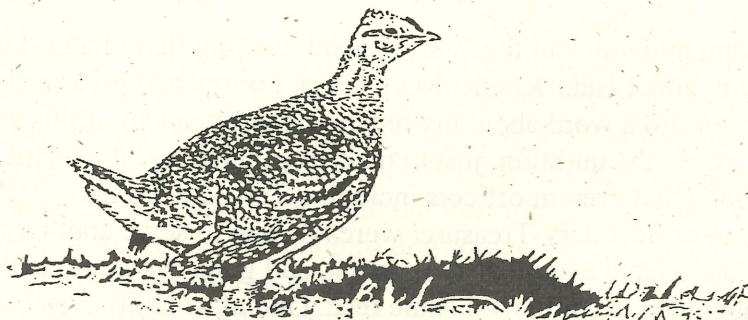


# WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Number 48

Fall 2006

## CONTENTS

Sharptail Tour  
Page 1

President's Corner  
Page 2

Namekagon Barrens  
Page 3

Annual Meeting  
Page 4

June Board Meeting  
Page 5

2006 Sharptail Census  
Page 6

Afield with Ziggy  
Page 7

Membership Renewal  
Page 8

## SHARPTAIL TOUR AND MEETING

By Jim Evrard

Some members of the DNR Prairie Grouse Committee and other players interested in Wisconsin's sharp-tailed grouse met for an early August tour of sharp-tail management areas in northwest Wisconsin and a meeting at Crex Meadows. New DNR staff upland ecologist, Dr. Scott Hull and Dave Evenson, President of the WSGS put the tour and meeting together as the beginning of the process to rewrite the DNR's sharp-tailed grouse management plan.

The event began when a group (Hull, Evenson, Dave Sample, Todd Naas, Armund Bartz, and myself) met for dinner in Ashland the night before the tour. The next morning 18 sharptail enthusiasts met at the Ashland DNR office. In bright, beautiful weather, Todd led an auto caravan to the grassland area south of Ashland proposed for a sharptail translocation project. The caravan next moved to the Bayfield County Forest fuelbreaks where Todd, Fred Strand, and Greg Kessler talked about the potential loss of this occupied sharptail habitat due to a change in management philosophy by the new Bayfield County Forest Administrator.

The group continued to the west through the Mosinee or Wausau industrial forest that probably contains the largest remaining sharptail population in the state. The area has been recently included within the acquisition boundary of the Brule River State Forest. Our morning ended at the Douglas County Wildlife Area field trial building where we ate lunch.

Following lunch, we toured the "bird sanctuary" and drove southwest to the Namekagon Barrens where Nancy Christel and Gary Dunsmoore gave us a tour of the sharptail management area that they manage. Finally, the auto caravan wound

through the jack pines to the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area where project manager, Pete Engman gave the remaining members of the group a tour of the huge brush prairie/wetland project. The tour survivors were treated to a social and cookout at the Crex Meadows Wildlife Education and Visitor Center that evening.

The next morning, nineteen persons attending a lengthy meeting where a variety of issues relating to the rewriting of the sharptail management plan were discussed. Dr. Hull chaired the meeting attended by representatives of the DNR, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Wisconsin - Madison, and the WSGS.

Discussion items included sharptail population status and harvest; impact of hunting on the bird; the model used to determine the number of hunting permits; habitat issues for sharptails on sandy soils and on heavy soils; defining habitat types; genetics; translocation; and plans for rewriting the management plan. The meeting ended with plans for the group to again meet in early October in Park Falls.

Special thanks go to Scott Hull, Dave Evenson, the various DNR sharptail managers, the Crex Meadows crew, and Blair Klein for making this event possible.



## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

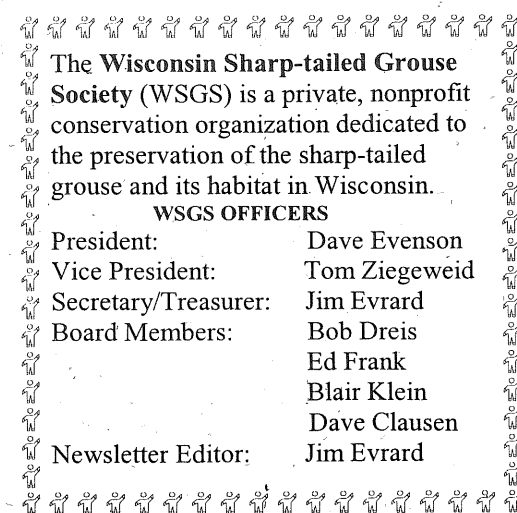
By Dave Evenson



We were midway into the WSGS board meeting that I had set up at board member Blair Klein's Rock Creek Farm when I realized no one had ever said a word about my remaining as president of this organization. I raised the question, just to make it official, and the board members agreed that present officers including Tom Ziegeweid as VP and Jim Evrard as Secretary-Treasurer were allowed to serve another term. We went on to have a productive meeting, and good camaraderie through the afternoon and evening wild game feed. One of us (Jim) even caught some trout on Blair's fine trout pond. Thanks to Blair for the gracious hosting of this group.

Much of our discussion centered on the upcoming revision of the DNR Sharptail Plan. These plans are revisited every decade or so, although the Sharptail Plan is overdue. Wisconsin DNR has had a vacancy at the Upland Game Specialist position. Dr. Scott Hull has recently been hired to fill that position, and among his many other duties, he will be chairing the committee to work on this plan. By the time you read this, we will have had a tour of sharptail areas and an initial planning meeting at Crex Meadows. We appreciate the working relationship we are forging with Scott and the DNR, and having a seat at the table in this important decision making process.

One of the important decisions to be made within (or even before) the Sharptail Plan regards hanging onto the Bayfield County Fuelbreaks. The Bayfield County Forest recently completed their 10-15 year plan, which did not include the continuation of these fuelbreaks, which are home to several active dancing grounds. The fuelbreaks are quarter mile strips several miles long, which are maintained in low vegetation by rotational prescribed burning or mechanical means. These breaks are strategically placed within the pinery to provide fire fighters a chance to catch or lessen a forest fire. The Bayfield County Forestry Committee has given the DNR Bureau of Wildlife three years to develop a proposal including funding for a lease or acquisition as well as coming to agreement on large block management in the surrounding area of Bayfield County Forest. It will take a good amount of work to negotiate this deal. WSGS will help in every way possible to save this core population at the eastern edge of the Northwest Sands.


**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.

**WSGS OFFICERS**

President:	Dave Evenson
Vice President:	Tom Ziegeweid
Secretary/Treasurer:	Jim Evrard
Board Members:	Bob Dreis
	Ed Frank
	Blair Klein
	Dave Clausen
Newsletter Editor:	Jim Evrard



Retired DNR Biologist Jim March sent this photo showing his dad and three men holding a mixed bag of sharp-tailed and ruffed grouse shot near Conover in 1941. Left to right: Fritz Mathwig, Maynard Sturm, Bob March, and his dog, Chief, and Carl Mathwig.

## FIELD TRIAL FINDS BARRENS BIRDS

By Jim Evrard

A friend recently gave me a copy of the *American Field* magazine of the American Field Trial Clubs Association. One article reported the results of the Region 19 Amateur Shooting Dog Championship that was held on the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area on September 7-9, 2005. The Northwest Field Association sponsored the event that featured 31 bird dogs.

Unless you're into formal bird dog competition in a big way, most of the article was simply a not-too-interesting description of the dog's performance during their one-hour heats over the nearly three-day competition. However, there were some interesting points made in the article.

Of interest to sharp-tailed grouse enthusiasts was that more than 40 "coveys" or flocks of sharp-tails were flushed by the dogs during the field trial despite high humidity and very hot temperatures (up to 100°F). The bird dog people were happy with the number of sharptails seen.

While the 40+ covey flushes no doubt included flocks flushed several times over almost three days, it would be interesting to see how many more flushes would have been made in cooler weather where the dogs had better scenting conditions and more stamina. Because of the heat and humidity, a fifth of the dogs did not finish their heat but pooped out.

Despite the poor "hunting" conditions, I was pleasantly surprised by the large number of sharp-tail flocks flushed. Only 19 displaying male sharptails were counted in the Namekagon Barrens in the spring of 2005, not enough (25) to trigger a permit hunting season in that unit. But those few breeding birds apparently produced an impressive number of broods later that year.

This hypothesis was borne out by the number of displaying male sharptails counted on the barrens this spring – 42, a 121% increase from the previous year! I don't think that sharptails can biologically increase that much in one year.

I think the somewhat conflicting sharptail numbers show that our present system of counting sharptails and estimating sharptail numbers needs to be improved. The "model" presently used by the DNR assumes that all male sharptails are counted in the spring and the number of female sharptails in the spring equal the number of males (a 50:50 sex ratio). Furthermore, the model assumes that each female will raise two young sharptails to flight stage. These model assumptions are just that, assumptions.

Research has shown that not all male sharp-tailed grouse display in the spring. So if only the number of displaying sharptails counted are used to estimate the male sharptail numbers (as in the DNR model), male sharptails will be undercounted. Furthermore, not all displaying males are counted due to too few people counting sharptails.

We do not know that the spring population of sharp-tailed grouse has a 50:50 sex ratio. Most likely there is a 50:50 sex ratio in the eggs, but we know that different wildlife species have different mortality rates among the sexes. So the equal sex ratio in spring adult sharptails is another model assumption.

The third model assumption is that the fall sharptail population will contain one young bird for every adult bird or two young per adult female. This may or may not be the case. For example, in ducks the average brood size at flight stage is five young but we know that not all female ducks have broods.

I hope that the DNR's sharp-tailed grouse management plan, due to be updated and rewritten during the next several years, will address the problem of the somewhat shaky model used to estimate sharptail numbers and ultimately, sharptail hunting permits. A good review of the existing published sharp-tailed grouse research and management literature would be a good first start.

## THE 2006 ANNUAL MEETING

By Jim Evrard

The WSGS annual meeting took place on Saturday and Sunday, April 22 and 23, in Black River Falls. This was the first time our group met in that city. Twelve members attended the Saturday afternoon business meeting including board members Dave Evenson, Tom Ziegeweid, Jim Evrard, Ed Frank, Blair Klein, Dave Clausen, and Bob Dries. Other members in attendance were Dave Biegel, Pete Engman, Chuck Sindelar, Greg Wheeler, Michele Windsor, and her guest, Steve Humphrey. Only 19 persons registered for the meals, below the minimum for the caterer, so the dinner, evening program, and brunch were canceled. Since there were so few people present, it was decided that the spring board meeting would be combined with the annual business meeting.

President Dave Evenson opened the meeting in the Black River Falls DNR building with introductions of those persons present. He then announced the election results for board members with Dave Clausen reelected and Dave Biegel elected. Jim Evrard gave the Treasurer's Report. He read the 2005 Financial Report that was printed in the Spring 2006 Newsletter and gave the current financial worth of the WSGS (CD -\$2,206.67 and checking account - \$7,173.60 for a total of \$9,380.27).

Crex DNR Manager Pete Engman discussed the recent successful expansion of the land acquisition boundary for an area lying between the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area and the Governor Knowles State Forest in Burnett County. DNR Wildlife Biologist at Black River Falls, Michele Windsor, discussed progress in rewriting the county forest management plans for Jackson and Clark counties. She thought that sharptails and other open-lands wildlife were treated fairly in the plan rewrites. That wasn't the case for Burnett County according to Engman since wildlife input was limited in that update.

Dave E., reporting for DNR Wildlife Biologist at Ashland, Todd Naas, said that Bayfield County Forest's revised management plan has abandoned the fuel breaks that presently support sharptails and dropped all reference to big block management. Todd hopes that some type of acquisition might save the present sharptail habitat and sharptails in the Bayfield County Forest fuel breaks. No progress has been made on Todd's proposed Ashland red clay sharptail restoration project. Douglas County, on the other hand, has been supportive of preserving sharptails and their habitat in their county forest according to Dave Biegel. It is obvious that personalities rather than policies are operating in the county forest system.

Ed reported that he apologized to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge Biologist, Rich King, for misunderstanding the type of "barrens" that has been restored in the refuge. Apparently there are 3,200 acres of restored open lands in Necedah. This could be the nucleus of habitat for sharptail restoration in that area. The Board passed a motion directing Dave E. to send a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Twin Cities supporting King's work.

The next item discussed was the need for a research study of Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse genetics. Ed has tried to contact Dr. Brad Swanson of the Central Michigan University to develop a study in cooperation with John Toepfer. If that study fails to materialize, a cooperative study with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee should be investigated. At a July 21, 2005 meeting in Ashland, the WSGS Board voted to increase WSGS funding available for a genetics study from \$2,000 to \$4,000.

Ed discussed his role in the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative. Jim attempted to fill in for Ed at a recent meeting of the group. Ed will continue to represent the WSGS in that organization. Dave E. reported that the WSGS supported efforts to increase federal funding for state wildlife programs through the Teaming for Wildlife initiative. Ed attended the January Prescribed Burning Symposium and reported that it was a very worthwhile meeting. Proceedings with abstracts of the presentations are available. After some discussion it was agreed that some DNR fire control personnel unnecessarily limit prescribed burning in Wisconsin. What is needed is policies not personalities to direct DNR's managed fire programs.

The DNR has hired a new staff upland bird ecologist, Dr. Scott Hull, formerly the upland bird expert for Ohio. We should now be able to move ahead on the rewrite of the DNR's sharp-tailed grouse management plan. Bill Vander Zowen has apparently put a high priority on this item. Hull will start with the DNR on May 1<sup>st</sup> of this year.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF JUNE BOARD MEETING

By Jim Evrard

The full WSGS Board of Directors met at the home of Board Member Blair Klein near St. Croix Falls on June 23rd. President Dave Evenson began the meeting by asking Secretary/Treasurer Jim Evrard for his reports. Jim stated the Secretary's Report will appear in the upcoming newsletter and gave the Treasurer's Report as \$7,140.43 in the checking account and \$2,206.67 in a CD for a total of \$9,297.60.

The group discussed results of the spring sharptail census and possible hunting permit levels. Some of the questions raised will be addressed in the rewrite of the sharptail management plan scheduled to begin this fall. Dave E. contacted the new DNR upland game ecologist, Dr. Scott Hull, who is arranging a sharptail meeting in August. This will involve a tour of sharptail management areas and a meeting with sharptail managers. The WSGS will take an active role in these events. Board Member Ed Frank will provide Hull with a copy of proceedings of the sharptail workshop sponsored by the WSGS in 2005.

Board Member Dave Clausen introduced a motion that was passed to contact the DNR and the Plum Creek Timber Company to reiterate our interest in the DNR acquiring a tract of sharptail habitat adjacent to Crex Meadows. DNR Biologist Todd Naas will be contacted to inquire about helping in his efforts to acquire the Bayfield County Fuelbreaks to prevent the loss of sharptail habitat and sharptails in that area.

Board Member Dave Biegel asked that the WSGS be involved in a sharptail seminar to be given at the field trial building at the Douglas County Wildlife Area in September. Members of the Friends of the Bird Sanctuary have asked for an event where sharptail life history and ecology information can be presented. The Board promised WSGS involvement in the event.

Jim also asked the WSGS to become involved in the establishment of a friends group for the Namekagon Barrens. He has contacted DNR Biologist and Namekagon Barrens Manager Nancy Christel about initiating that effort.

Board Member Tom Ziegeweid reported on his contacts with the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society. He attended their annual brush cutting event and following social and learned that the Minnesota Legislature provided \$700,000 for sharptail management in that state. Tom thought the WSGS needed more publicity.

Dave E. and Blair will work on a project to investigate printing limited edition prints of an original painting donated to the WSGS by artist Ruth King. Prints of the beautiful painting, depicting a sharptail dancing grounds in the Namekagon Barrens, can be used for fund-raising events.

Following the business meeting, the group toured Blair's property and sampled one of his fly-fishing-only trout ponds before returning to their homes.



### PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

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

## 2006 SHARPTAIL CENSUS AND HUNTING PERMITS

By Jim Evrard

Andrea Mezera, DNR Assistant Upland Wildlife Ecologist in Madison, kindly provided a summary of the 2006 spring counts of displaying male sharptails. Apparently there was some recovery of numbers in some management areas, no statistical change in others, and a decline in other areas. The DNR reported increases in ruffed grouse drumming counts this spring in the north, a sign that grouse might have begun the increase phase of their cycle. Hopefully, sharptails will follow ruffed grouse.

### NUMBER OF DISPLAYING MALE SHARP-TAILED GROUSE COUNTED IN THE SPRING

Wildlife Area/Unit	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Crex Meadows	111	110	73	61	61	53	49	38
Douglas County	20	16	11	12	20	21	14	15
Namekagon Barrens	54	44	15	29	52	37	19	42
Moquah Barrens	40	36	19	35	32	14	7	6
Kimberly-Clark	40	39	5	9	4	-	0	3
Pershing	22	-	19	13	3	16	11	16
Riley Lake	27	27	17	12	17	16	12	16
Dike Seventeen	3	6	0	2	3	3	2	1
Unit 2	283	155	71	143	263	188	181	152
Unit 9	123	127	44	66	73	55	34	44
Total:	723	560	274	382	528	403	329	333

Sharptails in the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area peaked in 1998 at 132 displaying males and have declined for eight straight years to only 29% of their former abundance! Reasons for this drastic decline should be closely examined by the DNR. Some have blamed the recent increase in ring-necked pheasants as the reason for the decline. Others think that hunting mortality is much higher than the official counts indicate with non-reporting of bagged sharptails by hunters being a problem. Recent changes in habitat management should also be examined.

Another worrisome management area is the Moquah Barrens that has dropped from an average of 32 cocks in 1999-2003 to an average of 9 cocks in 2004-2006. Since sharptails are not hunted nor are pheasants present in the Moquah Barrens, recent habitat management practices and spring survey efforts should be examined closely.

Reported sharptail numbers have bounced around in the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area from lows of 15-19 to highs of 52-54 during the eight years. It might be that the counts of displaying males are not reliable due to inadequate censusing efforts caused by low manpower availability.

Sharptails appear to be relatively stable, albeit at low numbers, in the Douglas County, Pershing, and Riley Lake wildlife areas. Apparently the birds are just hanging on in the Kimberly-Clark and Dike Seventeen management areas. It is difficult to believe that the grouse can persist at Dike Seventeen given the extremely low numbers of displaying cocks officially counted in the spring. The phenomenon must also be a function of inadequate censusing of the birds. Answers to these questions will be addressed in the upcoming rewrite of the DNR's sharp-tailed grouse management plan.

The number of sharptail hunting permits available for 2006 are based upon the spring census. There is a total of 775 permits available this year. Unit 2 (mostly the Mosinee Paper Co. industrial forest) had the most permits (540) and Unit 10 (Crex Meadows) had the least permits (25). Unit 9 (mostly the Douglas County Forest) offered 160 permits and Unit 8 (Namekagon Barrens), 50 permits. Unit 8 had 0 permits in 2005.

In 2005, about the same number of permits were available (780) as this year, but only 526 hunters applied for the permits. If this situation did not change this year and permit applicants were not too restrictive in terms in their preferences in the areas they wanted to hunt, all hunters who applied for a sharptail hunting permit should have received one.

## AFIELD WITH ZIGGY

By Thomas Ziegeweid

**Special projects** – Every active progressive organization, WSGS being no exception, needs an on-going "special" project to achieve the goals of its charter. Our annual spring meeting and associated bird census fills the bill. Our census:

1. Helps the DNR set our current permit hunting season by counting sharptails in areas where they don't have the fiscal or personnel resources to do so.
2. Keeps a long-term tab on population fluctuations of sharp-tailed grouse.
3. Enables the membership to stay connected.



My third point is one I will elaborate on. We as members, officers, and hunters need to stay involved if we are to see a turn-around in sharptail numbers. Preserving the population and habitat base for the long term and subsequent hunting opportunities is of utmost importance in the next few years.

If you have never been to an annual meeting and bird census, please feel free to join us next April. You will have a good time, meet new people, enjoy some great food and beverage, and contribute to the welfare of sharptails and the barrens community.

### Central Wisconsin sharptails, are they down for the count?

-- Our recent annual meeting and bird census were at Black River Falls this past April. We surveyed a number of areas where birds had been previously spotted. This was on mostly private land, mostly cranberry bogs where the owners cordially let us on their property.

We also surveyed various spots on public property, most notably Dike 17 WMA. Our group didn't spot one bird! The property I surveyed had one bird seen by the owner in the past year. This was in the Bear Bluff area where 20 to 30 birds have been seen regularly in the past few years.

I didn't expect our group to find too many birds, however, as the remnant population that is there is scattered, mostly on private land and the county is pretty wild and remote. I am skeptical of this population recovering! Even if there was a massive multi-agency effort, it might be a

case of "too little too late".

This population's demise, should it come to pass, can be thrown squarely in the laps of the various state and county agencies that manage this huge tract of public land.

I have been really mystified by the current popularity of the Karner blue butterfly problem. Now don't get me wrong, we all want all the barrens critters to thrive. The irony of the "Karner Kraze" is that if the various government agencies that administer the central sands would manage for sharptails on a large scale, they would have a Karner blue population extraordinaire!

The one exception to this opinion would be the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge people who have done a marvelous job as of date, developing large blocks of open habitat.

**Sharp-tailed grouse master plan** – Very shortly the Wisconsin DNR will be formulating the new sharp-tailed grouse master plan for the next decade. I think it is incumbent of our organization to stay on top of this situation and make sure Madison makes a very concerted effort to save and manage sharptail habitat.

I have never had any beef with the DNR field people who are mostly on board with us. However, I have much skepticism with the top brass in Madison. Throw "forestry's" overwhelming influence in the mix and you have a recipe for the sharptail problem. Hopefully, the DNR will come up with a concrete master plan. We will be watching!

**Upcoming hunting season** – This spring and summer should have been a good brood survival period for both ruffed grouse and sharptails. It has been mostly warm and dry especially in the northern barrens. Hopefully larger broods of grouse will show up later this summer, and the upward cycle will commence.

In the field,

Tom

# MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street/PO Box \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_  
Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to volunteer for:  
\_\_\_\_\_ Board of Directors  
\_\_\_\_\_ Bird Censusing  
\_\_\_\_\_ Newsletter  
\_\_\_\_\_ Annual Meeting  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed:

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ 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)

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Deluxe Green Corduroy Cap with Logo (\$14.00)

(all prices include postage and handling)

Total Enclosed: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO AND RETURN THIS APPLICATION TO:**

Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, PO Box 367, Grantsburg, WI 54840

WSGS  
Box 367  
Grantsburg, WI 54840

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