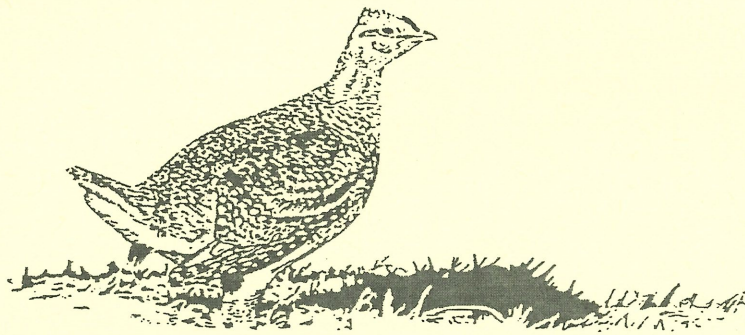


WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



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PERSHING BOUNDARY EXPANSION

By Jim Evrard

President Dave Evenson and I traveled to Gilman on a late May Saturday to attend a public information meeting about a DNR proposal to expand the acquisition boundary of the Pershing Wildlife Area (PWA). The PWA is one of the three remaining heavy-soil sharptail management areas in the state. Sharptails were once found throughout Wisconsin, but are now mostly confined to northwestern counties.

The State currently owns 7,900 acres of land within an 8,896-acre PWA project boundary. The DNR offered two proposals – expanding the boundary to add 3,500 acres or 7,000 acres. This would allow the DNR to buy land from willing sellers within the new boundary.

About 65 persons attended the afternoon meeting, mostly landowners around the PWA. The DNR was represented by Ken Jonas, Hayward Area Wildlife Supervisor, Mark Schmidt, PWA manager stationed in Ladysmith, and Chris Hess, a land acquisition specialist from Antigo. Dave and I represented the WSGS

since our interest was sharp-tailed grouse. We submitted written comments, both for the WSGS and personal, supporting the proposal for the PWA expansion since it would benefit sharptails.

Most of the persons at the meeting were concerned about how the expansion would affect their real estate taxes. Those people were largely ignorant of how land is appraised for tax purposes, DNR land acquisition procedures, state in-lieu-of-tax payments, state school aid formulas, etc.

While Dave and I were at the meeting, there was little concern expressed for sharptails, other wildlife species, endangered species, open lands, outdoor recreation, etc. There were a few hunters and wildlife supporters in the crowd but were mostly silenced by peer pressure. Dave and I left the meeting before it was completed due to other commitments. However, a DNR administrator later stated that the proposal was fairly well received by the group attending the meeting after the issues were further explained by DNR personnel. DNR personnel also attended a Town of Pershing meeting in July to again explain the impact of DNR land acquisition on real estate taxes.

The DNR has recently released the final version of the feasibility study that recommends expanding the PWA acquisition boundary by the full 7,000 acres. This decision was based upon mostly favorable public reaction to the expansion of the wildlife area once township residents were reassured that further state land acquisition would not negatively impact their real estate taxes. Copies of the final feasibility study are available for public review and comment at the DNR station in Ladysmith, at the Western Taylor County Library in Gilman, and the DNR website (<http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/pershing.htm>). WSGS members and other sharp-tailed grouse supporters are urged to support the proposal by submitting comments to Mark Schmidt, PWA Property Manager, DNR, N4103 Highway 27, Ladysmith, WI 54848 or (715)532-4369 or MarkE.Schmidt@Wisconsin.gov by August 22, 2008. The comments received will be incorporated into the final document for submission to the Natural Resource Board at their October meeting.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Dave Evenson

I'm not a very good birder, although I do have to say that one of the thrills of sitting in the turkey woods is watching the warbler migration flit through my little part of the woods. Certainly a major part of birding is listening as well as seeing. In this column I'll be writing about listening to what the birds (sharp-tails) are telling us. Don't take that literally; what I mean is what do the numbers of birds we count in our surveys tell us about habitat or other conditions on our various properties and survey blocks.

I survey sharp-tailed grouse in Unit 9, the heart of the jack pine budworm outbreak and subsequent large salvage cuts of the 1990s. With a count of 123 birds in 1999 and 27 birds this year I'm pretty sure the sharp-tails are saying "these trees are getting too tall!" (It might be Kirtland Warbler habitat for a while, though). In the other extensive area next door, Unit 2 the birds are telling us they're doing OK, 233 birds this year on an upward trend, back toward the peak count in 1999 of 283 birds. I don't know this unit well, although I might speculate that more of the dancing grounds are associated with small private landowners and farms than with extensive corporate or government holdings. Wildlife managers Fred Strand and Greg Kessler could tell us more about this.

Birds on four properties may be telling us about the little understood grouse cycle. Douglas County Wildlife Area, Namekagon Barrens, Riley Lake, and Pershing Wildlife Area all show three or four year increases, with DCWA and Riley Lake at recent record highs. These are all long established sharp-tail areas, with established prescribed burn regimes, and some roller chopping at Riley Lake. Whatever we're doing at these areas, the sharp-tails seem to think it's at least "OK". Don't be too optimistic though, even with these increases the four properties tally 129 dancing males.

The birds at Kimberly-Clark tell us an interesting but sad story. From a peak in 1991 of 56 dancing males they are now at 16 males, also on a three-year climb like those above. Retired Wildlife Manager Cliff Wiita points to the explosiveness of the species when it encounters new habitat, as it did at K-C in the early 1990s. I would agree; we also saw this explosion with the extensive jack pine budworm salvage cuts in Unit 2 and 9. Private land dancing grounds near Kimberly-Clark have also faded away, perhaps further isolating the remaining birds.

So few birds are seen in the central sands that it's hard to say what's happening. It's possible increased surveys might turn up some birds, although WSGS spring meetings and hired survey staff in past years haven't been able to find them.

We held our WSGS meeting at Cornucopia so that we could survey Moquah Barrens this spring. The weather was superb for holding a meeting snug in a cliff-top mansion watching the breakers on Lake Superior, not so superb for detecting sharp-tail activity. With USFS staff and WSGS valiant efforts, only 3 dancers were found. Moquah sits at the end of the "string of jewels" of our sand country wildlife properties, so it only has genetic interchange to the south and west, if that. Throughout the 1980s less than 10 dancing males were found each year. In the early 1990s WSGS and WDNR transplanted some birds to Moquah. The sharp-tails showed a steep climb to 40 dancing males in 1999, and an equally steep decline back to where we are. Despite the dismal state the birds tell us, I'm optimistic about this property. USFS Wildlife Manager Scott Posner reports prescribed burning 2470 acres this spring, and the new Forest Plan for this area will increase the open acreage.

Now what are the birds at Crex telling us? I wish I knew. From a peak of 132 dancing males in 1998, this flagship property has fallen to levels not seen since the 1980s, with 40 dancers this year. Two speculations I've heard about this decline relate to nesting cover. Prescribed burning units upwind of already burned units allows burning with more ease, but can lead to large burned areas, rather than a scatter pattern. We know that hens typically nest quite near dancing grounds, so it's possible they cannot find unburned habitat near some grounds. Secondly, the crew at Crex has had to be innovative in using mechanical means to augment burning to keep up. We know from Dr. Tim Connelly's research that Wisconsin hens choose some pretty rough habitat for nesting, with a significant vertical component. Perhaps mowing keeps the landscape open, but removes those vertical stems hens key on. Crex also is at the other end of the string of jewels. One wouldn't suspect genetic problems as much on this larger property, but by population biology standards this population is not all that big.

The thoughts above are mine, although I've been fortunate to be able to listen to the best sharp-tail managers in the state for a while. It's likely that you may have different explanations or thoughts. In the end, connectivity, good habitat and lots of it, and large populations are the basics for which all in WSGS strive.

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

Secretary/Treasurer: Jim Evrard

Board Members: Ed Frank, Dave Clausen, Blair Klein, John Zatopa

Vice President: Tom Ziegeweid

Newsletter Editor: Jim Evrard

SPRING SHARPTAIL NUMBERS AND FALL HUNTING PERMITS

By Jim Evrard

Under the direction of Scott Hull, DNR Upland Game Bird Specialist, new spring sharp-tailed grouse census methodologies were tested this past spring. While improved, further refinement of the techniques is needed. Also new this year was the availability of DNR funding to partially pay the travel costs (gasoline) of volunteers' helping the DNR in the annual spring counts. Eight volunteers were paid \$35 per diem this past spring. The eight volunteers spent 22 mornings looking for sharp-tails.

Sharp-tail numbers increased in Unit 2, from 173 counted in 2007 to 241 birds this spring. DNR biologists Fred Stand and Greg Kessler attributed the increase to increased census efforts. Unit 9 sharp-tails counted decreased slightly to 27 birds compared to 33 sharp-tails in 2007. The decrease was attributed to the deteriorating habitat. Sharp-tail numbers from Units 2 and 9 were total birds, not the number of dancing males. A slight decrease in the number of dancing males was recorded in Unit 8 (Namekagon Barrens) - 47 in 2008 compared to 51 in 2007. The slight decrease was also noted in Unit 10 (Crex Meadows), from 45 in 2007 to 40 this spring.

The four units (2, 8, 9, 10) are the only sharp-tail units open to hunting this fall. The number of hunting permits available for Unit 2 is 700 compared to 520 last year. Permit numbers in Units 8, 9, and 10 in 2008 remained the same as in 2007 (Unit 8 - 50, Unit 9 - 100, and Unit 10 - 25).

The method used by the DNR to determine the number of hunting permits requires a minimum number of 25 dancing male sharp-tailed grouse to trigger a hunting season in a management unit. This year, 28 dancing males were counted in the Douglas County Wildlife Area (DWCA), the highest number in the past 18 years and enough to allow limited permit hunting. However, the DCWA lies partially in Unit 8 (which already has a hunting permit quota) and partially in Unit 4 that has no permits. Those who receive a Unit 8 permit could hunt sharp-tails in that part of the DCWA south of County Trunk Highway M. In other sandy habitat, only seven sharp-tails (three were definitely males) were counted in Unit 3 (Moquah Barrens) this spring, too few for a hunting season.

There were two areas in the heavy soils of northcentral Wisconsin that could allow limited hunting. Unit 30 (Riley Lake Wildlife Area) had 27 dancing male sharp-tails this spring (up from 22 males in 2007). The same number of displaying males (27) were also counted in Unit 24 (Pershing Wildlife Area). Twenty-eight displaying males were counted in and around Pershing in 2007.

Both Units 24 and 30 could conceivably support limited hunting given the DNR's system, but the system allows local sharp-tail managers to make the final decision whether or not to allow hunting. Apparently the biologists in Units 24 and 30 decided not to issue hunting permits in 2008. Dancing males counted in the Kimberly-Clark Wildlife Area (11) were too few to trigger limited hunting. More than 25 males were also counted in 2008 in Rusk and Price counties but no permits were issued with the reason given that these birds are found on private land where little or no hunting would be allowed by the landowners.

At a recent meeting, Scott Hull was asked if he thought hunting the relatively small numbers of Wisconsin sharp-tails were endangering their future in the state. In response, Hull summarized a sharp-tail harvest and hunter survey report that he and his assistant Sharon Fandel conducted in 2007:

- 417 hunters applied for 695 permits with 376 hunters successful in drawing a permit (41 hunters were unsuccessful for various reasons).
- Reported harvest was 40 sharp-tails (Unit 2 - 25 birds with 5% hunter success, Unit 8 - 10 birds with 20%, Unit 9 - 0 birds with 0% success, Unit 10 - 5 birds with 20% success).
- These are minimum numbers with an estimated 30% non-reporting rate (the actual statewide legal harvest was approximately 52 sharp-tails).
- Hull thought no more than 5% of the fall sharp-tail population was killed by hunters, a number having little or no impact on birds that have more than a 50% annual mortality rate.
- Hull also thought if the very limited hunting season was closed, the resulting lack of hunter financial and political support might hurt Wisconsin's sharp-tailed grouse and their management program.

WSGS LOSES BOARD MEMBER

By Jim Evrard

WSGS Board Member Dave Biegel died on March 12, 2008 at the age of 69 after a courageous battle with cancer. Dave was a long-time member of the WSGS and was elected to the Board in 2006. He was also a charter member and the first president of the Friends of the Bird Sanctuary (the Douglas County Wildlife Area).

Dave was born in 1938 in Chippewa Falls and lived for a time in Eleva after serving in the U.S. Navy. He recently retired from the Madison Area Technical College where he served as program director/lead instructor for the diesel and heavy equipment program. He and his wife of nearly 50 years, Nancy, lived in Marshall near Madison. His wife, a daughter, son and granddaughter, survive him.

I first met Dave in 2003 at a WSGS meeting when he was a candidate for the WSGS Board. I next met him during the organization meeting of the Friends of the Bird Sanctuary. We served on their board of directors with Dave becoming the first president of the group. Dave and Nancy had a summer home on the St. Croix Flowage near the Douglas County Wildlife Area. They hosted our 2007 summer board meeting at their flowage home and it was there that we first learned of Dave's battle with prostate cancer. The WSGS is lessened by his loss. I considered Dave a friend and will miss him.

SHARPTAIL LITERATURE

By Jim Evrard

Not much has been written about sharp-tailed grouse in popular outdoor literature. What I have read were mostly stories about hunting the birds. However, I recently read a few well-written lines about their spring mating rituals in an essay, *All Birds Flying*, written by Dan Crockett that was published in the book, *A Hunter's Heart – Honest Essays on Blood Sport*, published in 1996 by the Henry Holt and Company. Crockett writes: "In the spring they [sharp-tails] dance, strutting and spinning, tamping the earth with feathered feet, thumping out a staccato rhythm. With the quiet browns and whites of winter prairie, checkered boldly across back and wings, lavender air sacs puffed, yolk-yellow eyebrows vivid, tail stabbing sky, they dance." Later in the essay, the author writes of a scene etched in his mind. The memory involves one of the sharp-tail's most important predators, the goshawk. "A sharp-tail zags through the sky, wings pumping like a jigsaw. Thirty feet behind it, a northern goshawk echoes every move. For ten thousand years, these birds have carved on another."

Closer to home on the eastern edge of sharp-tail range, the late Dean of Wisconsin outdoor writers, Gordon MacQuarrie wrote about sharp-tail hunting in Douglas County in the early 1930s. Despite the story being about hunting, it contains some information about sharp-tails or as MacQuarrie called them, the "sharp-tailed prairie chicken". The story was titled, *Chickens Fly Funny*, and was lastly seen in the book, *The Last Stories of the Old Duck Hunters*, published in 1985 by the Willow Creek Press.

One particular paragraph about the "sharp-tailed prairie chicken" where MacQuarrie hunted is to be savored. "It was a stunning October day. The temperature soared close to 70, but the heat was the mellow variety of Indian summer. Through the autumn haze the declining sun sent its flood, picking out in perfect detail the yellow-brown aspect of the country landscape." "The pungent smell of autumn hung heavy in the air". By the way, MacQuarrie shot a true prairie chicken and a sharp-tail that day, while missing at least seven other sharp-tails. The male prairie chicken MacQuarrie bagged was said to be the first killed in that country for 10 to 15 years according to his hunting companions.

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 fight for the sharp-tailed grouse and its habitat in Wisconsin. Our membership fee is low compared to most conservation groups and supports all-volunteer members who serve as your board of directors and do the work of the society.

The DNR will provide up to \$1,000 to pay a \$35 per Diem fee to volunteers who help in the 2008 state-wide spring sharp-tail census. The WSGS will pay the DNR-designated volunteers and be reimbursed by the DNR.

Dave E. stated that Jim, Ed Frank, and Blair Klein were reelected to the WSGS Board. In other membership news, 36 new members were gained as a result of sending membership recruitment brochures and a letter to non-WSGS-member 2007 sharp-tail hunting permit holders.

Fred Strand gave the management and sharp-tail history of the Bayfield County Forest fuelbreaks. A change in forest administration threatened the future of the fuelbreaks, but a tentative agreement reached recently between the DNR and the Bayfield County Forestry Committee, could provide a 600-acre core of open barrens surrounded by 40,000 acres of 'moving barrens' (four 10,000-acre blocks of jack pine on a 50-year rotation). No state funds would be involved in the plan.

Fred Strand also talked about 20 acres of land on the Northeast side of the Douglas County Wildlife Area (DCWA) that is being considered for acquisition to act as a buffer for the wildlife area. The DNR is working with the Western Wisconsin Land Trust and the Friends of the Bird Sanctuary on this project. The WSGS Board has made a decision to join the partnership by contributing funds to honor the memory of the late Dave Biegel, a WSGS Board Member and former President of the Friends of the Bird Sanctuary.

A brief summary of the yet-to-be-completed 2008 spring sharp-tail counts included information from the Namekagon Barrens (Gary Dunsmore reported at least 50 cocks counted in two dancing grounds, about the same as 2007); the DCWA and other areas (Fred Strand reported the same number at the DCWA and private lands, but down in the Wausau Paper Company land in Unit 2); the Pershing Wildlife Area and other areas (Ken Jonas reported 25 males on three dancing grounds in Pershing, 44 males in 5 dancing grounds in Rusk County, and a few birds in Price County – no information was available yet for Riley Lake and the Kimberly-Clark wildlife areas); Moquah Barrens (Scott Posner reported 7 birds on one dancing grounds and two additional birds near a traditional dancing grounds); and Jim Evrard stated that only about 30 males were found so far at Crex Meadows and there was concern about the continuing low numbers.

Dave E. announced that the annual meeting of the Friends of the Namekagon Barrens would take place at 9 a.m., Saturday, May 17th in the Long Branch Saloon in Minong.

Ken Jonas brought the group up to date on the progress to investigate the feasibility of expanding the acquisition boundary of the Pershing Wildlife Area. The preferred alternative of the feasibility committee is a 7,000-acre addition basically adding all the land between the two units of the wildlife area. This will be discussed at a public open house scheduled for May 31st in Gilman.

Scott Posner's power point presentation featured the status of the new vegetation management plan for the Moquah Barrens Wildlife Area in the Chequamegon National Forest. The 4,800-acre open barrens core will be surrounded by 9,200 acres of savanna. In addition, other areas will be managed for open barrens, and moving barrens. Scott also made assignments for sharp-tail census of the Moquah Barrens the following morning.

Scott Hull closed out the business meeting with a PowerPoint update on the rewriting of the DNR's management plan for sharp-tails in Wisconsin. There will be a general meeting of the planning group in June 9 and 10 at a location to be decided. Scott also mentioned that he has joined with UW-Madison professor Scott Lutz in a GIS study of sharp-tail habitat.

The business meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m. Door prizes were drawn and the drawing for the art raffle was completed. Lyman Lang of Grantsburg was the lucky winner of the framed Ruth King print. Larry Thompson of Barneveld won the framed Louis Raymer print. The name of Tom Harvieux of Stillwater, Minnesota was drawn for the Karen Smith print. Tom was the only winner present at the meeting.

The group moved to the kitchen-dining-living room area of the Tam O'Shatner Center for a lively social prior to a delicious catered steak/whitefish dinner. The high winds, snow, and cold temperatures of the day continued through the night.

On Sunday, April 27, a group left the Center at dawn to census sharp-tails in the Moquah Barrens despite the poor weather (mostly cloudy, wind 5-10 m.p.h., temperatures in the upper 20s). Twelve hardy people in nine groups (Ed and Deana Frank; Jim, Shirley, and Lori Evrard; Tom Ziegeweid and Roche Lolly; Fred Strand; John Zatopa; John Probst; Scott Posner; and Dave Evenson, counted 5 or 6 sharp-tails in several areas.

After a group breakfast in Cornucopia's Village Inn, the meeting officially ended with members returning to their homes throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota.

ANNUAL AND BOARD MEETING MINUTES

By Jim Evrard



The WSGS **Board Meeting** was held in the late morning of Saturday, April 26th at the Tam O'Shatner Conference Center, just northeast of the Village of Cornucopia. Snow was blowing out of the northwest off Lake Superior as high waves pounded against the cliff on which the impressive building stood.

President Dave Evenson called the meeting to order in the conference room with Board Members Dave Clausen, Jim Evrard, Ed Frank, and Tom Ziegeweid present. Dave E. introduced John Zatopa, who was appointed to serve out the remainder of the term of the late Board member, Dave Biegel. Scott Hull and Sharon Frandell of the DNR were guests.

Secretary/Treasurer Evrard gave the Secretary's Report. Minutes of the WSGS Board Meeting of September 16, 2007 and the minutes of the 2007 Annual Meeting were published in Newsletter No. 51. The 2007 financial report was published in Newsletter No. 53. Copies of 2007 income and expenditures were given to the board members. Jim also gave the Treasurer's Report: as of April 22, 2008, the checking account balance was \$10,537.72 and the CD balance was \$2,310.79 for a total of \$12,848.51. The money market account with an interest rate of 3.05% was converted to a 12-month CD on October 16, 2007 at an interest rate of 4.5%.

Thirty-six new members were gained by mailing membership brochures with a letter insert to 349 non-WSGS members who received a 2007 sharptail hunting permit. Dave E. and Tom helped Jim in this effort.

Scott Hull stated that a decision has been made to pay a Per Diem for those volunteers who help census sharp-tails this spring. Jim was directed to pay those people certified as volunteers by the DNR and then submit an invoice to the DNR for repayment of those fees.

The board directed Dave E. to buy up to five more Gromme sharptail prints if still available. Dave also said there was another small sharptail print from the South Dakota Wildlife Federation.

Buzz Balzer proposed in a letter to provide an original sharptail painting for a card raffle at our annual meeting where any profits would be split 50:50 between the artist and the WSGS. Balzer's suggestion was rejected due to the small number of people that attend the annual meeting. After some discussion, a motion offered by Tom, seconded by Dave C., was made to offer splitting the profits from an autumn raffle of a Balzer original. Dave E. said he would contact Balzer about our decision.

Dave C. made a motion to investigate possibly partnering with the Friends of the Bird Sanctuary, the Western Wisconsin Land Trust, and the DNR to buy property adjacent to the Douglas County Wildlife Area in memory of our late Board Member Dave Biegel. Tom seconded the motion and the board approved the motion.

Ed will represent the WSGS at the DNR open house on April 30 in Madison that will discuss the Wisconsin Wildlife Action Plan. Ed again discussed the problem of a definition of "open barrens".

Scott then advised the Board of the status of the sharptail genetics study. Another 90 sharptail wings (70 from 2001-2003 and 20 from 2007) were sent to Dr. Brad Swanson at Central Michigan University for analysis. Most of the wings were from sandy habitat. Feather samples from heavy soil habitat will be sent to Swanson this coming week. Samples from the Hamerstrom wings would be helpful, but are not essential to this study. The meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

Following lunch, the **Annual Meeting** was called to order at 1:15 p.m. in the Tam O'Shatner conference room. Nineteen people were in attendance despite the winter-like weather. Secretary/Treasurer Jim Evrard gave the Treasurer's and Secretary's Reports. As of April 22, 2008, the total balance was \$12,848.51. In addition, the annual meeting registration fees were \$100 with expenses of \$98 for a 'profit' of \$2.00. Art raffle income was \$920 with expenses of \$66 for a 'profit' of \$854.

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AFIELD WITH ZIGGY

By Thomas Ziegeweid



Over my years of sharp-tailed grouse hunting I have had more than my share of weird and strange situations crop up while hunting. I will share some of them with you.

Cripples: About seven seasons ago I was hunting in Zone Two east of Solon Springs off Cheney Lake Road by myself. I was slowly working a patch of young red pine that had held birds for a number of years. It was about midmorning on opening day.

Suddenly, a sharptail went scooting out of some cover, running full tilt away from me. I surely expected it to flush within seconds. It didn't! I slowly moved to where I last saw this bird only to have it run away from me a second time. The season was only two or three hours old and I thought that this bird couldn't be a

cripple as there were no other hunting activities in the near vicinity. The third time it took off, I ground swatted it like a good shot on a cottontail rabbit.

Later that day I cleaned it at a shack I stay at in Bayfield County. The bird had been hit with 3-4 pellets in the shoulders and back. By the looks of the wounds it appeared to probably have been shot by a ruffed grouse hunter or a poacher at least a week before the season. Needless to say, I did manage to salvage most of the carcass and it tasted fine later when I cooked it.

That same opening weekend, some of my cronies from the shack had been driving east along the edge of the Bayfield County Firebreaks when they saw a sharptail sitting in the road. When their vehicle got close to the bird it flew out only about 200 yards into the firebreak and lit. They precisely marked the bird and proceeded to surround the area with four hunters and two dogs. The bird seemed to have vanished into thin air, the dogs didn't even pick up scent. Later that evening they told me their story, which I responded to that the bird was probably hit on the opener by another hunter.

The really unbelievable part of this saga happened that Monday morning after the opener when we were leaving the shack to go home. I still had one tag left and thought I would hunt a bit on the way back to Solon Springs.

I was driving down the road by the firebreak very slowly, more preoccupied with seeing ruffed grouse in the vicinity where they had seen this bird on the road the previous day. Something caught the corner of my eye on the edge of an old stand of red pine next to the road. I thought I got a glimpse of what appeared to be a grouse head momentarily by this particular tree. I shut the truck off and got my gun out and loaded it with two low base sixes. The "bird" seemed to vanish, but I marked the tree that I thought it was near.

I shot down through brush to the base of the tree thinking that maybe the bird had crouched down and was still sitting there. There was no wing flapping, death throes, or bird flying away. Then I walked into the woods and to my amazement there was a monster cock sharptail that was probably the nicest bird I ever bagged.

When I got back to Eau Claire I skinned that bird and to my surprise this bird had been "beaned" by a pellet on the back of the shoulder. The shot hadn't broken the skin, but left a black and blue spot the size of a dime.

Would this ever happen in a hunter's lifetime or 100 hunter's lifetimes again? I shook my head in disbelief that I had actually filled both my tags with cripples.

The Cagiest Bird Ever: Four seasons ago I was hunting in northwest Minnesota in the Caribou WMA very close to the Manitoba border. I had been hunting this area for a number of years and generally saw birds and even bagged a few.

As I was slowing walking down this dike road going north, I heard the usual "cuck-cuck-cuck" of a sharptail alarmed and allegedly flying away. The only problem was he wasn't flying away. I didn't see the bird, but that's not uncommon with me as I can only hear in one ear and can't pinpoint sound like normal people.

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I finally pinpointed this bird to be sitting in or near a large aspen clone about 100 yards away. For around ten minutes this birds would “alarm call” on and off, but he never flushed. Never in my life have I heard a sharptail call unless he was up and flying away. I slowly walked over to the clone and kicked it out for 15 minutes or so, and the bird shut up and didn’t flush.

Figuring I wasn’t going to get a shot at this one I proceeded to continue down the dike road to another area. When I got about 200 yards away I heard this bird call again but he got up and flew by me “just out of range” like he was teasing me. I marked him down road about a half mile, and proceeded to sneak him again. This same scenario went on for about another mile or so.

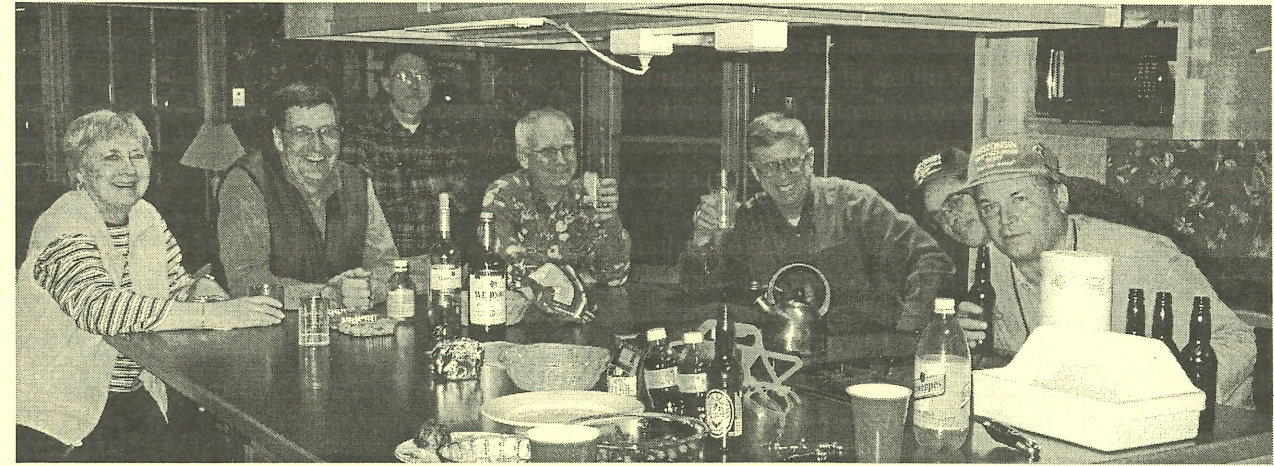
The last time he lit I had a very precise mark on him, there wasn’t much cover on the ground with a few scattered trees present. I literally soured a 70-yard circle for half an hour, thinking that now was my big chance. He would “ground cluck” when my back was turned to him. Finally, I had enough of this malarkey! As I was walking away he finally flushed well out of range and flew so far away, I couldn’t see where he landed. Was this bird almost human?

Hail Mary: Take some deuces along with you. Over the years I have advised sharptail-hunting friends to use heavy loads and leave the low base shells in the car. These birds are much tougher to bring down and many shots are at long range.

I always take some 12-gauge, 3”, lead, 7/8 oz., #2s that I had left over from Canada goose hunting in the pre-steel era. I chamber these up when I am walking across really open areas when I move between thick spots. Last fall it paid off! Roche Lolly and I were hunting as guests on our buddy Marshall Dieter’s farm near Wanaska, Minnesota.

We had flushed a large covey of birds that were mostly out of range, when Marshall suggested we make a drive across a huge alfalfa field where he had regularly seen birds. Not much cover, so in went the #2s.

As we were approaching the end of the drive, a sharptail flushed well out in front of Roche’s dogs and hooked around across the three of us. They didn’t even consider a shot. As the bird came across me I took two “long lead” shots at it and it fell stone dead. I thought the bird was out there pretty far but didn’t realize the distance until I paced off nearly 100 yards! All it took was one well-placed shot! **See you this fall in the barrens. Ziggy**



Evening Gathering at Annual Meeting: From left to right—Sue Clausen, Dave Evenson, John Zatopa, Dave Clausen, Jim Evrard, Roche Lolly, and Tom “Ziggy” Ziegeweid

Offered by the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society

“Namekagon Barrens Sharptails”



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ruth Masloski King grew up in Rice Lake, WI and didn't have to learn to love the outdoors. She started hunting with her father at age 12 and hasn't quit yet. Her favorite outdoor pursuits include grouse hunting, muzzleloader hunting for deer, musky fishing, hiking, canoeing/kayaking, backpack camping, cross-country skiing, skijoring, and dog sledding.

The artwork began early, as well. She sold her first painting at age 10. Ruth began her DNR career as a fisheries biologist in 1986. In 1999, after the birth of their daughter, she chose a half-time position in storm water and non-point source pollution prevention.

Ruth works primarily in acrylic, chalk pastel, and pen and ink. She strives to accurately portray not only the wildlife but also the varied habitats of northern Wisconsin. Wildlife, working dogs, and sporting dogs are her favorite subjects. She lives outside of Sarona, WI with her husband, daughter, and six dogs. Contact Ruth at tagalder@chibardun.net.



The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (WSGS) is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the sharp-tailed grouse and its barrens and bog habitat in Wisconsin. Artist Ruth Masloski King generously donated the printing rights to her painting, *Namekagon Barrens Sharptails*, to the WSGS to raise funds for its conservation efforts.

The painting depicts a group of sharptails in the early spring on their lek or dancing ground in the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area in far northwest Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources manages the wildlife area on land leased from Burnett County. Only a few percent of the Pine Barrens habitat, which originally covered more than two million acres in Wisconsin, remain. It is in these remnants that the Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse also remain.

The price for the limited edition signed print, which measures 17 inches by 27 inches, is \$60 plus \$5 for shipping and handling.

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SHARPTAIL MANAGEMENT PLAN

By Jim Evrard

The DNR has been in the process of updating and rewriting its sharp-tailed grouse management plan for the past two years. All major wildlife species have a specific plan that directs its management. The plans are updated periodically to reflect changing conditions in the state. The last version of the sharptail plan was written in 1996-97.

Under the direction of Scott Hull, DNR upland game bird specialist, a group of sharptail supporters have met several times (October 10, 2006 in Park Falls, February 8, 2007 in Grantsburg; and June 9, 2008 in Wausau) to update the plan. A meeting is planned for Eau Claire on August 19, 2008. The group includes federal and state management and research biologists, university educators and researchers, and private citizens, both hunters and non-hunters. Dave Evenson, Ed Frank, and myself have represented the WSGS.

The sharptail plan is divided into three parts: History and Background; Plan Goals and Focus Areas; and Plan Implementation and Management Options. One major item dealt with at the June 2008 meeting was sharptail genetics and translocation. Since the sharptails survive in Wisconsin as isolated small populations, it was feared that there has been a loss of genetic diversity due to 'inbreeding'. To test this idea, wings and feathers collected over the past decade or so from hunters and other sources, were analyzed to determine their DNA makeup. Dr. Brad Swanson of Central Michigan University analyzed the Wisconsin materials and compared them to similar material collected from sharptails in western states. Swanson found that Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse has roughly one half of the genetic diversity (expressed as the number of alleles) as the western sharptails.

As a result, plans were discussed to rectify this potential problem by translocating (trapping, moving, and releasing) sharptails from areas having high genetic diversity to areas where sharptails have low genetic diversity. More testing has to be done to determine if sharptails can simply be moved around within Wisconsin or sharptails have to be brought in from western states. This same process is now taking place in Wisconsin in our prairie chicken populations.

In addition to translocating sharptails to increase their genetic diversity, translocation was also discussed to return sharptails to Wisconsin habitat where they have disappeared. Several DNR biologists pleaded their case to release sharptails in areas they manage and where they think there is again suitable habitat. One area proposed was in southeast Wisconsin. The biologists from that area stated they could obtain a significant amount of private funding for such a project. I personally think that such an effort would be a waste of resources, whether private or public. Even if a sharptail population could be reestablished in the southeast, it would create a very isolated population where genetic drift (loss of genetic diversity) would be a real problem. To me it doesn't make sense to attempt to restore a species that disappeared over 150 years ago into habitat that now supports another game bird, the ring-necked pheasant.

The second major item was the identification of sharp-tailed grouse conservation areas. Primary areas include the Northwest Sands along with part of the Lake Superior Coastal Plain (Crex Meadows, Namekagon Barrens, Douglas County, and Moquah wildlife areas, Bayfield County Fuel Breaks, Brule River State Forest, and Private lands in Ashland, Bayfield, and Douglas counties) and the North Central Forest (Pershing, Kimberly-Clark, and Riley Lake wildlife areas and private lands in Rusk and Price counties).

Secondary sharptail conservation areas would include the Central Sand Plains (Dike 17, Sandhill, and Wood County wildlife areas, Black River State Forest, and private lands in Jackson County).

Other potential sharptail conservation areas could include the Spread Eagle Barrens in Florence County and additional areas in Central Wisconsin such as the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Each conservation area would include a sharptail population goal and a related habitat acreage goal. These items will be discussed at the next meeting of the planning group.

I would like to end this article by stating that in my 30 years with the DNR, there never appeared to be much interest or support among the DNR staff in Madison for sharptail management. The only reason why we have sharptails and hunt sharptails today in Wisconsin is the interest and dedication of field DNR wildlife managers who cared about the bird. However, times have changed. Scott Hull, the new DNR Madison staff person responsible for sharp-tailed grouse, is a breath of fresh air. He is truly interested in sharptails and their future in the state. Scott has secured financial support for the sharptail management program from DNR-Madison and offers hope for the future of the species in this state.

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