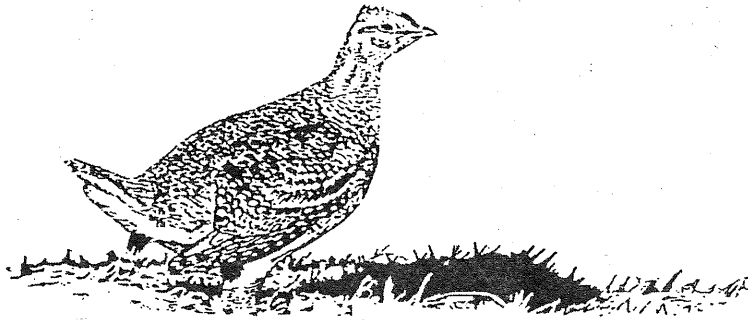


WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Number 46

Winter 2006

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HABITAT PROGRESS

By Jim Evrard

A habitat project involving the WSGS was the recent approval by the Natural Resources Board (NRB) of the proposed acquisition boundary expansion of the Crex Meadows Wildlife area. More than a year ago, WSGS member and DNR Wildlife Biologist Paul Kooiker gave NRB Member (and WSGS member) Herb Behnke a tour of 320-acres owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company that the DNR was hoping to buy to add to Crex Meadows. That particular tract supported sharptails during the last cyclic high and had been mentioned in previous articles in this newsletter.

One problem was that the 320 acres were outside the approved acquisition boundary. The tour's purpose was to convince Behnke that the Crex boundary should be expanded to include the Plum Creek tract. After the tour, Behnke suggested expanding the Crex boundary beyond the Plum Creek land and also suggested a boundary expansion of the adjacent Governor Knowles State Forest, linking Crex and the state forest together.

The DNR developed the concept and introduced the proposal to the public at a series of meetings held early in 2005. Dave Evenson, representing the WSGS, attended the major meeting held in the Crex Center and submitted a written statement supporting the proposed acquisition expansion.

Overall the public approved of the proposal, but several vocal opponents apparently swayed some DNR staff members and they recommended dropping the proposed expansion.

I also attended the Crex Center meeting and after reading the resulting local newspaper accounts of the opposition, decided to contact Herb and ask

him to reassess the situation, saying that the bulk of the opposition came from misinformation and personal vendettas. Behnke took the leadership role and organized the effort to examine the proposal again, including additional public hearings, put the item on the NRB agenda, and the proposed expansion was approved.

Herb should be congratulated for his persistent efforts to help Crex sharptails for without his efforts, the acquisition proposal would be sitting on a DNR shelf somewhere. New WSGS Board member Dave Clausen also should be thanked for his testimony in support of the proposal at several of the public hearings. Incidentally, Herb recently stepped down from the NRB and Governor Doyle named Clausen to replace him. Kooiker and Crex Manager (and WSGS member) Pete Engman also played a large role in making the Crex expansion a reality. The next step now is for the State to buy the 320 acres from the Timber Company. WSGS members might be called upon to lobby the powers that be, both within the DNR and Plum Creek Timber Company to make the proposed acquisition a reality.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Dave Evenson



About 5AM on July 22 I was awakened by the full moon shining in my eyes and the baying of bear dogs. I tried to shield my eyes from the moon, but to no avail. I was awake and may as well get up. In a few minutes fellow board member Jim Evrard crawled out of his tent as well. We said our farewells as Jim headed off for his class reunion and after a quick breakfast of a cold brat and a Diet Coke I drove the several miles over to the blueberry grounds of Moquah. It rained a handful of big drops, enough to convince me to put on my rainsuit. In a few minutes the rain stopped, but I found the rainsuit appropriate.

Anyone following my path would probably assume that a bear had passed that way, as I found myself kneeling, sitting or occasionally lying on my back reaching out for just one more handful of berries. Not a human sound about, it was a wonderful place to reflect on this northernmost barrens area, the Moquah Barrens.

The day before Scott Posner of the USFS had led the WSGS board members and friends on a tour of Moquah. We stopped at several large open areas with vistas of a mile or so, but also drove some good distances between stops through closed canopy forest. Fred Strand, a WSGS member and Wisconsin DNR wildlife manager has more experience with this area than any other professional. Fred verified what Scott had shown us in his slide show, that USFS has been managing the core Moquah area more aggressively in the last decade than in previous ones. Board Member Ed Frank remains a skeptic- "too many trees" being a frequent comment.

We often find ourselves arguing about what is sharptail habitat, or what is good sharptail management. My belief is that the birds will tell us what is good habitat, as they did in their population explosion in the jack pine budworm clearcuts in the early 90's. By that standard I need to agree that Ed is right. The birds are hanging on at Moquah, but the population certainly is not exploding. Yet I find myself agreeing with the optimistic Fred as well. The serious management of Moquah is only a few decades along. Moquah remains the only light soil area outside of Crex where we have the potential to reach the 10,000-acre mark. The new Forest Plan includes a buffer area around the core that can be managed in a way that has some potential to be marginal habitat at some times. These are all positives, and I believe that Moquah is going to get better for the birds.

There are competing uses and views of usefulness for every acre of land in Wisconsin. Private land decisions are quiet and usually don't make the news. Public land decisions are often shrill, as

various groups represent their interests. The natural constituency for barrens and open lands includes ecologists, some hunters, bird watchers and other naturalists, and very few others, although I'd have to include the several dozen blueberry pickers I saw as being appreciative of barrens! WSGS spoke for the barrens in the new Chequamegon- Nicolet Forest Plan and to a large part our concerns were heard by appreciative planners. Plans are one thing, and implementation is another, and there's no doubt that USFS wild- lifers face the same real world issues, budgets, staff- ing, burning windows as any other manager. Yet I remain an optimist that the trends at Moquah are in favor of the sharptail.

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

PLAN FOR YOUR 2006 ANNUAL MEETING

Mark this important event on your 2006 calendar now! The WSGS annual meeting will take place on Saturday and Sunday, April 22 and 23, in Black River Falls. This will be the first time that our society will meet in that city.

The business meeting will start at 1 p.m. in the lower conference room in the DNR headquarters building just west of I-94 at the Highway 54 exit. The meeting should end at 4 p.m., followed by drawings for door prizes and the annual art raffle.

The group will then move east across I-94 to the Holiday Inn for a social hour and catered prime rib/ chicken dinner. A historian from the HoChunk Nation will provide an interesting after dinner pro- gram. Following the program, DNR Wildlife Biologist Michele Windsor will make assignments to volunteers to count sharptails early the following morning in eastern Jackson County including Dike 17 and the cranberry bogs.

Following the sharptail census in the field, we will return to the Holiday Inn for our debriefing brunch. Many thanks to Vice President Tom "Ziggy" Ziegeweid for making the arrangements for this gathering.

The meeting registration fee is \$25 per person which includes refreshments, the catered dinner Sat- urday evening and the catered brunch Sunday morning, and registration materials. We have re- served a block of rooms at the Holiday Inn at a cost of \$62/room including taxes. Please call them at (715)284-0888 and make your own room reservations prior to March 25th.

For more information, contact Jim Evrard (715)463-2446 or email at "evrardsc@grantsburgtelcom.net".

(cut on line and return with registration fees)

REGISTRATION FOR 2006 WSGS ANNUAL MEETING

Name: _____
Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Amount Enclosed : _____

Make check/money order (\$25/person) payable to the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society and send to:

WSGS
PO Box 367
Grantsburg, WI 54840

2005 SHARPTAIL HARVEST

By Jim Evrard

Madison DNR Wildlife biologist Andrea Mezera provided the preliminary sharptail harvest numbers and they are not impressive! Only 22 sharptails were reported harvested in 2005, 16 in Unit 2 and 6 in Unit 10. There may be a few more sharptails harvest reports received in the next few months, but not many.

Reported hunter success rates were very low – only 3% for Unit 2 (620 permits available), 12% in Unit 10 (50 permits), and 0% in Unit 9 (110 permits)! In 2004, reported hunter success rates were about the same, ranging from 3% to 12%. However, the reported harvest numbers should be viewed with caution.

We don't know how many permit holders actually hunt. If some didn't hunt, the reported hunter success rates would be higher. We don't know how many hunters who shot birds send in their reports to Madison. No doubt some hunters forget and other ignore the requirement to do so. And we don't know how many birds are shot by hunters without permits – ruffed grouse hunters probably shoot a few sharptails by accident or on purpose and even some duck hunters shoot at sharptails flying over wetlands (I personally observed this while duck hunting in Crex Meadows some years ago).

Even if the actual numbers of sharptails killed by hunters were double or triple that reported, hunting mortality on our grouse populations is negligible. For example, in Unit 10 (which is actually Crex Meadows) about 55 displaying male sharptails were counted in the spring (we know that not all male sharptails display in the spring and aren't counted). With an assumed 50:50 sex ratio, that would mean there were at least 55 female sharptails, for a total of 110 adult sharptails in the spring. The DNR sharptail population model assumes a production of at least one young sharptail in the fall for every adult sharptail in the spring. So there would be a minimum fall population of 220 sharptails (110 adults and 110 young) in Unit 10. A harvest of 6 birds (3%) or 12 birds (double the reported harvest or 6%), or even 18 birds (triple the reported harvest or 9%) should not impact a population that normally has an annual mortality of about 50% (half the birds or 110 would die in any given year). In addition, hunting losses are normally compensated by a reduction in other population losses.

Other factors that impact grouse numbers including crippling loss by hunters, predation of adults, young, and eggs by a wide spectrum of predators (hawks, owls, coyote, fox, raccoon, skunk, snakes, etc.), unseasonable cold weather during the brood season, and nesting habitat and nest destruction by burning and other disturbances.

Whatever factors that historically drove the grouse cycle have forced sharptail numbers in Wisconsin down to their lowest level in 15 years. Hopefully those factors will moderate and sharptail numbers (along with ruffed grouse numbers) will again increase. We can hope that 2006 and the following few years will be years of recovery for Wisconsin's sharptails.



WSGS Board members Ed Frank (in white hat) and Dave Clausen (with white hair) on tour of the Moquah Barrens Wildlife Area at the summer board meeting. Tour leader USFS

EARLY WISCONSIN SHARPTAIL RESEARCH

Eleventh in a series by Jim Hale

In 1961, Dr. Richard J. Vogl completed a long-term study on the effects of fire on light-soil vegetation in 12 state-managed prairie grouse areas. His conclusions for six of the areas were described in the WSGS Newsletter No. 45. His suggestions for the six remaining areas are somewhat from his original report.

ATHELSTANE PUBLIC HUNTING GROUNDS

The controlled burning in the southern block of Athelstane has been spectacular and successful in the production of prairie. Wildfires and successive control burns have not only reduced the brush and trees, but some of the tree grubs are now failing to resprout. Repeated burns will not harm the area since the soils are fairly rich and there is a rapid buildup of fuels. However, annual burning is no longer needed to maintain the prairie opening that now exists.

In the northern section of Athelstane a trial control burn was not too successful. Additional attempts should be made, because results almost as good as the southern block could be obtained. Contained also in the northern block are a few barrens areas, now existing mainly as openings dotted with rocky outcrops. These areas could be improved since the amount of dead material has inhibited growth.

DUNBAR WILDLIFE AREA

I believe that the large blocks now being managed with fire are being burned too often. Probably one fire every ten years would be sufficient since herbaceous growth in general is scanty with a low accumulation of duff. The annual fires have become so lack of fuel that burns have little or no effect on woody vegetation present.

POWELL MARSH WILDLIFE AREA

Permanent burning quadrats were not sampled in 1961 and surveys will be completed in 1962.

DOROTHY DUNN WILDLIFE AREA

This area needs considerable more burning. Fire is necessary to knock back woody vegetation encroaching upon once numerous openings. Fire is not needed to maintain herbaceous vegetation; its only use is to reduce the trees to grubs, thus re-opening the canopy. Any fires in the wooded areas would be a help. It might be too late now for sharptail management, but I believe the area needs opening up, perhaps even by logging and then prescribed burning. A little fire management could produce a blueberry area as was shown in the summer of 1960.

WEST CENTRAL CONSERVATION AREA

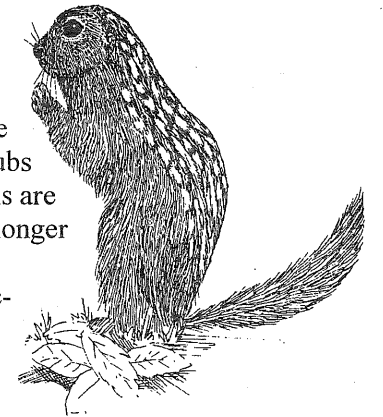
Elimination of wild fires on various upland sites in this area indicates that good results can be obtained by burning. Many burned sites revert back to prairie, and after being established can be easily maintained. Large portions of Jackson, Monroe, Juneau, and Adams counties are in a monotype of jack pine forest that was prairie savanna prior to forest protection. Burning upland sites to create openings would help to vary the habitat and be easier to maintain as openings compared to lowland areas presently managed by fire for waterfowl.

BUENA VISTA – LEOLA MARSH AREA

I would like to comment on the mowing of willows followed by chemical spraying to maintain grasslands. Fire is an integral part of grasslands and is necessary for the maintenance of them. Even with chemical sprays and mowing, grassland must be burned for its advantages such as fertilizing effects of ashes, increase in flowering, fruiting and seeding, blackening the surface, and less expensive.

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.



RESPONSE TO VOGL ARTICLE

By Jim Evrard

Prairie grouse presently occupy only seven of the twelve prairie grouse light-soil management areas discussed by Dr. Vogl in the past two WSGS newsletters. Sharptails can still be found in some numbers in the Crex Meadows, Namekagon Barrens, and Douglas County wildlife areas. A few sharp-tails might still be hanging on in the Spread Eagle and Powell Marsh wildlife areas and the Central Wisconsin Conservation Area (now the Meadow Valley area). Prairie chickens still occupy the Buena Vista - Leola Marsh Area.

However, sharptails have disappeared in the other five areas Vogl mentioned - Danbury Grouse Area, Nicolet National Forest, Athelstane Public Hunting Grounds, Dunbar Wildlife Area, and the Dorothy Dunn Wildlife Area.

When the Danbury Wildlife Area was created in the late 1940s, sharptails still occupied barrens habitat in the property. However, little management was done there and sharptails eventually disappeared and the management thrust of the area has shifted to ruffed grouse and aspen. Geographically, the Danbury area is located midway between the Crex Meadows and Namekagon Barrens wildlife areas. If genetic interchange between island populations of sharptails is important, then the Danbury barrens habitat link should be reestablished. The Danbury area may or may not be large enough to support its own sharptail population throughout a grouse cycle, but it could serve as a corridor allowing sharptail movement from Crex Meadows to the Namekagon Barrens.

As a youth, I remember seeing signs nailed to trees in the Nicolet National Forest near Lakewood designating the area for sharptail management. My Dad hunted deer in that area in the late 1930s and remembered seeing flocks of sharptails flying across the then-open "plains". As far as I know, posting the signs was the extent of sharptail management conducted there. Pine plantations and forest succession eliminated sharptail habitat and the sharptails.

The Athelstane and Dunbar areas are in northern Marinette County. Again the lack of adequate management there spelled doom for the sharptails and their extensive barrens habitat. And finally, the Dorothy Dunn Wildlife Area is (or was) located within the DNR's Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest. I camp and fish near that area every summer, but it certainly isn't sharptail habitat now. To my knowledge, nothing was mentioned of the Dorothy Dunn Wildlife Area in the recent revision of the state forest's management plan.

I'm afraid we are going to lose sharptails and their habitat in some of the remaining management areas if we don't continue to monitor, support, and lobby for the birds. Hopefully, the upcoming rewrite of the DNR's sharp-tailed grouse management plan will give the WSGS an opportunity to insure that the species doesn't disappear from Wisconsin.

CALL FOR BOARD NOMINATIONS

We have two positions open on the WSGS Board. The terms of Bob Dreis and Jim Wilson expire this year. Bob has decided not to run again and Jim Wilson died last year. Dave Clausen was appointed to fill the balance of Wilson's term and Dave has submitted his name for election to that position.

Anyone interested in submitting their name for consideration for the open board positions, please send your name and a short resume to Jim Evrard at WSGS, P.O. Box 367, Grantsburg, WI 54840 before March 1st.

AFIELD WITH ZIGGY

(In his own words)

By Thomas Ziegeweid

Roche's Shack - As I am sitting here writing this article, I am reflecting on the fall hunting season just past, the sharp-tail hunting was pretty decent.

I started the season off in September in Minnesota. Roche Lolly is the president of the Minnesota Sharp-tail Grouse Society, whom I've known for years. I took him up on his invite to his shack near Cromwell, MN in Aitkin county. The area is in the "East-Central Range" of their sharp-tail habitat. The country is very wet and boggy, rubber boots being a must.

It was a miracle we made it back in to his shack with an old jacked-up four wheel drive truck, it had been dry there this summer. I would hate to try to get in there in a wet year.

Later that evening another of their officers, Greg Nelson of Minneapolis, and we dined on ptarmigan breasts that Roche had recently bagged in Alaska.

We hunted around his shack and adjacent land to no avail. No birds were seen all morning. That afternoon we hooked up with two more MSGS officers and hunted the Grayling WMA near Aitkin. This area is periodically burned and is one of the premier sharp-tail areas of eastern Minnesota.

The area is an old glacial lake bed with beach ridges with a dry prairie plant community on top of ridges. The ridges is where the birds were hanging out. Between Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning the three of us bagged four birds, all birds of the year.

Back to Caribou: Two weeks later I made my annual trip to Thief Lake in northwestern Minnesota. The duck hunting was excellent as it usually is. My buddy Marshall Dieters and I went out to Caribou WMA, where we always have done well before.

NO BIRDS! I was shocked to have walked around five miles plus and not seen any sign of sharp-tails. The area had been very dry this past summer and should have had a good hatch. So much for theory! That's hunting!

Good Ole Zone 2: Finally the Wisconsin opener was hours away and Pat Otteson and myself were ready to go kick out the thick cover north of CTH A east of Solon Springs. We flushed 12-14 birds by noon and got three. This population of sharpies on the paper mill property is really tuned in to being in incredibly tall, thick cover compared to other places I have hunted.

Many of the hunters we talked to had not seen much that morning. Most of the hunters that were seen walking were hunting way out in the open where the walking is easy. There are more sharp-tails in Zone 2 than meets the eye of the hunter. They are difficult to find due to the vast expanse of land they could be hiding in. This will be a decent sharp-tail area in the future as long as paper companies keep clear cutting ahead of their tree planting. There is a large area of recent cuts east of highway 27 that should be great in a next few years.

Where are the Ruffies?: In all my travels this autumn, hither and yon, a common thread was obvious. The ruffed grouse population is down to rock bottom. It was actually easier to find sharp-tails in Minnesota than ruffies, and there is no lack of ruffed grouse habitat.

Even in central Wisconsin, and the lower Chippewa river country, the birds were way down the last two falls. These mostly red phase birds don't really cycle much compared to their gray northern cousins. But down they are; hopefully they will start to come back next year.

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

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