### WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Number 103 Spring 2024

#### WSGS 2024 ANNUAL SUMMER MEETING

The 2024 annual meeting of Wis. Sharp-tailed Grouse Society will be held Saturday July 20 at the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area. There will be a Board of Directors Meeting beginning at 9:30 with the general membership meeting starting at 10:30.

Current plans are to have the membership meeting begin with a tour of ongoing efforts at Crex Meadows State Wildlife Area that enhance and expand barrens management on the property. The sharp-tail grouse population has been increasing in both numbers and occupied area at Crex and adjacent properties for the last couple of years as habitat management efforts have ramped up. The tour will be led by Crex Wildlife Biologist Joe Dittrich who will do a show and tell that will include benefits to other flora and fauna as well as sharptails from focused barrens management.

Following the tour there will be a picnic style meal provided at the Crex Mess Hall with raffles and WSGS merchandise to enhance your attendance experience.

Beginning around 1pm several talks by professionals engaged in sharptail management efforts will take place. The presentations will include new WDNR Sharptailed Grouse Management Plan implementation, Bayfield County ongoing STG habitat and research cooperation efforts, and the Audubon Society private grassland work in the Oulu area of NW Wisconsin with a focus on sharptails and other grassland species.

A more detailed agenda and pre-registration flyer will be coming out in June, along with your ballot for voting on the 3 board of director positions that are up for grabs.

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#### **2024 PHEASANT FEST OVERVIEW**

By: Mike Cole, WSGS Treasurer



On Thursday, February 29 four WSGS volunteers departed various points in Wisconsin to Sioux Falls, SD to staff the WSGS booth at the 2024 Pheasant Fest. The travels were uneventful (compared to last year when Trevor B. was in a bad car accident on his way to PF). Access to the Denny Sanford Event Center was easy and setup went well. The WiFi worked great and the new battery pack eliminated running extension cords to power the credit card reader and iPad. The WSGS display banners (purchased in 2023 for shows at Stevens Point and Minneapolis Pheasant Fest) looked like new. Fresh merchandise adorned the table. We figured out how to assemble the sharptail viewing blind borrowed from Friends of the Namekagan Barrens. Jodie Provost (North American Grouse Partnership) setup a video player inside the blind allowing visitors to watch various types of grouse courtships, almost like being in the wild.

The show opened at noon on Friday. Right away

the crowds were huge (on the way to being a record weekend). Grouse Row (consisting of WSGS, Ruffed grouse Society and North American Grouse Partnership) was located in a slightly-less-traveled area of the show, but those who wanted to talk sharptails found us. We met people from all over, but I specifically remember supporters from Duluth, Eau Claire, St. Croix Falls, Ashland (right next to the Moquah Barrens), Golden Valley, MN and Indiana. We saw a lot of our merchandise (purchased at the 2023 Pheasant Fest or on -line) being worn. We had good news to share. Early indications were that bird counts on the Wisconsin properties would be up over last year. We talked about the roller chopper that WSGS partnered to purchase for facilitating habitat work. Folks heard about the Oulu grassland project partnership with the Audubon Society.

Last year WSGS VP Mike Amman was the star of the show, but this year it was WSGS BOD Ashley Steinke who provided the boots-on-the-ground perspective that people want to hear. Ashley seems to know half of the folks in both Dakotas from his grad school days there. For those wanting to talk Ruffed Grouse, we had Brian Vander Maazen, a professional NW Wisconsin grouse hunting guide volunteering in the booth.

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Trevor Hubbs (WSGS BOD, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers rep, published hound hunting author and Wisconsin Conservation Congress member) provided perspective on a multitude of issues.

We had a great time over the course of the 3-day show. We met interesting people. We played with dogs. We sold more than half of our total merchandise inventory (and it has continued to sell well since the show). We signed up or renewed 14 members, including 2 Life Members. I got to stand outside at 3 AM on Friday in the South Dakota wind thanks to a fire alarm prank that evacuated the hotel! While our booth was quite busy at times, it was slower overall than 2023 in Minneapolis. But we accomplished much via spreading WSGS story. Sometimes those contacts have a way of paying off later in ways that can't be measured in dollars.

Loading up after the show was a breeze, as the access to the Sanford loading docks is fantastic! I began my non-eventful journey home by 3:30 on Sunday, looking forward to spring-time in Wisconsin and surveying sharptails!

#### **SHARP-TAILED GROUSE TRAPPING & GPS MONITORING**

By: Mike Amman

Bayfield County and Natural Resources Research Institute recently wrapped up the trapping and collaring efforts for 2024. 4 GPS collars were purchased for the trapping effort this year and all 4 were successfully deployed. 3 males and 1 female were trapped and outfitted with GPS tags. This year we are collecting data on the birds every hour to capture more spring lek activity data. We can change the collection timeframe remotely if needed. Attached is a map of two of the male's locations between the timeframe of 5am and 8:30am over the couple week timeframe they have been tagged. This map is interesting in that the 2 males are spending most of their time not on the lek we trapped them on, which leads us to believe there may be other lekking locations we are not aware of. We will use this information to scout these point clusters.





Photo by: Keith Crowley

# SPRING- A TIME OF RENEWAL By: Ken Jonas

On the 10th of April, The Wisconsin Natural Resources Board unanimously approved the latest version of the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan in its entirety. This plan has been in the making since May 2022 and has been the major focus of the WDNR Sharp-tailed Grouse Advisory Committee of which the WSGS is an active member. Significant direction for implementation of the approved plan include:

- Focusing management on the existing core range of sharp-tailed grouse in northwest Wisconsin.
- Developing cooperative partnerships between public and private organizations.
- Implementing landscape-level habitat strategies to sustain long-term populations of sharp-tailed grouse.

As part of the plan new education, outreach, and updated research priorities for stg are also provided. A noteworthy research need is the development of a minimum viable population estimate to help the department better understand potential long-term population sustainability and recreation opportunities. This plan replaces and renews the 2011 Sharp-tail Management Plan that has guided state management efforts for over a decade.

Spring is a time of renewal for sharp-tailed grouse populations as the spring mating ritual begins in earnest. Sharptails are at the lowest part of their annual population cycle in spring with a decline that does not reverse until the first brood hatches sometime in late May. This is the time of year that sharptails are monitored by agency staff and private citizens surveying attendance at communal leks where male stg dance daily, to attract the females that wander in less often for breeding purposes. The spring count of stg males is used by state Wildlife Management staff as an index to the current population status and is compared with infor-



Photo By: Keith Crowley

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mation from other years to develop population trends. Early indications are that the stg count this spring is on the upswing, with final numbers forthcoming several weeks from now. WSGS donated observation blinds are used to conduct surveys at both Crex Meadows and Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Areas.

When speaking spring renewal in the sharptailed grouse world, one needs

to include habitat maintenance/improvement efforts that occur through prescribed burning. We know that conditions for a hot intense vegetation burn are at their peak in the spring season. Once the snow has melted, last year's old growth of ground vegetation composed of grass and forbs begin to dry out. When weather conditions are just right, fire becomes a tool that managers can use to carry a flame through overhead stands of brush and young trees that have grown to the point of limiting use of the area by sharptails as well as other open landscape adapted flora and fauna. While not on the same scale as the wildfires that historically burned hundreds of thousands of acres at a clip and maintained the Wisconsin prairies and barrens used by bison, fire still has the same impact to the land. Fire sets back succession favoring a suite of species that are well adapted to occupying the resulting more open, grass/forb community. Successful spring burns have been taking place throughout sharptail range this spring with more acres set up, waiting for condition to become just right for habitat renewal that is critical in supporting the firebird!

#### SHARP-TAILED GROUSE HABITAT MANAGEMENT BENEFITS MANY OTHER SPECIES

By: Bruce Moss

The WSGS mission has always been directed at sharptails in Wisconsin and the barrens habitat within which they are found. Early succession barrens once covered over a million acres of Wisconsin and sharptailed grouse were abundant throughout much of the state. Today barrens habitat has shrunk to approximately 50,000 acres, primarily in northwest Wisconsin and most sharp-tailed grouse are relatively few in number and found chiefly in the northwest part of the state.

While our focus will always be STG and barrens, we should not forget how many other species of plants and animals are benefited by barrens habitat. The term barrens leads many to think of wasteland devoid of much life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Barrens are prairie interspersed with shrubs and young trees. This diversity is comprised of many different plant species which provides habitat for numerous birds, insects, mammals, and herptiles.

A good example of this diversity can be found at Crex Meadows Wildlife Area where birds have been recorded for decades and floral studies were conducted in the 1990's. Currently 186 upland bird species have been recorded. Many are generalist's, but others require prairie or barrens. Plant surveys found 85 trees and shrubs species, 51 grasses, 22 sedges and rushes, 21 ferns, and 196 prairie plant species.

The barrens of northwest Wisconsin attract many bird enthusiasts and those interested in the abundance and diversity of plants. A friend often reminds visitors to take time to look down when on the barrens. Also, bring binoculars. You will certainly see barrens are not barren.

#### WDNR ST. CROIX AREA SPRING REPORT

By Cody Strong, Area Wildlife Supervisor

Spring came early in the barrens this year, and that flush of new life was accompanied by plenty of activity. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staff, partners and volunteers have been diligently surveying leks, some of which were attended by impatient male sharp-tails as early as February.

Surveyors located sharp-tailed grouse dancing on old and new leks on DNR-managed properties and partner lands. This included some working forests managed as "rolling barrens" through silviculture. Be on the look-out for the official survey results, which will published at a later date.

Our local team has also been busy performing crucial habitat work this spring, using tools like prescribed fire and roller chopping to provide much-needed disturbance on the barrens. With this past winter's early end, and a somewhat cooperative fire season, DNR staff have accomplished quite a bit with prescribed fire this spring. At the time of writing, DNR staff have burned approximately 6,000 acres to restore and maintain barrens habitat, and the fire season is still ongoing.

Altogether, this is an excellent start to a new year, but it's also an excellent time to reflect on the past year or so of accomplishments. There were many in the Northwest Sands:

- The Natural Resources Board approved the updated Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan, providing a vision for future management of barrens and sharp-tails.
- On Crex Meadows Wildlife Area, the DNR restored 304 acres of new barrens and burned it for the first time. We've also started work restoring 200 acres just next door.
- On Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area, staff restored 289 acres of barrens and burned it for the first time.
- On Douglas County Wildlife Area, a dispersed timber sale helped open 3,800 acres of barrens in less than two months. Between this and other work on the property, Douglas County Wildlife Area might provide its best barrens habitat in years.
- Our partners at Bayfield County Forest continue to make good progress on restoring both Bass Lake and Barnes Barrens. They also received grant funding to purchase a roller chopper for barrens management.
- DNR leadership approved the creation of new barrens habitat near Mott's Ravine on Brule River State Forest. Staff have already begun this restoration process by roller-chopping 96 acres of new habitat in the expansion area.

The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society supported considerable amounts of this work, either directly through funding or indirectly through public input.

If you're a sharp-tailed grouse, there's plenty to dance about in the barrens this spring.■

#### FIND US ONLINE!

Facebook: Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society

**Instagram:** wisharptails

Website: http://www.wisharptails.org/ Email: information@wisharptails.org

#### WSGS TREASURER'S REPORT FEBRUARY 5, 2024– APRIL 2, 2024

Starting Balance February 5, 2024	16,652.99
Expenditures	
USPS—Mail 20 hats, 1 book, 2 shirts, 2 prints, 1 roll tape	168.54
Duluth Screen Printing (75 Hats)	1,244.69
Audubon Great Lakes (Ashley-Oulu Grasslands Project)	5,000.00
Battery for iPad (to run w/o extension cord)	56.97
Renew FNBWA, NA Grouse Partnership Memberships	154.00
Newsletter Printing	268.00
Reimburse Trevor B. for iPad shipment (prep for Pheasant Fest	15.75
Boxes for Shipping Hats	21.76
Blank Checks	37.77
Misc. Expenses (Mike Cole, receipts provided)	69.53
Hotel Rooms for Pheasant Fest	867.60
Total	7,904.61
Income	
Memberships	1,473.40
Merchandise (not including spreadshirt t–shirts)	401.71
Spreadshirt t-shirts	10.51
Donations	4.80
Total	1,890.42
Net Gain for Period	-6,014.19
Ending Palance July 15, 2022	10 (20 00
Ending Balance July 15, 2023	10,638.80
Jim Evrard Memorial Account	366.46
General Account Fund	10,272.34

#### **Pending income**

March PayPal payment \$1,724.71 (\$1,063.44 memberships, \$661.27 merchandise) March Wixcom Payment \$1,402.82 (\$1,061.09 memberships, \$341.73 merchandise)

#### **Membership Totals**

2/5/24 200 (includes 44 Life Members, 9 Courtesy)-lots of Jan & Feb renewals to chase

4/2/24 215 (includes 50 Life Members, 8 Courtesy)- 7 will be removed from list if not renewed by 04/15/24

Submitted by Mike Cole 02402/24

### **WSGS T-SHIRTS**

Go to <a href="https://wsgs.myspreadshop.com/">https://wsgs.myspreadshop.com/</a> and proudly wear our logo.





# WSGS BOARD OF DIRECTOR MEETING MINUTES APRIL 2, 2024

Present: Ken Jonas, Mike Cole, Mike Amman, Bruce Moss, Trevor Hubbs,

Ashly Steinke, John Probst, Paul Kooiker, Dave Evenson

Meeting started at 6:35pm via ZOOM.

- Reviewed and approved February 5, 2024 BOD minutes (AS/MC).
- Treasurer's report by M. Cole (2/5/24 4/2/24). Beginning balance was \$16,653. A major expenditure was \$5000 donated to Audubon Great Lakes for the Oulu Grassland project under the direction of Ashly Steinke. Other expenses included costs related to Pheasant Fest (hotel rooms and hat orders). Memberships generated \$1473 and merchandise sales generated \$402. Ending balance was \$10,639, but as Mike pointed out we will be receiving delayed payments from Paypal and Wiscom in the amount of \$3100. Treasurer's report was approved (AS/MA).
- 2024 Pheasant Fest in Sioux Falls, SD, March 1-3, 2024: Mike Cole, Ashly Steinke, and Trevor Hubbs represented WSGS, along with volunteer Brian Vander Maazen. Lots of good contacts made which will have future benefits for sharptails and barrens habitat. Merchandise sales were good. Of the 22 new members gained during the past two months, most of these were the result of contacts made at Pheasant Fest. PF expenses were \$3239, and income was \$2014, for a net cost of \$1225, very similar to last year's PF held in Minneapolis.
- Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan 2024-2034: NW Sands Wildlife Biologist Bob Hanson gave the BOD an update on the plan's timetable. Bob will be presenting the plan to the Natural Resources Board on April 10. Ken will represent WSGS at the NRB meeting. Deadline for written comments is April 3 (tomorrow) by 11:00am. Bob also described the apparent upsurge in sharptails on managed properties, and that help will be needed and welcomed in conducting the upcoming lek counts.
- Project Updates:
- 1. Mike A. reported that Bayfield County's new roller-chopper (partially funded by WSGS) will be put to use immediately treating 90 acres of jack pine at Mott's Ravine. The roller-chopper will be available for use by other agencies at a very reasonable rate of \$5 per hour.
- 2. The timber sale on Douglas County Wildlife Area has been completed.
- 3. The Barnes Barrens project has been expanded to the north by 400 acres. This site is a failed jack pine planting and will improve the linkage to the Bass Lake Barrens.
- 4. Bayfield County has four new GPS collars and plans are to collar 3 females and 1 male. NRI will again coordinate the research project.
- Oulu Grasslands: Ashly Steinke, in his role as Audubon Grassland Conservationist, has to date contacted 12 owners of small grass-based farms within the Oulu Grassland area. Response has been very positive, with nearly all the private landowners interested in improving sharptail habitat through mowing and/or prescribed burning. It is likely that funding for habitat work will be available through the American Bird Conservancy and the EQIP program handled by NRCS. Ashly will be conducting sharptail lek surveys in

the Oulu area later this week.

- Current legislation: AB512, which proposed to liberalize dog training regulations in northern Wisconsin, was recently vetoed by Gov. Evers. A win for wildlife.
- Annual Meeting: BOD consensus was that a one-day summer meeting, similar to last year's annual meeting at Namekagon Barrens, was preferable to a two-day meeting. Location will be at Crex Meadows, with two possible dates in July. Kooiker will check on availability of the Crex Education Center. (Note: Saturday, July 20 is available and has been reserved for WSGS). "Partnerships" was suggested as a possible theme for the annual meeting. Ken, Mike C., Bruce M., and Paul K. agreed to serve on the planning committee.
- Spring Newsletter: this needs to be completed and out to the membership by late May to provide enough lead time to the annual meeting in July. There are many potential topics for the newsletter, among them grants and project updates, legislation, Pheasant Fest, BOD candidates etc. Ken encouraged board members and members in general to submit articles.
- A joint meeting of the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society and the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society will be held in Crookston April 19-20. WSGS has been extended an invitation to attend.
- 2024 Birdathon: Trevor B, Mike C., and Mike A. will be participating in this fundraising event on behalf of WSGS.
- A motion to adjourn was made (PK/BM) and passed.

Meeting adjourned at 8:35pm

Submitted by Paul Kooiker; April 15, 2024

#### **US FOREST SERVICE STG NEWS**

By: Aaron Falstrom

The United States Forest Service, Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Washburn Ranger District continued habitat management and monitoring on the Moquah Barrens this spring 2024. Surveys and monitoring have revealed two male grouse in the Moquah Barrens. Technicians walked roads, monitored leks, and set camera traps on historic leks and other areas of historic grouse activity.

In the Moquah Barrens a 200-acre brushing contract is currently open for bid. If the contract is awarded the work will be completed in late summer or early fall of 2024. The work for this contract is adjacent to open barren's habitat. The slash left over from the brushing will be a great fuel source for future prescribed burns. Prescribed burn season has started in the Barrens, with 85 acres treated, and 2000 acres still to be treatwill ed. Burns continue this Spring, and into the Summer as burn windows open.

In the Riley Lake State Natural Area on the Park Falls Ranger District surveys have been conducted and they have 20 grouse at five different leks. Camera traps have also been placed on leks to monitor grouse activity and habitat selection. Prescribed burns have been conducted, with 500 acres treated, and 900 acres still to be treated. Work continues, on a conversion of a forested site, to an open site, where a lek will be created. ■

#### NAMEKAGON BARRENS WILDLIFE AREA SPRING UPDATE

By: Nancy Christel, WDNR Biologist & Property Manager

I do not have final numbers for the spring sharp-tail survey yet, but here is a quick summary:

There were 5 active leks with many females at each, another lek where the birds may be considering a different location, and a couple other potential future leks. In general, we've been hearing or seeing sharp-tails throughout the barrens dancing in places I haven't observed birds in previous years, many of which had a visiting female. We have a wonderful problem. With so many more birds, I need a minimum of 8 surveyors for each early morning. We only had 3 wildlife staff in Spooner, and sometimes 2 of them had to survey Douglas County. Without volunteers from FNBWA and WSGS, our DNR Wildlife surveys would not have been completed. Thank you!

We've been a little behind on our burn schedule the last few years as we put Crex and Douglas County as priority, but this burn year (late summer to fall) we got a lot done on NBWA. We burned units 19, 39, 23, 7 and 46 (our last "first-time burn" in the 1400 acres donated by The Conservation Fund) this spring and units 5 in the fall for a total of just over 1,500 acres.

Let's Celebrate Sharp-tailed Grouse!

The sharp-tailed viewing blinds were a big hit again this year. Viewers took some amazing pictures. With so many females, the males were quite active. Thank you to Natural Resource Members, Marcy West and Bill Smith, for traveling the distance and assisting with our wildlife surveys. Paul Smith, Wisconsin State Journal, is always so much fun and insightful. He visited 10 years ago and returned this spring: https://www.jsonline.com/story/sports/columnists/paul-smith/2024/05/03/sharp-tailed-grouse-dance-on-as-advocates-hope-to-increase-habitat/73439502007/

Darren from Xplorer Friends shared his exciting and entertaining visit found at: https://youtu.be/oln4VR8meBc?si=s6zkK20 t19nJUT6.

Todd Gustafson, PBS, who travels the world capturing exquisite wildlife footage was here filming for the third in a series "To the Ends of the Earth". This addition will be about the unique mating displays of spectacular birds around the world, and will be available for viewing later this year: https://www.pbs.org/show/ends-earth/. Jane Goodall narrates the introduction and proceeds go to her Roots and Grass Foundation.

Although Jake Rome, producer for the TV program Discover Wisconsin, was unable to visit NBWA, watch for his digital short https://discoverwisconsin.com/ later this year that will feature the Northwest Sands and sharp-tails thanks to Mike Amman, Bayfield County Forester and WSGS VP.■

#### THE WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY

Officers

President: Ken Jonas

Vice President: Mike Amman

Secretary: Paul Kooiker Treasurer: Mike Cole

Newsletter Compositor

Lauren Thomas

#### **Board Members**

John Probst Bruce Moss

Trevor Hubbs Ashly Steinke

Trevor Bellrichard

### RENEWAL THRU DISTURBANCE – DOUGLAS CO. WA By: Trevor Bellrichard and Ken Jonas

Make no mistake about it, in this day and age open barrens habitat management is difficult to achieve. In the historic past, the NW Sands Landscape was a slowly shifting mosaic of cover types that would change primarily according to the most recent history of fire frequency. Natural and human started fires burning intensely over hundreds of thousands of acres on a regular basis would result in landscape renewal, keeping some areas open consistently while creating only temporary habitat changes in others. Early successional forests of pine and oak would sometimes dominate low fire frequency areas for years, pushing sharp-tails to follow the effects of vegetatively renewing fires in adjoining locales.

Land managers try to replicate this process in the existing Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape using prescribed and managed burning on a few thousand acres of mostly publicly owned land each year. Reducing a once region wide phenomena to that small of a land base has flaws inherent in maintaining the larger system over time. Forest succession is a powerful force and is constantly attempting to encroach on a grass/shrub habitat type that maintains species adapted to more open conditions. As a result, the few small areas left in the state having suitable habitat for sharptails need to be managed intensively or the risk of losing ecologically sensitive species intensifies. Unfortunately, when quality habitat acreage on a managed property begins to dwindle for whatever reason, there follows a profound and often rapid decline in the remaining sharp-tailed grouse population. The only way the population will have a chance to rebound is with a relatively large vegetative disturbance that produces suitable open habitat acreage.

That is why what occurred at the Douglas County Wildlife Area this spring was such a huge event. 4000 acres of 10 - 20 year-old age class, red pine, jack pine, and birch along with many large legacy trees were harvested. The before and after images shown here don't adequately communicate the total impact of what all occurred from an ecological perspective. But this is an excellent example of the type of vegetative disturbance on a scale that the NW Sands needs, to maintain its ecological integrity. We will quite likely see what is currently a low-level Sharp-tailed grouse population increase on this property in the near future and applaud the wildlife management and forestry staff that made this happen.■





MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL We are going to a primarily electronic newsletter, with hard copy only on request.

Would you like to volunteer for:
Board of Directors
Newsletter articles
Other
Electronic NewsletterHard Copy Newsletter
scal), Family - \$50 (receive decal), Sustaining - \$100 (receive hat),
are fully tax-deductible)
cate color choice)
rint (\$30)
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ociety, 102 East Crex Avenue, Grantsburg, WI 54840
and merchandise orders at https://wisharptails.org
asurer, Ken Jonas: kenjon@centurytel.net