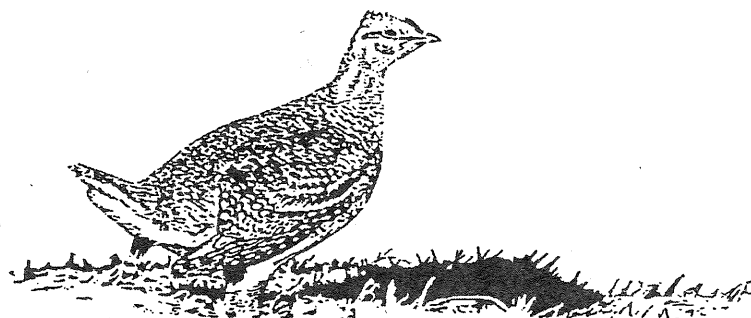


WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



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Fall 2005

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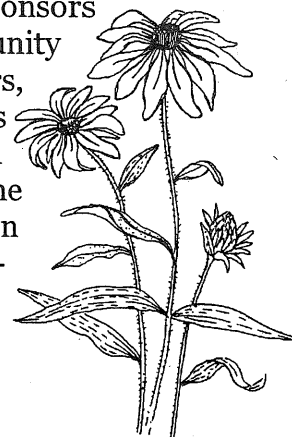
Successful Sharptail Workshop

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2005 PRAIRIE GROUSE TECHNICAL COUNCIL MEETING

The 2005 Prairie Grouse Technical Council (PGTC) Meeting will take place in Valentine, Nebraska from Monday, September 19 through Thursday evening, September 22. An evening social on Monday will open the meeting. Tuesday and Wednesday will be devoted to paper presentations and an all-day field trip is planned for Thursday. Registration and lodging information is available from Bill Vodehnal (402)684-2921 (vodehnal@ngpc.state.ne.us). A nine-page meeting announcement with many more details is available at (<http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/grousecouncil>). Valentine is located in the Sandhill Region of Nebraska, a vast rolling grassland inhabited by few people and many sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chicken. The grouse season opens on September 17 so meeting attendees will have a chance to hunt the prairie grouse. Contact Len McDaniel (lenslek@yahoo.com) for hunting information..

Wisconsin hosted the 2003 PGTC Meeting in Siren with the WSGS being one of the sponsors of the event. Wisconsin had the opportunity to show grouse researchers, managers, hunters, and supporters from other states and Canada, sharp-tailed grouse and their habitat in the northwest part of the state. The upcoming PGTC meeting is an opportunity to learn about North America's prairie grouse while also being able to see and hunt the birds in the fabled Nebraska Sandhills.



PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Dave Evenson



You have no doubt seen the card with the grizzled old cowpuncher saying, "There's a heckuva lot of things they didn't tell me when I signed on for this job". As your president, I'm in the midst of reviewing the draft Strategy for Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need. And I feel a little sympathy for that cowboy. I probably feel more sympathy for the DNR team charged with developing this document. At over 800 pages, they sent it to me via CD for my computer. You can check into this document via the DNR web site. Read the 9 page executive summary for a good idea of methodology and order.

This document addresses endangered and threatened species as well as other species that aren't doing too well, including some game species. Of the 84 bird species listed, all the grassland and barrens species are there, bobolinks, dickcissels, all the grassland sparrows, upland sandpipers, and of course, the sharp-tailed grouse.

In the document, 66 natural communities are classified from apparently secure down to critically imperiled. Of those classified imperiled or critically imperiled, eight out of 23 with this classification are some form of barrens, prairie, openings or bracken grassland. And those eight open types all have a few dozen vertebrate species associated with them, as opposed to many of the other imperiled landscapes, which have none, or only a few species associated. This document clearly points out the very reason that WSGS exists, and echoes our mission.

Each state is going through this planning for these "fall between the crack" species. Federal grants are making the urgency, but this is a logical well thought out way to prioritize limited state and federal monies and staff.

WSGS LOSES BOARD MEMBER

By Jim Evrard

WSGS Board Member Jim Wilson died on April 22, 2005. Jim, in his early 80s and having health problems for some years, called me several weeks earlier, stating that he and his wife sold their home in Milltown and were moving to St. Croix Falls to be closer to the hospital where he was being treated for his illness.

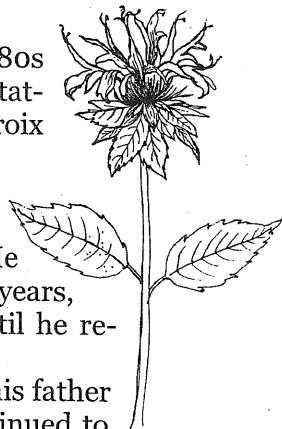
Jim, a veterinarian, was a life-long resident of northwest Wisconsin. He was raised in St. Croix Falls and graduated with a degree in veterinary science

from the University of Michigan. He practiced in Milltown for over 50 years, treating small and large animals until he retired.

Jim began hunting sharptails with his father in the Namekagon Barrens and continued to hunt the birds in Canada and the U.S. throughout his life.

Jim was a charter member of the WSGS and was elected to the executive board in 2003. In our recent conversation, Jim said he intended to run for reelection to the WSGS Board in 2006. Sadly, he will never have that opportunity.

Jim's declining health didn't prevent him from attending our annual and board meetings. In the last year or so, either his wife or one of his sons drove him to our gatherings. Jim joined us in many activities although he walked assisted with a cane. He will be missed. Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse has lost one of their most ardent supporters.



WSGS OFFICERS

President: Dave Evenson

Vice President: Tom Ziegeweid

Treasurer: Jim Evrard

Board Members: Bob Dreis
Ed Frank
Blair Klein

Newsletter Editor: Jim Evrard

2005 Sharptail Census Results and Resulting Permit Numbers

By Jim Evrard

The DNR's Andrea Mezzera provided the following summary of the 2005 spring sharptail counts and the suggested number of hunting permits based on those counts.

On eight managed areas for which census data were available (apparently there was no sharptail census of the Wood County Wildlife Area again this year – the third year running), the number of 2005 displaying male sharptails declined to 114 from 148 in 2004. On unmanaged areas, male sharptails counted dropped from 243 in 2004 to 215 this year.

This is the lowest number of displaying males counted in managed areas in 15 years! I had hoped that the bottom of the grouse cycle was reached last year, but hopefully this year will be the bottom. Apparently drumming ruffed grouse counts also declined this spring from the previous spring.

Suggested hunting permits available will be 780 (620 in Unit 2, 110 in Unit 9, and 50 in Unit 10 (Crex Meadows). There will be no permits issued this year for Unit 8 (Namekagon Barrens) since the number of displaying males counted, 19, was below the threshold of 25 needed to trigger issuing hunting permits. The 780 permits are significantly less than the 1,000 permits issued in 2004. A total of 471 hunters applied for permits last year. If a similar number apply this year, everybody should receive a permit based upon the unit applied for.

Some grouse managers and others have expressed concern that hunting has caused the lower grouse numbers. However, grouse numbers declined from 2004 to 2005 on the six managed areas **not hunted** (Douglas County, Kimberly-Clark, Moquah Barrens, Pershing, Riley Lake, and Dike Seventeen wildlife areas) as well as on the two managed areas that were hunted in 2004 (Crex Meadows and Namekagon Barrens wildlife areas). Sharptails also declined in the unmanaged areas (Units Two and Nine).

Reported hunter success rates remain low, from three to eleven percent. Some grouse managers feel that there is a substantial unreported sharptail harvest. Only 40 sharptails were reported taken last year.

What does this mean for the future of sharptail hunting in Wisconsin? Hopefully, history will repeat itself and sharptail numbers will rebound, following the grouse cycle. I've lived through three grouse cycles during my professional life, but it is difficult at times to reassure oneself that sharptails will recover after seeing seven straight years of declining numbers in Crex Meadows.

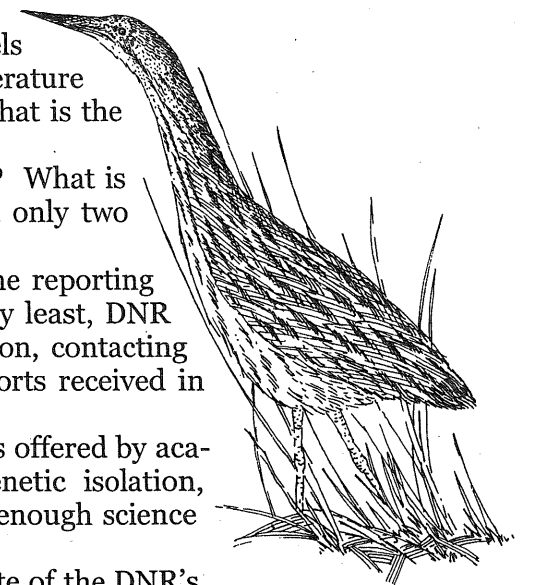
I feel that the sharptail model used to set hunting permit levels needs to be validated. The first step would be an exhaustive literature review and summary. Questions that need answers include what is the true spring adult sex ratio?

What proportion of the males actually display in the spring? What is the average annual production of young in Wisconsin? Is it only two young (in the fall) for every adult female in the population?

The reporting rate should also be investigated much like the reporting rate has been investigated for Canada goose tags. At the very least, DNR personnel should devote several man-days each hunting season, contacting hunters in the field and comparing the results to hunter reports received in Madison.

I would also like to see more analysis of some of the theories offered by academics regarding minimum viable population numbers, genetic isolation, minimum habitat size, etc. There is too much "art" and not enough science used in the management of Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse.

Hopefully these questions will be answered during the rewrite of the DNR's sharp-tailed grouse management plan, scheduled to begin this fall.



ANNUAL MEETING

By Jim Evrard

The WSGS annual meeting took place in Solon Springs on Saturday and Sunday, April 23 and 24. The gathering began with the Executive Board meeting at 10 a.m. in the St. Croix Inn. Board Member Jim Wilson was the only member not present and we learned later that day that he died the previous evening.

The business meeting was called to order in the St. Croix Inn lounge by President Dave Evenson at 1:30 p.m. with 18 persons eventually present. Treasurer Jim Evrard gave his report with the net worth of WSGS being approximately \$8,200.

Evenson reviewed the business conducted during the past year including memberships in the North American Grouse Partnerships, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, and the Wisconsin Stewardship Network. Membership with the Wisconsin Outdoor Alliance was dropped and the offer of membership in the Wisconsin Wetland Association was declined. The WSGS signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the new Friends of the Bird Sanctuary (FOTBS) and continued the MOU understanding with the Friends of Crex.

Evenson, Evrard, and Ed Frank had input into the Burnett and Bayfield county forest management plan revisions, the DNR's prairie chicken management plan, and the proposed extension of the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area project acquisition boundary.

Frank also reported on involvement in the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative and the DNR's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan.

The Sharptail Workshop held in Grantsburg in late March was a success with 35 persons attending. Frank is writing the workshop summary that could be used in the upcoming rewrite of the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan. The Plan rewrite will probably be initiated when a replacement for DNR staffer Keith Warnke is selected later this fall.

The Board decided to fund additional Wisconsin sharptail genetic research to a maximum of \$2,000. This information will be vital to the rewrite of the management plan.

Dave Biegel, WSGS member and President of the FOTBS provided an interesting program about the short history of the new group and its accomplishments.

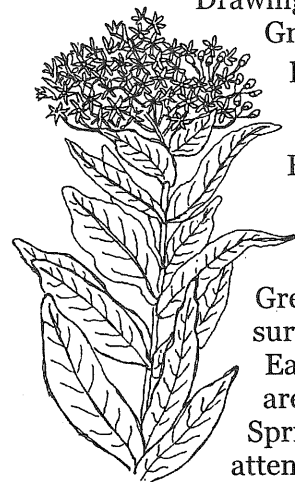
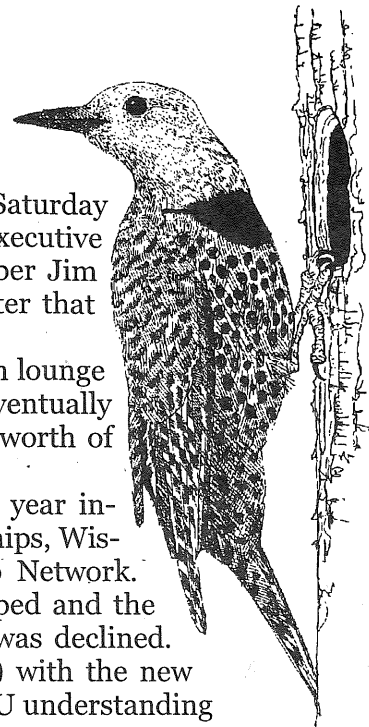
It was announced that the summer executive board meeting will be held on July 21 and 22 in the Moquah Barrens in Bayfield County. All members are invited to attend.

Drawings for the art prints then took place with Sue Clausen winning the Gromme print, Bob Dreis won the Raymer print, Dick Nickoli, the Smith print, and Jim Hale won an added prize, a gift certificate for a bird mount. This year there was a door prize for every member present at the meeting.

Following the meeting, the group drove to the field trial building in the Bird Sanctuary where they were joined by FOTBS for a social and catered steak dinner. Following a welcome by FOTBS

Secretary/Treasurer Scott Peterson, DNR biologist and WSGS member Greg Kessler made the assignments for the following morning's sharptail survey and gave a presentation on the history of the Bird Sanctuary.

Early on Sunday morning, the sharptail counters spread throughout the area to count the birds. They reassembled at Prevost's Restaurant in Solon Springs for breakfast and census debriefing. By mid-morning, those who attending the annual meeting were on the road headed back to their homes.



I observed that in past burning operations, some junberry bushes were protected from fire. I suggest that these bushes not be spared in burning, but the fire should be allowed to nip or consume the bushes since this will result in increased fruit production and reproduction.

I believe that control burning can be used as the sole management tool on the upland portions of this area. On the off-sites of aspen, basal spraying might hasten the clearing.

NICOLET NATIONAL FOREST

Within the Nicolet National Forest there are several areas presently being managed by WCD for sharptail grouse. Two of these areas have been burned in an attempt to reopen and extend old clearings. The burning only succeeded in eliminating excess "duff" and stimulating some grass and forb growth. The encroaching woody shrubs and trees were not seriously set back by burning. These areas do not lend themselves to burning because the surrounding northern types are somewhat fire-proof. When they do burn, chances of an uncontrolled wild fire are great. Since the terrain is broken and rocky, uniform burns and adequate firebreaks are also difficult to attain. Perhaps logging, hand-cutting, or basal spraying followed by fire would improve results.

SPREAD EAGLE WILDLIFE AREA

The acreage that has been subjected to prescribed burning did not greatly benefit from it. Both the north and south sections of Spread Eagle consist of a series of large openings. It appears that these openings (bracken-grasslands) do not need fire for their maintenance and one fire every five to ten years or so would only be beneficial in removing unnecessary acculated duff as well as stimulating flowers, fruits, and seed production, particularly blueberries.

However, if some of the adjoining ridgetops could be burned when the openings were burned, fire could be allowed to run into this forest edge until stopped, so that any woody invasion might be checked and a good "edge" might be produced.

The jack pine stands on the north-facing slopes probably should be allowed to remain, since these more mesic types are best studied for forest growth and would help to provide different cover types.

(TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT NEWSLETTER)

"AFIELD WITH ZIGGY"

(in his own words)

By Thomas C. Ziegeweid

It has come to my attention, among other interested parties, that some sharptail hunters are not sending in their bag reports to DNR in Madison. I personally talked to a gentleman at Crex two seasons ago, that had shot a bird the same day I did. When the subsequent report on bagged birds came out last year I did not see his name on the list.

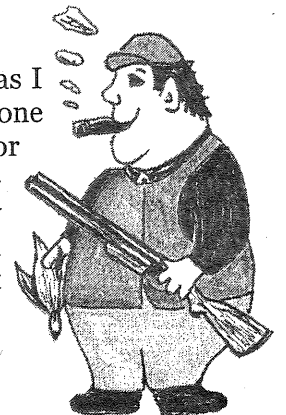
I am sure it was an unintentional oversight on his part; I have caught myself almost forgetting to call the DNR hotline with exterior zone Canada geese I've bagged in years past.

Most hunters usually remember to tag their sharptail or punch their tag for Canada geese as the permit must be carried on your person while hunting. But, it is real easy to forget to send in your report, (or call in bag with geese). You get home, you are tired, you put away the gear and kennel your dog, and you forget.

Here are some practical tips to help facilitate your reporting:

When I get my tag(s) in fall, I fill out as many stamped, addressed envelopes as I have tags. I carry them in my van, where I can see them. That way if I bag only one bird on that trip, the report gets sent in on time and I still have envelopes for more trips at a later date. When hunting in a group, designate one leader to collect tags and send them in. I usually end up doing this when I hunt with my friends. Verbally remind other hunters you run into afield to be sure to send in their reports promptly (within 48 hours). Remember, "IT'S THE LAW", we don't want to see anybody get a fine for not reporting a bird, but bag data is absolutely critical to future hunting seasons on sharptails.

See you in the barrens, Ziggy



EARLY WISCONSIN SHARPTAIL RESEARCH

Tenth in a series by Jim Hale

In the late 1950s and early sixties, Richard J. Vogl conducted and completed a study on the effects of fire on light-soil vegetation in 12 state-managed prairie grouse areas. He completed a PhD thesis at U.W.-Madison in 1961 and provided the Wisconsin Conservation Department with a series of recommendations for managing controlled-burning programs. His following suggestions are somewhat abridged from his original report.



CREX MEADOWS

I think Norm Stone's use of fire as a management tool is to be commended and is comparable to that of Wallace Grange and others who have used fire in management. Areas of Crex have been opened completely and sufficiently so that I do not think that yearly burning is any longer necessary. I do not mean that annual burning is harmful; in some respects it might still be helpful in reducing the number of oak grubs per acre. I think that one burn approximately every three years might be sufficient to keep brush down and keep the prairie in maximum production. I believe that the time, manpower, and money spent annually reburning these now established openings could be put to better use in reclaiming other new areas on Crex. Upland openings are also sorely needed in the Fish Lake Wildlife Area which is rapidly growing out of production because it is growing up and closing in.

In Crex, there are areas of prairie and of pine islands. Openings in the pine island types are harder to create and even more difficult to maintain. Since there are numerous prairie areas still to be burned and opened, I advise concentrating future burns on these prairie types. This only holds true if the ultimate management plan of Crex advocates a mixture of prairie openings and forest types. The latter should be left undisturbed, since the pine islands will potentially produce the best forest type of northern pine-hardwoods and are harder to open up and maintain as openings.

DANBURY GROUSE AREA

The same management techniques applied to the prairie areas of Crex should be applied here. But, since this area is marginal prairie and barrens, the interval between fires should be longer to permit maximum accumulation of mulch or fuel for the next fire.

The entire Danbury area is currently in need of burning and if a burning program is started in the near future the best results with the least effort can still be done.

NAMEKAGON BARRENS WILDLIFE AREA

Before forest protection, portions of this area were mostly oak barrens and some pine barrens. Management practices used to date are very good. Much of the area is now oak barrens transitional forest, so frequent fire is needed. A tentative schedule of one burn every five years for about a 20-year period followed by one burn every ten years is recommended. In this way, maximum fuels would be present to help reduce the oak trees to multiple-stemmed grubs. I believe that since the Namekagon Area was a barrens and only contains a small fraction of prairie grasses and forbs, fires occurring closer together than five years would not have enough fuel to produce maximum effects on the woody vegetation present.

Rather than reburn the blocks of land that have already been burned, new blocks should be burned. In the northern edge where trees have reached larger size, a good head fire or repeated burning under extremely dry conditions will be needed to "knock down" the trees.

DOUGLAS COUNTY WILDLIFE AREA

Control burning should be used about once every five to ten years on this area. Burning not only decreases advancing woody vegetation, it stimulates flower, fruit and maximum production in some species. Blueberries, for example, seem to produce maximum yields with several years rest after burning. Future burning should be concentrated on areas not fired in the last ten years. Hand-cutting of jack pine should be stopped, allowing jack pine that survive the fire to remain. Hand-cutting of aspen, however, along with basal spraying might help to reduce aspen groves that increase after burning. Complete extermination of any tree species should not be carried out, since good sharp-tailed grouse range contains a variety of tree species.

JACK PINE BUDWORM OUTBREAK

By Jim Evrard

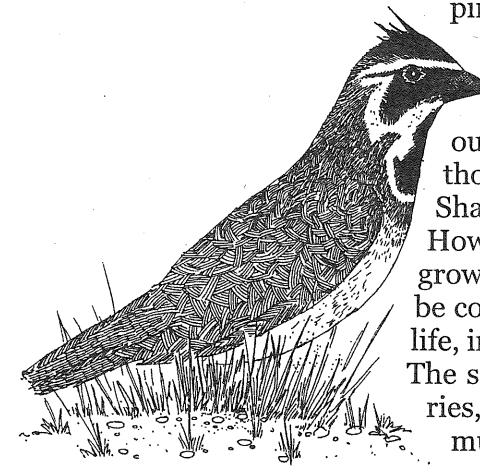
According to a news release issued by DNR Entomologist Shane Weber, more than 100,000 acres of jack pine forests in Douglas, Bayfield, Washburn, and Burnett counties could suffer heavy budworm damage this summer. The jack pine budworm has reached its highest population levels in the last 12 years. Last year, 35,000 acres of jack pine were damaged mostly in southern Douglas County. So far, the Bayfield Peninsula is almost free of the budworm. There are some budworm infestations in north-east Wisconsin.

The budworm eats pine needles, killing the trees through defoliation. Budworm populations cycle every 10-12 years with the last major outbreak during 1992-1994. That outbreak was responsible for thousands of acres of jack pine being clearcut in huge salvage timber sales. Those large clearcuts created the conditions for a sharp-tailed grouse population eruption in Units 2 and 9. Those units still have numbers of sharptails that will offer the best sharptail hunting this fall in the state.

The sharp-tailed grouse in Wisconsin is a species of disturbance. The jack pine forest is also a community of disturbance. Under natural conditions, the native jack pine budworm periodically kills substantial areas of jack pine, creating the fuel for large wild fires. The heat from fire opens the jack pine cones, allowing seed to spill on the soil bared by fire. In this way, jack pine seedlings are established and the jack pine community is renewed.

Sharptails take advantage of large wild fires, moving into the open, brushy areas and prospering until tree growth closes in, again creating forests. Sharptails move on, colonizing new, recently-burned areas. In this way, the jack pine forest and sharptails move across the landscape.

I recently drove from Grantsburg to Drummond through the Northwest Pine Barrens. Dying jack pines were common from Spooner to Barnes. According to Weber, the budworm normally attacks jack pines 35 years old and older. However, I saw many young jack pines turning brown.



What does this mean for Wisconsin sharp-tails? If the budworm outbreak does become as bad as predicted, there will probably be thousands of acres of new clearcuts, creating new sharptail habitat. Sharptails will increase in the short term.

However, since the budworm is a reoccurring problem when trying to grow jack pine for market, I fear that many former jack pine stands will be converted to red pine. Red pine plantations are poor habitat for wildlife, including sharp-tailed grouse.

The so-called balance of nature may be true, but only in terms of centuries, not human lifetimes. Nature is dynamic. Plant and wildlife communities change. Sharptail numbers cycle and so does their habitat.

WSGS PROJECTS

What does the WSGS do with the money from membership fees, profits from the annual art raffle, and other income sources? The following is a complete list of the projects that the WSGS has funded from its beginning to the present

Year	Amount	Recipient	Project
1992	\$800	Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission	Radio transmitters for Crex Meadows /Moquah Barrens sharp-tailed grouse relocation
1993	\$35	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Support of Governor's Conference on Hunting, Green Bay
	\$100	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Support of Wisconsin Grouse Symposium, Madison

Year	Amount	Recipient	Project
1995	\$600	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Cost-shared brush mower for Sandhill Wildlife Area
	\$100	Wisconsin Society for Ornithology	First of five gifts for Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas
1996	\$500	Friends of Crex	First of three gifts for proposed Crex Meadows Wildlife Education Center
	\$100	Wisconsin Society for Ornithology	Second of five gifts for Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas
1997	\$500	Friends of Crex	Second of three gifts for Crex Meadows Center
	\$100	Wisconsin Society for Ornithology	Third of five gifts for Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas.
	\$25	Wisconsin Stewardship Network	Membership support of network of conservation groups
1998	\$500	Friends of Crex	Third and final gift for Crex Meadows
	\$100	Wisconsin Society for Ornithology	Fourth of five gifts for Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas
	\$25	Wisconsin Stewardship Network	Membership
	\$1,200	University of Wisconsin Stevens Point	Support of Neal Niemuth's sharp-tailed grouse research project
	\$275	Central Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Workshop	Support of workshop, Wausau
1999	\$100	Wisconsin Society for Ornithology	Fifth and final gift for Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas
	\$200	Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute	Support of Pine Barrens Workshop, Ashland
	\$50	Wisconsin Stewardship Network	Membership
	\$1,230	University of Wisconsin Stevens Point	Support of Tim Connolly's sharp-tailed grouse research project
	\$200	Ducks Unlimited	Booth at Great Outdoors Festival, Oshkosh

Year	Amount	Recipient	Project
2000	\$35	North American Grouse Partnership	Membership support
	\$50	Wisconsin Stewardship Network	Membership
	\$500	Friends of Crex	Additional donation for Crex Center
	\$1,000	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Barrens restoration in Burnett County
2001	\$35	North American Grouse Partnership	Membership
	\$50	The Nature Conservancy	Don Bronk memorial donation
	\$50	Jan Hewitt	Sharptail census
2002	\$35	North American Grouse Partnership	Membership
	\$50	Wisconsin Stewardship Network	Membership
	\$100	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Mail survey to private land-owners in Red Clay Project area
	\$2,000	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Barrens restoration in Burnett County
2003	\$35	North American Grouse Partnership	Membership
	\$500	2003 Prairie Grouse Technical Council	Support and host of meeting, Siren
	\$250	Wisconsin Outdoor Alliance	Membership support
2004	\$35	North American Grouse Partnership	Membership
	\$50	Friends of the Bird Sanctuary	Membership support
	\$125	Wisconsin Wildlife Federation	Membership support
	\$250	Wisconsin Outdoor Alliance	Membership
	\$5,000	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Crex Meadows land acquisition
	\$600	Gus Smith, Northland College	Construct two sharptail viewing blinds, Moquah Barrens
Total: \$17,590			

SUCCESSFUL SHARPTAIL WORKSHOP

The successful WSGS-sponsored sharptail workshop took place on March 29 and 30 in the Crex Meadows Wildlife Center in Grantsburg. The purpose of the workshop was to update our knowledge about the sharptail in our state in preparation for the rewrite of the DNR's Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan. The workshop also focused on the plight of the sharptail in Wisconsin. Approximately 35 persons attended the event. The first session featured the history and ecology of the sharptail in Wisconsin including habitat fragmentation and effects on genetics and hunting impacts. WSGS President Dave Evenson introduced the speakers who included WSGS Treasurer Jim Evrard, Stan Temple, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Bruce Swanson of Central Michigan University, and Damian Vraniak, a native American involved in pine barrens research and restoration.

Following the presentations, a social and catered dinner was held in the Crex Center.

The workshop resumed the following morning with presentations by panels of sharptail managers that focused on the status and future of the sharptail and its habitat in their respective management areas. The panels included Scott Posner and Dan Eklund of the U.S. Forest Service and Todd Naas, Greg Kessler, Fred Strand, Nancy Cristel, Pete Engman, Pat Beringer, Mark Schmidt, Michele Windsor, and Stu Boren of the DNR.

WSGS board member, Ed Frank, is preparing a workshop summary that is planned to be made available to those interested in the future of Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse.

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