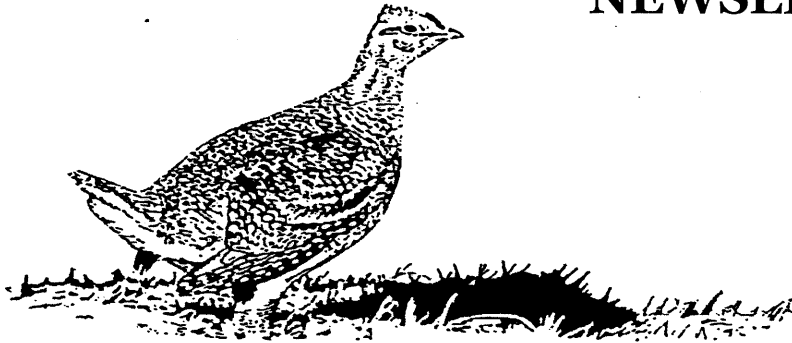


WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Number 69

Winter 2013

2014 ANNUAL MEETING IN SOLON SPRINGS

by Jim Evrard

The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse (WSGS) Society will hold its annual meeting in Solon Springs on Saturday and Sunday, April 26 and 27, 2014. Mark this date on your calendars.

The annual meeting will begin at 1 pm. with the business meeting, followed by a program featuring the new Northwest Sands Management Plan. At the end of the program, drawings for door prizes and the annual art print raffle, WSGS's biggest annual fund raising event, will take place. A social hour will precede a catered dinner. The location of the meeting will be announced in the next newsletter.

Those interested in a tour of the new 20,000-acre state easement acquisition of industrial forest land and the Germann Lake fire area south of Brule River State Forest will gather at the Saint Croix Inn at 6 AM. for a vehicle caravan to the sites. A group breakfast is scheduled at 9 AM. in an area restaurant. The meeting will officially end following breakfast.

The fee for the annual meeting is \$15 per person to cover the cost of the catered dinner and other expenses. Please send the fee by April 21 to Jim Evrard at the WSGS address so the caterer can have a head count. Breakfast costs will be the responsibility of those participating. A block of rooms has been reserved at the St. Croix Inn (715-378-4444). Please make your own room reservations.

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THE WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY

The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (WSGS) is a private, nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to the preservation of the sharp-tailed grouse and its habitat in Wisconsin. Questions about the WSGS should be directed to the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, 102 East Crex Avenue, Grantsburg, WI 54840.

WSGS OFFICERS

President: Dave Evenson
Vice President: Tom Ziegeweid
Secretary/Treasurer: Jim Evrard

Board Members: Mike Cole Bruce Moss
Ed Frank John Probst
Paul Kooiker John Zatopa

Newsletter Editor: Jim Evrard

FROM YOUR PRESIDENT

by Dave Evenson

I was in a somber mood as I returned home from Eau Claire DNR Sharp-tailed Grouse Committee on May 20. WSGS has a vote on that group, and I had just voted with the majority to keep sharptails listed as a game bird, but to issue zero permits this year. The censuses and polling of our board members assured me that it was the right decision, but it was still a sad day as I contemplated "Will Wisconsin care about sharptails when they are not hunted?"

Certainly the great population of Wisconsin doesn't care about sharptails right now. Maybe one percent (58,000) or maybe more, might know that we have sharpies, but certainly that number doesn't spend much time thinking or working for them. And since the public doesn't much care, neither do politicians for the most part. So the real question comes down to "Will Public Land Managers care?" I hope so, but there are too many examples of lost barrens and sharptail populations to be optimistic.

It's real hard to manage for barrens. A manager has to fight succession, fight those afraid of fire, fight sportsmen who'd rather have forest and ruffed grouse, fight a public sentiment that thinks trees are good and barrens are wasteland.

In 1939 Wood County had a prairie grouse bag of 7,000. Central Wisconsin was the heart of prairie grouse research, with Buss, Hamerstoms, and Grange all based in that region. I wasn't around as it started slipping away, but certainly during the last 4 decades there has been no priority on maintaining sharptail barrens on most of the state managed properties. Northeastern Wisconsin went the same way, Dunbar, Ackley, Spread Eagle and others all gone, with nary a thought any more, save Spread Eagle.

On this gloomy day, I think of a few bright spots, managers who had the moxie to fight those battles, Cliff Wiita at Kimberly Clark and especially Stu Boren over at Spread Eagle. And I have to say the Feds do pretty well, as Mike Bablick has led a succession of managers at Riley Lake and recent planning efforts have recognized Moquah Barrens for the gem it should be.

And what of present day properties? I've heard anecdotally of a Friend of Crex questioning whether the sharptail was still the best logo for their group. I believe it is, I hope it is, but I can certainly see a layman having questions when Crex has so many other neat and visible critters. Certainly to me what makes Crex is the long vistas; if we lose that, what have we?

Usually I would describe myself as an optimist, and I'll end this column on an optimistic note. Prairie chickens have been un hunted for decades, yet Wisconsin spends millions maintaining habitat for them. Good things, great things really are happening on the land ownership front, at Pershing Wildlife Area, in the land trade that links Crex with the Governor Knowles State Forest Barrens and brought the Namekagon Barrens into state ownership. There's the good possibility Namekagon Barrens could be expanded by 25% (You can help with your donation to make this a reality). And I'll hope that we are able to hunt sharptails in future years.

PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

Check the date on your mailing label and please renew your membership if it has expired or is about to expire. The WSGS is a small organization and depends heavily upon membership fees to continue the struggle for the sharp-tailed grouse and its habitat in Wisconsin. Our membership fees are low compared to most conservation groups and support all-volunteer members who serve as your board of directors and do the work of the society.



AFIELD WITH ZIGGY

by Tom Ziegeweid

As most of you know now, there will be a closed hunting season (no permits issued) on sharptails in our state this fall. I guess this was destined to happen sooner or later with the gradual decline of huntable birds in the last decade. The one big positive this year was the Germann Road wildfire this spring.

I am thoroughly convinced the sharptail's only salvation will be large-sized natural occurrences: wildfires mainly, but also budworm outbreaks and windstorms. Being very familiar with Units 2 and 9, I expect to see an irruption of birds there in the next few years. It makes sense! The birds went bonkers after the Deer Print Lake fire and jackpine budworm outbreak.

Years back I was told by a few DNR biologists, retired and present, that the sharptail eruption in Unit 2 was a temporary glitch and that the birds there were "doomed" as soon as the trees grew back. The biologists said the managed properties would prevail! When the last sharptail is gone from Crex Meadows, there will still be birds in Units 2 and 9. The Crex DNR crew has a solid history of safe burning so why do the Madison powers keep squashing their efforts with "fire bans" etc.

Another positive note this year was the state acquisition of the Namekagon Barrens and the proposed northeast parcel addition. This property plus the Douglas County Wildlife Area and Units 2 and 9 will be in my estimation, the last stronghold for sharptails in Wisconsin. These properties are fairly close to each other, and with some "connectivity" projects, the sharptail population will remain viable in the near future. I bagged my first sharptail at the Barrens last fall. I'm glad I hunted that property, but could it be my last? Hope not. When I was there and looked across the landscape, it reminded me of what Crex used to look like.

My predictions and comments on various properties:

Central Wisconsin – How ironic that one of the biggest flocks of sharptails (23-24 birds) that I have seen in the state was near Bear Bluff about a decade ago. I wouldn't be surprised if they are extinct there. Two years ago, a fire boss at Necedah NWF told me he saw one or two birds on two occasions when they were burning. Too bad 40 years ago they didn't manage this area with disturbance. Gloomy to say the least.

Pershing – Barring a large scale fire, I don't see a drastic turnaround in bird numbers as this area is hard to burn. There are still more pheasants around there than sharptails. The recent land acquisition was fine and dandy, but it isn't going to do much good with unmanaged plant succession.

Riley Lake – Our donation to the Forest Service for habitat work was a good investment. The very active management maintains a good sharptail population for the size of area. Keep up the good work!

Kimberly-Clark – Like Pershing, there is little hope for the sharptails there barring a large scale fire.

Moquah – Where are the birds? It is a good place for large-scale fire, that I probably will not see in my lifetime.

In summary, with the budget cut to the Stewardship Fund, we need to find creative ways to help our sharptail resource with the Namekagon Barrens land trade being a great example. Maybe we should change that policy for one-time habitat projects or get a habitat stamp with funds to manage the land the State already owns. What good is it to continually buy land when you don't have the money to manage it. A glaring example of this is Meadow Valley – 90 square miles of land with only a small historical record of management.

Have a good fall, Tom

MINUTES OF SUMMER BOARD MEETING

by Jim Evrard

The WSGS held their summer board meeting on July 11, 2013 in the Chequamegon National Forest's Perch Lake Campground, near Drummond. Mile Cole, Dave Evenson, Jim Evrard, Ed Frank, Bruce Moss, John Probst, John Zatopa, and Tom Ziegeweid were present along with guest DNR Upland Game Bird Ecologist, Scott Walter.

President Evenson called the meeting to order at 12:40 PM. Secretary/Treasurer Evrard stated the Secretary's Report was printed in previous newsletters. As of July 2013, the WSGS had 177 members that included 154 paying members and 23 complementary members.

The checkbook balance was \$7,862.54 (includes \$2,070 Namekagon Barrens WA (NBWA) land acquisition fund drive) and the CD balance was \$2,591.08 for a total of \$10,453.08 (\$8,383.62 plus the \$2,070 NBWA fund). Moss and Frank sent their Namekagon Barrens contributions to the Friends of the NBWA (FNBWA) rather than the WSGS fund.

Total balance of the NBWA Acquisition Fund is \$3,070.00 (the \$2,070 in the checking account plus a \$1,000 challenge matching pledge). When the pledges are received, the WSGS would have to take \$1,930 from the checking account to complete the \$5,000 WSGS pledge. Moss stated that the FNBWA has raised \$4,000 thus far for the land acquisition fund.

After attending a recent Wisconsin Wildlife Federation District Meeting it was learned that the WSGS (a statewide organization with <300 members) should be paying \$125 annual dues rather than \$60 that we have been paying. A motion was made and approved to increase the annual dues to \$125.

There was a discussion that centered on the value of the proposed NBWA land acquisition with a conclusion that the 1,400+ acres will be valuable as a sharptail habitat corridor to the Douglas County Wildlife Area. Walter stated that Bob Hanson might soon become the Northwest Sands Coordinator to carry out the new barrens management plan that is being developed.

Walter also discussed Scott Hull's new project involving hiring a team of limited term employees to locate sharptail leks in the Northwest Sands during the next three years. It was suggested that volunteers could help count the number of sharptails once the leks were found.

Walter also said Stewardship funding was being reduced with emphasis on easements rather than fee title ownership. He also discussed the directive to sell 250 acres of state land each year.

Walter also suggested that the WSGS become involved in the "Secretary's Roundtable" that will meet on September 16th. It is for DNR partners. One item for possible discussion is a proposal to eliminate the various hunting stamps in favor of one "habitat" stamp.

Evrard brought up the issue of little prescribed burning taking place in the Crex Meadows WA during the past two years. The area is growing into brush and trees to the detriment of barrens wildlife including the sharp-tailed grouse. Evenson will send a letter to those in the DNR involved restating our concern (Cole presented our concern to the Natural Resource Board last year).

There was also a discussion of the 2013 Zero sharptail hunting permits. Moss made the point if sharptails increase in response to the Germann Lake fire with increased numbers; we should hunt these non-managed "surplus" birds. The concern about the theory of genetic vulnerability to hunting again surfaced.

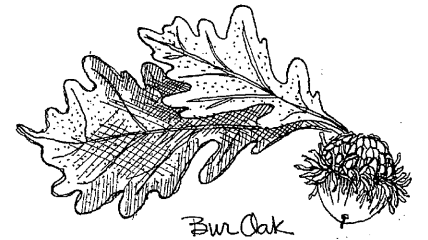
It was decided to hold our 2014 annual meeting in Solon Springs in late April. A tour of the Germann Lake fire and the possibility of helping census sharptails were discussed. Management plans for the "Second Phase" of the St. Croix-Lyme industrial forest easement and the Germann Road fire area might be good items for meeting presentations.

In response to a question by Evenson about future WSGS opportunities, there was a suggestion to form a coalition of friends groups of the Crex Meadows, Namakagon Barrens, and Bird Sanctuary (Douglas County Wildlife Area). The group also thought a "Friends of the Moquah Barrens" should be established.

WSGS officers, Evenson, Ziegeweid, and Evrard were reelected by unanimous consent.

Evenson stated the Prairie Grouse Technical Council will meet in Crookston, Minnesota on October 10-13. He plans to attend.

The meeting adjourned at 3:45 PM.



NAMEKAGON BARRENS LAND ACQUISITION PROGRESS

By Jim Evrard

In previous newsletters, we described a new effort for the WSGS to support Wisconsin sharptails. There is an opportunity to expand the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area by 25 per cent by contributing funds to buy 1,478 acres of private Lyme-St. Croix Forest land adjacent to the northeast border of the Namekagon Barrens. Against the price tag of \$1,060,000 The Conservation Fund has secured a half million and there is a strong likelihood of Wisconsin Stewardship Fund matching that amount. The balance is \$60,000 that needs to be raised by the end of 2013.

The WSGS pledged \$5,000 for the acquisition fund and we initiated a campaign to raise that money for the Namekagon Barrens expansion. Dave and Shirley Anne Evenson initially donated \$1,000 that was subsequently transferred to the Friends of the Namekagon Barrens (FOTNB) to be used as a challenge grant for their land acquisition fund. WSGS Board Member Bruce Moss also plans to donate \$1,000 to FOTNB fund to be used as a challenge grant.

A generous anonymous WSGS member made an offer of a challenge grant, matching up to \$1,000 in additional donations to the Namekagon Barrens fund. There was a good initial response from our membership. Chet Anderson donated \$1,000! Including the challenge pledge, we have raised \$3,820 at the time this newsletter went to press. That would mean we have to tap our "treasury" for \$1,180 in order to complete the WSGS \$5,000 pledge.

Contributors to the WSGS fund to date in addition to Anderson and the anonymous donor include Mowry Smith III (\$300), Mike Cole* (\$250), Tom "Ziggy" Ziegeweid* (\$100), Jonathon Wilde (\$100), Jim Evrard* (\$100), Barry Stanek (\$100), Dan Wilson (\$100), John Probst* (\$100 [\$15 + \$85 pledge]), Fred Hennessy (\$100), S.J. Kmetz (\$100), Jim Shurts (\$100), Herb Behnke (\$50), Al O'Leary (\$50), Paul Stoll (\$50), David Ballman (\$30), Ron Eckstein (\$25), James Spaeth (\$25), Mike Vogl (\$25), Rodney Cole (\$25), Alan Jabar (\$20), Michael Cramey (\$20), Terry Retzlaff (\$15), Joseph Wiltjer (\$15), Richard Ayres (\$10), and John Clemetson (\$10). Thanks to all of you for your generosity. Donations will be accepted until the end of the year.

*WSGS Board Members

CREX MEADOWS CONCERNS

by Jim Evrard

Brush prairie habitat in the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area (WA) is deteriorating. The lack of significant prescribed burning during the past two years is changing Crex Meadows from a brush-prairie to a brushland. Young trees and brush are shading out prairie plants. Vegetative fuels are building up. Wildlife requiring open land habitat including sharp-tailed grouse are declining.

Prescribed burning for the past 60 years had restored the huge state wildlife management area to one of the largest brush prairie-wetland complexes in Wisconsin. Crex Meadows is widely known for large numbers of waterfowl and waterbirds. In the recent past, Crex supported the largest managed sharp-tailed grouse population in the state. The wildlife area also supports rare prairie species such as the upland sandpiper, the Franklin's ground squirrel, and the Karner Blue butterfly.

Norm Stone initiated burning on Crex Meadows in the early 1950s. Later Crex Managers continued the prescribed burning program with the cooperation of the DNR's fire control personnel. However, due to a massive 2011 windstorm in northwest Wisconsin that leveled thousands of acres of forest, a decision was made at the highest levels in Madison not to allow any burning in the windstorm area including Crex Meadows in the spring of 2012.

The burning ban was put into effect due to the large numbers of trees that were downed in the windstorm, creating a huge amount of fuel that was a wildfire threat. Despite Crex Meadows containing many and large wetlands, an extensive system of managed 100-foot wide firebreaks and relatively few trees susceptible to wind damage, it was included in the area-wide burning ban.

Knowing the perilously-low sharptail numbers in Crex Meadows, Board Member Mike Cole, representing the WSGS, appeared before the Natural Resources Board in 2012 asking them not to continue the burning ban for Crex Meadows in 2013. The burning ban was lifted with the return of normal precipitation in the spring of 2013 and the extensive salvage cutting of downed trees from the 2012 windstorm. However no prescribed burning has taken place in Crex to date in 2013. It became obvious that young trees and brush are 'taking over' Crex Meadows.

The WSGS wrote a letter to the DNR chain of command pointing out that the lack of prescribed burning on Crex was threatening the future of the brush prairie property. The DNR response included an invitation to the WSGS to attend a recent meeting of northwestern Wisconsin forestry administrators in Hayward.

Five WSGS Board members (Dave Evenson, Jim Evrard, Ed Frank Paul Kooiker, Bruce Moss) attended the meeting of state forest supervisors, area foresters and area fire control rangers. Northern region forestry administrator Tom Duke conducted the meeting. WSGS President Evenson led the discussion of the WSGS's concern over the lack of prescribed burning in Crex Meadows. After

WSGS WEBSITE

The WSGS website, "wisharptails.org", describes our goals and objectives, projects, members of our board, membership and contact information, and electronic copies of recent newsletters.

extensive discussion of the problem by the group, decisions were made that hopefully will allow the resumption of significant prescribed burning in Crex Meadows.

I came away from the meeting optimistic that the DNR will follow through making it possible to maintain the Crex Meadows brush/prairie habitat and associated wildlife.

As I see it, there were several factors that were involved in the problem that developed over the past few years. First there is a personnel problem at Crex. When I was the Crex Manager in the 1970s, there were six technicians stationed there. When we burned, our mechanic (who had fire control experience) helped in the burn making a total of eight persons in the crew. The Crex crew has now shrunk to just three technicians. Presently one of the three positions is being converted to a biologist level and another position is vacant. This lack of manpower must be addressed by the DNR or wildlife management in Crex Meadows will be history.

Several ideas and suggestions came from the meeting. The WSGS should continue to encourage and support prescribed burning especially in sharptail habitat and range. The WSGS and the DNR should also make a public relations effort to inform the people of the values of prescribed burning and the expertise of trained and experienced DNR crews and their related equipment.

The DNR should provide additional manpower to make up for the continual loss of permanent employees caused by Madison politicians who continually promise cutting state spending as campaign fodder. It is foolish to think that the three present technicians at Crex can do the work of six technicians in the past in light of more state-owned land in Crex now.

Postscript: On September 30, 2013, the DNR conducted the first significant prescribed burn on Crex Meadows in recent years (540 acres). Unfortunately, the fire escaped the boundaries of the burn unit and it jumped two town roads before it was stopped.

All the additional acreage burned (600 acres) was state land within the boundaries of the Crex Meadows WA. The nearest private land was several miles from the fire. There was no damage to the land, in fact, the area burned by the escaped fire badly needed burning. Wildlife will benefit. The costs involved with the loss of control of the fire was two water-drop planes and a helicopter from nearby Minnesota and the additional DNR personnel and equipment that came to the aid of the Crex crew.



MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL

Name: _____
Street/PO Box _____
City: _____ State: _____
Zip: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Would you like to volunteer for:

_____ Board of Directors
_____ Bird Censusing
_____ Newsletter articles
_____ Annual Meeting

_____ **Electronic Newsletter (by email)**

Enclosed:

\$ _____ **Contribution to Namekagon Barrens land acquisition fund**

\$ _____ Dues (Regular - \$10, Supporting - \$25, Contributing - \$50, \$100 Sustaining, \$200 Sponsor)
(Dues are fully tax-deductible)

\$ _____ WSGS Logo Decal (\$1.50)

\$ _____ Four-color Cloth Patch (\$3.50)

\$ _____ Tan or blaze orange Cap (\$15 – indicate color choice)

\$ _____ King Sharptail limited edition print (\$60)

(all prices include postage and handling)

Total Enclosed: \$ _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO AND RETURN THIS APPLICATION TO:

Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, 102 East Crex Avenue, Grantsburg, WI 54840

WSGS
102 East Crex Avenue
Grantsburg, WI 54840