

***LIVING ON THE EDGE***  
***[Sending out an S.O.S.]***  
*By David C. Pauly*

The remnant populations of Sharp-tailed Grouse living on the east central landscape of the Minnesota range are truly living on the *edge* of existence.

They exist on the edge for the following factors:

- Their niche encompasses the ecotone/transition zone – the southern extension of the forested area of northern Minnesota and the northern extension of the grassland area of central Minnesota – a definite “no-man’s land” – an abyss (so to speak).
- The individual sub-populations -- those closely linked to each dancing ground -- are experiencing the initial phases of genetic isolation (evidenced by early data from the DNA analysis project currently in progress).
- These populations are disjunct from those better thriving populations to the north. Therefore arbitrary political jurisdictional lines regarding future funding opportunities are impacting DNR habitat management/maintenance decisions. These decisions should be based upon sharp-tailed grouse habitat community potential.
- The insidious gradual disappearance/decline of quality habitat due to:
  1. Natural brush/tree encroachment
  2. Invasive species introduction and expansion (both vegetative and huntable avian species).
  3. Land parcelization for recreational purposes (fragmenting necessary expansive habitat complexes).
  4. Conversion of habitats to agricultural commodity crops and/or biomass energy treeson these ‘openlands’. (Note -- there is a significant number of habitat areas in this portion of the Mille Lacs Uplands subsection (Ecological Classification) that were designated for targeted Openlands species management through several iterations of planning processes).
- The impacts of little understood emerging avian diseases such as West Nile Virus, Avian Cholera, Reticuloendotheliosis virus, Blackhead, etc.
- The general lack of knowledge and apathy surrounding the intrinsic values of these birds in this locale.

- The possible unknown potential ramifications of climate change scenarios and those influences in this area of Minnesota.
- Forest Certification and the associated restrictions disallowing the use of certain herbicides, habitat restoration techniques and plant materials on State administered lands – including Wildlife Management Areas.
- A definite paucity of habitat corridors that would provide much needed connectivity between these small bands of birds.

All of the above point to a convergence of causative agents that have the collective possibility to significantly marginalize the dynamics of this population – currently poised on the edge (of extirpation)!



The S.O.S. these birds are emitting, however, is being heard – loud and clear. And there are many new and exciting management alternatives that can effectively assist us with saving and salvaging their floundering ship while attenuating the demise of this somewhat isolated population:

### **Funding Opportunities Specific to Minnesota (Legislatively Mandated)**

- Heritage Enhancement (**HE**) Grants to non-governmental organizations (including MSGS) for the expressed purpose of habitat management on public lands.
- Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (**L-SOHC**) large block grants – a segment of the 3/8 of 1%, 2008 Constitutional Amendment.
- Conservation Partners Legacy (**CPL**) funded as a direct result of the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Constitutional Amendment – a specific subset of the L-SOHC funding, dedicated for the purpose of enhancement, management and acquisition administered through small local organizations and other entities.
- The Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society – **SOS** (*Save Our Sharptails*) acquisition program. Donations made to this MSGS account are used to acquire sharptail habitats in peril. This program is currently the engine behind a project in the heart of ‘dancer’ range.
- Green Acres, **2C** Managed Forest Land Program (**MFLP**) – tax reductions of 30% annually to landowners
- Sustainable Forest Incentive Act (**SFIA**) – annual incentive payments to enrolled owners of forest land practicing long-term sustainable management -- includes lands capable of producing forests (i.e. brushlands)
- DNR – Division of Fish & Wildlife, Game and Fish Account -- Heritage Enhancement Program cost- share dollars (up to 100%) for habitat management on private lands -- administered through the Private Lands Program. Focus can be sharp-tailed grouse habitat.

## **Funding Opportunities From The National Perspective (associated with the USDA Farm Bill)**

- Environmental Quality Incentive Program (**EQIP**) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (**WHIP**) – up to 50% cost share for approved conservation practices (includes brushland/openlands habitat enhancement or restoration).
- Grassland Reserve Program (**GRP**) -- voluntary conservation program that emphasizes support for working grazing operations, enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grassland under threat of conversion to other uses.
- Biomass Crop Assistance Program (**BCAP**) – cost-share incentive payments related to the harvest of biomass energy fuels. This is especially appropriate as there will be demonstrations in Minnesota this September – highlighting a BioBaler, capable of mechanical harvest and baling (500 kg round bales) from shrubs and trees up to 4” in diameter.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (**CSP**) – annual payments of \$7/acre for lands enrolled with an 8-year renewable term agreement, for parcels of < 1000 acres with an updated Stewardship Plan.

As you can see – the *dancers*' future horizon can have a broad and expansive view –

### **‘LONG LIVE THE FIRE BIRD’**



*”We are not placed on this earth to be curators of a museum, instead to be tenders of a green and bountiful garden” -? Author.*

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