, and the amount of early successional work we are able to complete from year-to-year can vary greatly. This last winter was good in terms of frost penetration. More frost provides less ground disturbance from dozers and more access to sites. We will continue to actively manage for all of our early successional species." -Kyle Arola, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

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Red Lake

"Last year we completed 140 acres of early successional habitat for golden-winged warblers with a grant from the **Lessards-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council** (LSOHC)/ **American Bird Conservancy**. We also used money from our MNDNR budget to shear 169 acres of brushland to maintain open landscape for species including sharp-tailed grouse, sandhill cranes, Le Conte's sparrows and yellow rails. **The MN DNR's Region 1 Roving Crew** (funded by **LSOHC**) also sheared an additional 109 acres of open land in our work area. We maintain many upland grass openings within the forest. These are typically treated with summer mowing. This year we mowed about 40-50 sites. We also have approximately 500 acres of brushlands/sedge meadows that we are hoping to burn this fall. These sites will be part of MNDNR Grouse Research Scientist Charlotte Roy's research on the effects of management on habitat use by sharp-tailed grouse. We also just mowed a small upland area (20 acres) that is part of the same study."- Charlie Tucker, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

Baudette

"This year in the Baudette work area we have two fall mowing projects for a total of 100 acres (funded from our MNDNR budget). The **Minnesota Deer Hunters Association (MDHA)** submitted a $17,000 **Conservation Partners Legacy program (CPL)** grant for winter shearing of 225 acres lowland brush. We are waiting to find out if it got funded. We also conducted three prescribed fires totaling 266 acres. We are also planning to complete a 348-acre shearing project that was started last year. The CPL grant was a partnership with **MDHA** and the **Ruffed Grouse Society**." - Brandon Schad, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

Roseau River

"Last year Roseau River staff completed 310 acres of mowing to remove woody vegetation from open land. This year to date, we have completed approximately 36 acres of brush mowing. We plan to treat 602 acres of brush using Roseau River staff and budget this winter. We have teamed up with the **American Bird Conservancy (ABC)** (funded by **LSOHC**) to identify project areas that would benefit golden-winged warblers, as well as other species. We had planned to complete this project last winter, but winter drew to a quick close. We will initiate these projects this coming winter if frost conditions are adequate. The ABC project has been downsized to approximately 132 acres, due to staffing limitations. **The Audubon Society** and **Ruffed Grouse Society** also expressed interest in some of our initial proposed project areas. In addition, we have four prescribed burns planned this fall for a total of 262 acres; however, the amount of burning we accomplish depends highly on weather conditions and the availability of the **MN DNR Region 1 Roving Crew.**" -Jessica Parson, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

Karlstad

"Currently, we have a **CPL** grant partnered with **MDHA**, **Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation** (**RMEF**), and the **Student Conservation Organization (SCA).** With the help of these organizations we hired two temporary employees and have completed 6,712 acres of prescribed fire to date. We also have another **CPL** grant with **MDHA** and **RMEF** to hire a **Conservation Corps of Minnesota (CCM)** crew for buckthorn removal and prescribed fire. Currently we have completed 920 acres of prescribed fire using funds from this grant. We have completed 7,352 acres of prescribed fires, all with the assistance of **The Nature Conservancy**. We completed one 41-acre fall brush mowing site this year using our MNDNR budget. We hope to get approximately 115 acres of additional winter brush work done this year as well." -Graham Parson, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

By Partners:

Many important partnerships have contributed to open landscape habitat management and research. All are greatly appreciated. This article is not comprehensive. Information on two partnerships follows.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

"TNC and MN DNR Karlstad wildlife office cooperatively burned approximately 7,800 acres this fiscal year on DNR and TNC lands. TNC brush mowed nearly 120 acres on TNC land near Skull Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Next year, we have 27 [burn] areas prepared for a total of 23,000 acres. We prepare more than we think we can burn each year so managers have the option to choose between burn units. We are also working with Charlotte Roy to conduct some fall fires, so she can research the effects on sharp-tailed grouse dispersal. Currently, one 100-acre unit was completed for the study." -Jon Eerkes, The Nature Conservancy

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American Bird Conservancy (ABC)

"We have completed 1,544 project acres in the past 2 years using mechanical woody removal treatments - 1,497 using **LSOHC** funds and 47 using **Neotropical Migratory Birds Conservation Act (NMBCA)** funds. To date, 702 acres have been completed on state (MNDNR administered) land. The remaining acres were completed on county and federal land. This winter, a little less than half of our completed acres 300-400 will be done on state land and the rest in federal, county, and reservation jurisdictions. My total project budget was $436,700 and my remaining funds will complete between 800-1,000 acres this winter." –Peter Dieser, American Bird Conservancy

In Northeast & East-central Minnesota
By Minnesota DNR Wildlife Areas:

Tower

"The Sax–Zim Wildlife Management Areas have high management activity despite low sharp-tail grouse numbers. They are located about 5 miles west of Cotton, Minnesota and comprised of three individual management units named Sax, Zim and Fermoy. They have a long history of sharp-tail management and exceptional birding opportunities. Uniquely, these units bring in people from all over the world to view the different species of birds present at these sites.

Due to the extensive areas of peat throughout the Sax-Zim Bog, management for sharp-tails becomes very challenging and only few tools are feasible. These tools include mowing, shearing, burning, hand cutting or chemically spraying of invasive species on state and county lands. In 2014-2015, we successfully completed numerous management activities totaling 700 acres and 9 miles of Hunter Walking Trails. Some our highlight projects include mowing 360 acres of sharp-tail leks and surrounding brushlands to provide the open landscape necessary for their mating behavior and nesting grounds. Additionally, we burned 300 acres on state lands with local wildlife staff. One area of management that was ramped up this year was tackling invasive species on our management units. We treated common tansy, buckthorn, and thistle on 40 acres throughout all the units.

Pending additional funding, next year's management activities include burning, shearing, mowing, lek and opening maintenance. All of our activities for 2014-2015, were funded by the LSOHC **Outdoor Heritage Funds** and local area budgets. Due to very limited funding provided to open landscape projects, it is complicated to complete the projects necessary for sharp-tail in the NE. It may be necessary to partner with other organizations to meet goals." –Jessica VanDuyn, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

International Falls

"The process our Wildlife Area uses to select management sites starts with lek surveys. Leks that are consistently used year to year and those with good numbers are our priority targets. We then look for opportunities for improving habitat near these areas. We use both mechanical (usually shearing but occasionally mowing or roller chopping) and burning. Sites with older brush or tree encroachment are higher priorities. Most sharp-tails in Koochiching County use privately owned lands that are in fields or pastures in combination with open peatlands. Most sites we manage are brushy areas between these important areas. We combine several considerations (bird numbers, proximity to lek, urgency to treat, landscape context) to prioritize habitat management projects within the area.

Concern exists for adequate funding to meet our habitat management needs. Our Area should treat 500 acres annually to maintain the most important habitats. If this need was evenly split between shearing/mowing and burning, we would need around $20-25,000 annually. Other limitations include site conditions (ex: too wet from beavers or inadequate frost to shear), or other challenges like contractor equipment breakdowns.

Examples of proposed and completed open landscape habitat projects include: in FY 2014, four projects (580 acres) proposed, one funded and completed (120 acres); in FY 2015, three projects (560 acres) proposed, all funded, and one completed (174 acres) due to weather/site conditions; and in FY 2016, three projects proposed ($36,800) and one funded ($4,000, 260 acres) for hopeful completion." –Larry Petersen, Area Wildlife Manager

Aitkin

"In the Aitkin Wildlife Area, approximately 60 acres were mowed last winter on the Aitkin and Ripple River WMAs. The latter project was done in collaboration with **ABC** for golden-winged warblers. Last spring's sharp-tail surveys showed no changes from 2014 in number of

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leks or numbers of birds on leks, despite extra effort to find new leks. About 2000 acres were burned in spring on the Willowsippi, Deer Run, Sherman and Blind Lake WMA and brushland project areas. Fall burns (270 acres) are planned for the Roberts-Wickstrom and Gun Lake WMAs, and one private land project, to provide sites for the fall treatment study.

No funds exist in the Area budget for brushland mowing projects this winter. Only $30,000 was available in the MN DNR Region 2 budget for open landscape habitat projects in FY 2016. Fortunately, the **Pheasants Forever (PF)/Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGS) Northeast Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Habitat Partnership**, through their FY 2015 grant from the **LSOHC** ($143,000 total for enhancement), will help mow up to 1,250 acres of brushland at the Wagner West Bog, Grayling Marsh WMA, and Great River and Thumb Island projects this winter. Spring burns (814 acres) are planned on French Lake and Aitkin WMAs, the Sherman West project, and a private land project.

The Aitkin Wildlife Area will be fully staffed with a new Area Manager, Assistant Area Manager and Wildlife Technician soon, as other staff has retired or transferred to vacancies in Brainerd." –Christine Reisz, Area Wildlife Manager

Cloquet

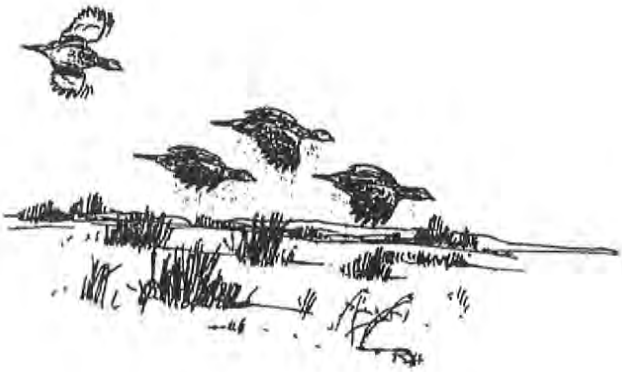
"Based on spring surveys, the local sharp-tail population may have rebounded a bit in the Cromwell area from 2014. Burns completed last spring included three sites (800+ acres), and summer mows included 45 acres on Sandstone WMA and 32 acres in the Cromwell area (sharp-tailed grouse research site). Firebreaks have been mowed in preparation for a 70 acre burn this fall near Meadowlands (also a fall treatment research site) and for a 60 acre burn next spring on Rutledge WMA. One shear project is planned this winter with the **PF/MSGS** grant on the Kettle Lake East brushland project (576 ac).

The budget outlook is tough, unless funding sources for open landscape habitat management, such as CPL grants (partners and match are needed), are found. Three major projects to protect roughly 1,380 acres of open land and brushland habitat, and addition to the WMA system, are coming along nicely, much thanks to the **PF/MSGS Northeast Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Habitat Partnership** and their FY 2015 grant from the **LSOHC.** " –Joe Worm, Wildlife Technician

Cambridge

"The Cambridge Wildlife Area is home to the southern fringe of the east-central sharp-tailed grouse range in Minnesota. Several historic lek sites have been identified and observed over time in northern Kanabec County. Like many areas hosting the east-central population, attendance at historic dancing grounds has been decreasing. Cambridge Wildlife staff have focused habitat management on two newly acquired parcels in northern Kanabec County: Pomroy Pastures WMA (960 acres) and The Holy Cow Ranch Addition to the Kroschel WMA (1,495 total acres).

Area staff has completed approximately 1,457 project acres over the last year: 347 acres hayed, 185 acres burned in prescribed fires, 800 acres maintained through conservation grazing, and 125 acres of brushland sheared. These projects could not have been possible without support from the **MN DNR Region 3 Roving Crew**, the **Kanabec County Soil and Water Conservation District** as grantee of a **CPL Grant**, and Pomroy Pastures WMA **grazing cooperator**. In addition to this work, Cambridge Wildlife staff built two sharp-tailed grouse lek observation blinds that are available for public reservation." – Melissa Boehmer, Assistant Area Wildlife Manager



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