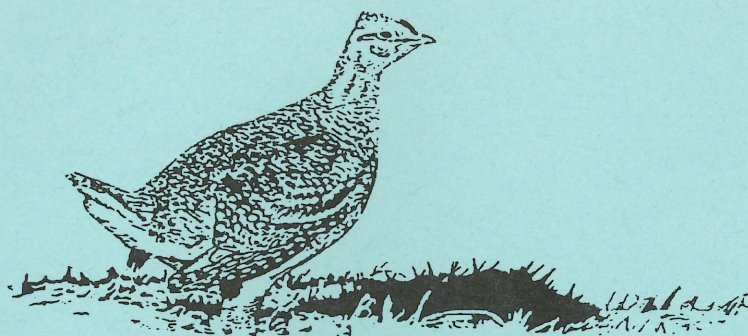


WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



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Table of Contents

Habitat Front—p.1-2
President's Corner - p. 2
Annual Meeting - p. 3-4
Sharptail Census - p.5
Hemingway - p. 6
Volunteer Surveyors - p. 7
Sharptail Publicity - p. 7

Progress on the Habitat Front

By Jim Evrard

Pershing Wildlife Area: After receiving approval in October 2008, the DNR negotiated the purchase of 538 acres of the Big Rock Shooting Preserve within the newly approved acquisition boundary of the Pershing Wildlife Area. At its May 2009 meeting, the Natural Resources Board approved buying the parcel and Governor Doyle later approved the acquisition. The story of enlarging Pershing's boundary was described in previous newsletters. The nearly one-square mile tract contains the former clubhouse and other outbuildings. Preliminary plans are to use the buildings for DNR administrative and storage purposes.

There had been concern that the shooting preserve was having a negative effect on the sharp-tailed grouse found in the North Unit of Pershing. The shooting preserve had planted acres of wildlife food patches just across the Pershing boundary fence, possibly attracting sharptails during the fall and winter.

Big Rock shooting preserve released thousands of pen-reared pheasants annually and shooting of both roosters and hens was allowed during a season that extended into the winter months. There was some evidence that sharptails were being mistaken for hen pheasants and shot despite being protected. ^{SOME} Hunters can't tell the difference between a flushing hen pheasant and a sharptail.

DNR wildlife biologists, Mark Schmidt and Ken Jonas, and DNR Natural Resource Board member Dave Clausen (also a WSGS Board member) should be given credit for the Pershing expansion.

Crex Meadows Wildlife Area: A good portion of the 320 acres that the DNR purchased from the Plum Creek Timber Co. a few years ago has been restored to sharptail habitat by Crex Manager Pete Engman and his crew.

Photos of the DNR crew enlarging some of the existing openings in the tract using a huge tractor-mounted mower were shown in a past newsletter. This was followed up by a commercial timber sale where nearly all the remaining woody vegetation was converted into biofuel. The trees and brush were cut, ground into chips on the site, and trucked to electrical generating plants in Ashland and in Minnesota's Twin Cities.

This May, the Crex wildlife management crew completed the habitat restoration by prescribed burning the cleared area. It is expected that sharptails will begin using the newly restored habitat yet this year. Hopefully the dancing ground or lek that had been used by sharptails for many years will be reestablished.

Riley Lake Wildlife Area: The U.S. Forest Service is planning to expand the Riley Lake Wildlife Management Area located in the Chequamegon National Forest east of Fifeield. The federal forestry officials recently released their preferred management alternative and the environmental assessment for that alternative.

The Riley Lake area totals 4,761 acres (3,133 acres of lowland, 1,628 acres of upland). The plan will convert a substantial part of the 727 acres of forested habitat to add to the existing 901 acres of open upland habitat. In addition two large corridors will be established in the lowlands to provide travel lanes for sharptails between open areas of the bog.

Continued on page 2...

From Your President

by Dave Evenson

Sixty-one years ago Wallace Grange wrote in his book "Wisconsin Grouse Problems" that Sharp-tailed Grouse in Wisconsin might hang on as a relict un-hunted species for perhaps 50 years. I've been a sharptail manager and/or a member of WSGS for the latter half of those 61 years and have taken some pride that we have been able to stretch that prediction by at least a decade. Especially during the last twenty years or so state and federal agencies, ecologists and academics have recognized the value of "saving our barrens" not just for sharptails, but also for all the niche species that live there. Coincidentally those twenty years overlaps the existence of WSGS. The successes WSGS have had stem from this increased ecological awareness.

For most of the 61 years Crex Meadows has been the flagship property for sharp-tailed grouse in Wisconsin. We've had other managed properties fade away, but Crex has gotten stronger. Up until 1991 the sharptail counts in the high years kept getting higher, and the lows were higher too. Even in the 1998 peak the population was strong, not as high as 1991, but still another noticeable high. But populations have fallen for the past decade, with only 24 males counted this spring.

I don't profess to know what's wrong, and thus don't know how to fix it. There has been speculation about burning in too big of blocks, or mowing that levels all brush as opposed to the natural vertical stems that remains after a burn. Certainly Crex is at the southern end of the "chain of jewels" sharptail properties, so any new genes coming into the population can only come from the north, either Namekagon or across the river from Minnesota. Murphy's law and the more scientific sounding "vortex of extirpation" have about the same root- that which can go wrong, will go wrong. Probably the sharptail decline at Crex is like that- a combination of several factors. WSGS secretary-treasurer Jim Evrard has called for a professional research investigation of the decline, and I agree. As a WSGS member, you should expect this topic to be core to our mission for the foreseeable future. If our flagship isn't safe, what is?

...Continued from page 1

The open habitat conversion and maintenance will be accomplished using rotational prescribed burning, a roller chopper (a large finned drum pulled by a bulldozer), and other machines. Riley Lake sharptail numbers have appeared to have stabilized or perhaps increased slightly within the variation 8-10 grouse cycle.

Moquah Barrens Wildlife Area: The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has released the environmental impact statement for their preferred management alternative for the Moquah Barrens. They examined three alternatives: Alternative One - no action; Alternative Two - increasing the size of the open area so critical to sharptails to 4,800 acres (from the present 2,150 acres now); and Alternative Three - increasing the open area to 6,400 acres. The USFS chose Alternative Two.

The WSGS recommended Alternative Three based on research by Dr. Stanley Temple of the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Prof. Temple determined that a minimum of 10,000 acres was needed for a population of sharptails to survive 50 years without direct genetic intervention.

Other Public Lands: The endangered Kirtland's warbler is now nesting in Wisconsin. The songbird nested in the state successfully last year and is again nesting in one and perhaps two locations in Wisconsin. How does this relate to the sharp-tailed grouse?

The warbler needs open, grassy young jack pines for nesting. The best Kirtland's warbler habitat is also habitat where sharptails can be found during parts of the year. If significant acreage of jack pine become dedicated for Kirtland warbler habitat, more habitat will become available for sharptails. New WSGS board member John Probst is a Kirtland Warbler expert and will hopefully report on this new development in a future newsletter.



Results of 2009 Annual Meeting

By Jim Evrard

President Dave Evenson called the 2009 annual meeting to order at 1:20 p.m. on Saturday, April 25 in the auditorium of the Crex Meadows Wildlife Education and Visitor Center, Grantsburg. Approximately 25 people were in attendance.

Pete Engman, Manager of the Glacial Lake Grantsburg (GLG) wildlife complex, welcomed the group to Crex Meadows. Pete gave a short presentation summarizing recent habitat work in the Crex Meadows and Fish Lake wildlife areas where forest habitat was converted to brush prairie and savanna.

Secretary/Treasurer Jim Evrard presented his reports, most of which have appeared in recent WSGS newsletters. There are 225 members of the WSGS -- 206 dues paying and 19 complimentary.

The checkbook balance was \$10,822.48 and the CD balance was \$2,415.06 for a total of \$13,237.54. The Balzer art raffle netted the WSGS \$393.62. Future financial obligations include \$2,600 for analysis of sharptail genetic material; \$3,000 for a possible sharptail translocation project; and \$5,000 authorized earlier in the day by the WSGS Board for acquisition of the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife by the DNR from Burnett County. The WSGS will again funnel state funds to those volunteer spring sharptail 'counters' on a per diem basis.

Ken Jonas and Mark Schmidt of the DNR gave the gathering an update on the progress of the newly authorized Pershing Wildlife Area (WA) acquisition effort. An option has been taken on 560 acres of the Big Rock Shooting Preserve and will be considered for approval at the May Natural Resources Board meeting.

Evenson gave a short summary of the recent successful brush-cutting project in the Riley Lake WA in the Chequamegon National Forest in Price County. Twenty-one persons cleared a grove of black spruce from an area in the bog too wet for machinery. They also cleared brush surrounding a former lek. In addition to WSGS members and agency (USFS and DNR) people, students from Northland College, the University of Wisconsin - Madison, and a student from the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point contributed their labor. **WSGS Vice President Tom 'Ziggy' Ziegeweid** fed the group a hardy lunch as a reward for their brush cutting efforts. The project will probably become an annual affair.

Persons at the meeting provided an incomplete estimate of the number of displaying male sharptails in the state.

Gary Dunsmoore thought sharptail numbers in the Namekagon Barrens WA were about the same or slightly lower compared to 2008 (36 males), with birds both units of the wildlife area. **Pete Engman** thought there were about 30 males in the Crex Meadows WA with poor brood survival the past few years given as a reason for the failure of the birds to recover from the cyclic low.

Fred Strand said sharptails in the Douglas County WA were the same as 2008, but birds in Units 2 and 9 were down. **Mark Schmidt** said sharptails in the Pershing WA were similar to 2008 (about 26-27 males). He also said he found 12 leks with 56 males in private land in Rusk County. Pat Beringer has found 1 lek with 6 males in the Kimberly-Clark WAS and is still counting. There was no report from the Riley Lake WA.

Dave and Jim spent several mornings looked for sharptails in Central Wisconsin, but they found none. However, **Michel Windsor** sent a report of a lek with 12 males found on a cranberry bog in that area.

Scott Hull, DNR Upland Game Ecologist from Madison, had the good news that a sharptail cock was seen and photographed in the Powell Marsh WA in Vilas County, the first report in some years.

The business portion of the annual meeting ended with the members in attendance approving a By-law change increasing the size of the WSGS Board from seven to nine members.

The program began with former GLG Manager **Paul Kooiker** discussing the history of sharptails and sharptail management in the GLG complex. Sharptail habitat is being created and maintained in the Crex Meadows and Fish Lake although sharptails presently can be found only in Crex Meadows. Sharptail or barrens management was abandoned in the Danbury WA in 1980.

Former GLG manager **Jim Evrard** created 70-72 burn units in Crex Meadows for ecological patterning. Over 50 miles of firebreak are needed to safely use prescribed fire in the burn units. The first Crex manager, **Norm Stone**, began managing for sharptails in the late 1940s using mechanical clearing and burning to convert forested habitat to brush prairie. The present wood fiber market today permits the use of timber sales to clear the land before prescribed burning begins. Stone estimated that there were only ten sharptails present when management began. Although sharptails are still the flagship species, there is more emphasis now on managing for the whole barrens community, plant and animal.

Continued on Page 4...

...Continued from Page 3 Sharp-tail hunting was open from 1954 to 1973 when it was closed to protect prairie chicken released on Crex in an effort to reestablish the species. The northeast part of Crex was reopened to sharp-tail hunting in 1979 when radio telemetry showed that prairie chickens did not use that area. At that time, studies by DNR researcher Larry Gregg provided estimates of hunting mortality from 25 to 33%.

Kooiker also briefly reviewed sharp-tail graduate research by Brent Ramharter, Mike Gratson, and Tim Connolly. Their studies suggested a management system based on scatter patterning of the habitat so there is always unburned habitat immediately adjacent to burned habitat. These habitat blocks should be relatively small since sharp-tail hens nest within one mile of a lek. Hens also avoid nesting near standing trees since the trees provide hunting perches for hawks, the leading cause of nesting hen deaths. Possible reasons or a combination of reasons for the continuing low number of sharp-tails in Crex Meadows were discussed including predation, management, genetics, disease, etc.

Engman then discussed a potential land trade between the state and Burnett County. The County is apparently receptive to the concept of trading state wildlife lands for county forest lands. Specifically, the DNR would like to trade several state properties (Danbury WA, Keizer Lake WA, Sand Creek Fishery Area, etc.) that are now managed much like the county forest for county forest and county-owned land including the area between Crex Meadows and the Kohler-Peet WA on the Governor Knowles State Forest and the Namekagon Barrens WA.

Questions from the audience included the role that Danbury WA might play as a corridor for barrens species movement between Crex Meadows and Namekagon Barrens WAs.

Scott Hull spoke about several items including the failure for approval of the question on the Spring Questionnaire regarding mandatory registration of harvested sharp-tails. The vote failed statewide, 3200 to 2500, but passed in the counties having huntable numbers of sharp-tails. The membership felt the DNR should make sharp-tail registration mandatory despite the statewide vote.

Hull reported on the results of the sharp-tail hunter survey that indicated, similar to many other forms of hunting, a minority of the hunters harvest a majority of sharp-tails. It is interesting to note that our own Ziggy ranks number two in Wisconsin for the number of sharp-tails reported harvested from 2004 to 2008!

Scott, assisted by **Eric Nelson** of the Minnesota DNR, then discussed sharp-tail genetics. One interesting bit of information was that sharp-tail broods have multiple sires (e.g. hens mate with several males). That would help make sharp-tail translocation efforts easier.

Hull also reported on results of sharp-tail genetic analysis conducted by **Prof. Brad Swanson** from Central Michigan University. Riley Lake WA sharp-tails had the fewest alleles (4) and Crex Meadows and Pershing WA had the highest number (5). However, sharp-tails from central Minnesota had 8 and sharp-tails from northwest Minnesota had 12. He concluded the 'best' sharp-tails to capture and release in Wisconsin to bolster genetic diversity of our sharp-tails would be birds from northwest Minnesota.

Scott ended his presentation by stating that the DNR's sharp-tail management plan update is scheduled to be completed by July 1 but then an implementation plan must be developed.

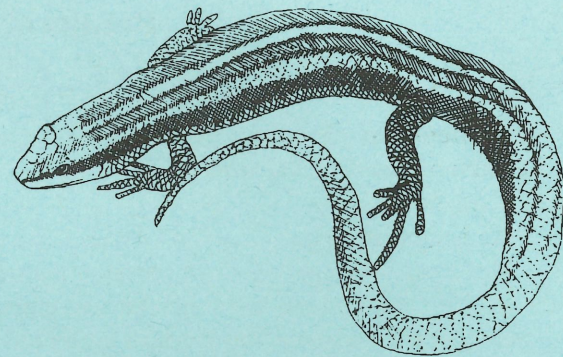
Dave Evenson announced that **John Zatopa** had been reelected and **Paul Kooiker** elected to the WSGS Board. Dave then presented a special award to **Scott Hull** for his efforts on behalf of the sharp-tailed grouse and **Tom Ziegeweid** presented an award to **Jim Evrard** for 18 years of service to the WSGS.

The WSGS assemblage then moved to the classroom area of the Crex Center for liquid refreshments and hors d'oeuvres. Vice President Ziggy conducted a lively drawing for door prizes prior to the delicious catered Cornish Game Hen dinner.

Eric Nelson of the Minnesota DNR made an evening presentation summarizing the role of the MDNR in collecting Minnesota sharp-tail wings and feathers as part of the genetic investigation.

Six hardy souls (Minnesotans **Jodie Provost** and **Martha Minchak**, Washingtonian **Ray White**, and Wisconsinites **Dave Evenson**, **John Zatopa** and **Jim Evrard**) gathered at dawn the next morning for an auto tour of Crex Meadows. Despite the cold, windy, and wet weather, a group of four sharp-tails were observed on one lek and many deer, sandhill cranes, ducks, Canada geese, Trumpeter swans were seen.

The group of six returned to the Crex Center for warm coffee and a hearty breakfast joined by seven other late-sleeping WSGS members. Following the catered meal, the group dispersed to return to their homes.



2009 Sharp-tail Census and Permit Numbers

By Jim Evrard

Scott Hull and Sharon Fandel, DNR Madison staff, provided the summary of the 2009 spring sharp-tail numbers and the resulting hunting permits allocated.

Sharp-tail Management Area	Number of males		Deer Management Unit	Number of Permits	
	2008	2009		2008	2009
Crex Meadows	40	24	2	700	600
Douglas County	28	41	8	50	35
Kimberly-Clark	10	10	9	100	0
Moquah Barrens	3	6	10	25	0
Namekagon Barrens	47	36	Total	875	635
Pershing	27	20			
Riley Lake	27	37			
Dike 17	1	1			
Total	183	175			
Unit 2	241	178			
Unit 9	27	19			
Rusk County	N/A	56			
(Units 19, 24, 25)					

Overall the number of displaying male sharp-tails in managed lands statewide declined less than one half of one percent (0.04%) from 2008 (183 birds) to 2009 (175 birds). Statistically, there was no change in numbers from last year.

However, the sharp-tail population at Crex Meadows continues to decline. The birds peaked at 132 displaying males in 1998 and dropped to only 24 males this year, below the number needed (25) to trigger hunting permits. Given this rate of decline, sharp-tails might possibly disappear from Crex within the next few years. A special research project is being considered to try to determine the reasons for this disastrous decline.

More dancing sharp-tails were counted this year at the much smaller Douglas County, Riley Lake, and Namekagon Barrens wildlife areas than at Crex Meadows! Sharp-tails continue to hang on in the Pershing, Kimberly-Clark, Moquah Barrens, and Dike 17 wildlife areas. There are sharp-tails on private land near those areas, which may explain why Dike 17 has reported only 1 dancing male in recent years.

Sharp-tails continue to decline in the jackpine budworm outbreak area in Units 2 and 9 and the number of hunting permits have been reduced accordingly. Despite some recent large clearcuts in the area, much of the excellent habitat created by the budworm outbreak has disappeared due to heavy pine planting and natural plant succession.

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.

Hemingway and Pine Barrens

By Jim Evrard

Pine barrens are probably unknown to most people and it is rare to find any reference to them in our general literature. However, Ernest Hemingway wrote about pine barrens, which he termed **pine plains**, in a short story, *Big Two-hearted River*. I've read the well-written story many times since it involves pine barrens, fire, trout fishing, and wilderness camping – all interests of mine.

As a young man, Hemingway had many Michigan experiences involving the outdoors. The *Big Two-hearted River* begins with Hemingway as the character Nick being dropped off a train with his camping and trout fishing gear in the village of Seney in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Seney had just been completely destroyed by a wild fire and the surrounding pine barrens were black and charred.

Hemingway shouldered his backpack and "... hiked along the road, sweating in the sun, climbing to cross the range of hills that separated the railway from the pine plains." "Ahead of him, as far as he could see, was the pine plain. The burned country stopped off at the left with the range of hills. On ahead islands of dark pine trees rose out of the plain." "There was nothing but the pine plain ahead of him, until the far blue hills that marked the Lake Superior height of land."

"Two hundred yards down the hillside the fire line stopped. Then it was sweet fern, growing ankle high, to walk through, and clumps of jack pine; a long undulating country with frequent rises and descents, sandy underfoot and the country alive again."

"He broke off some sprigs of the heathery sweet fern, and put them under his pack straps. The chafing crushed it and he smelled it as he walked"

"He was tired and very hot, walking across the uneven, shadeless pine plain." "For some time as he walked Nick had been in sight of one of the big islands of pine standing out above the rolling high ground he was crossing." "There was no under brush in the island of pine trees. The trunks went straight up or slanted toward each other. The branches were high above." "Around the grove of trees was a bare space." "This was the overlapping of the pine needle floor, extending out beyond the width of the high branches." "Sharp at the edge of this extension of the forest floor commenced the sweet fern."

Hemingway's description of the pine "plain" or barrens could be used today to describe the fire-managed barrens in northwest Wisconsin. The barrens in the Crex Meadows, Namekagon Barrens, Douglas County, and Moquah Barrens wildlife areas resemble Hemingway's pine plains.

During the summer in Crex Meadows, a person can walk in recently burned treeless areas, cross a firebreak either natural or created, and enter a brushy grassland covered in areas with patches of pungent sweet fern and clumps or "islands" of unburned pine trees. In the shade of the high branches of these pines, one can rest on a bed of soft pine needles.

Perhaps the Seney pine plains are different than the Crex Meadows barrens but you cannot walk in the open areas of Crex Meadows on a hot summer day without being attacked by a horde of biting insects – deer flies, horse flies, black flies, etc. And if you ever walked through barrens after it had been recently burned, you know how black your boots and clothes become. Hemingway also failed to mention the presence of wildlife including sharp-tailed grouse in the pine plains. However, sharptails can still be found in the fire-managed Seney National Wildlife Refuge adjacent to the present village of Seney.

However, I think Hemingway captured the essence of the pine barrens, a bright open landscape with scattered clumps and individual pine trees complete with aromatic plants underfoot. It is a landscape that few have experienced. The increasingly isolated large expanses of pine barrens in Wisconsin today owe their existence to sharptail hunters, not botanists, bird watchers, or other nature enthusiasts. Sharptails are still found in Wisconsin due to the perseverance of sharptail hunters and DNR sharptail managers.

THE WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY

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

WSGS OFFICERS

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

Board Members: Ed Frank John Zatopa
Dave Clausen John Probst
Blair Klein Paul Kooiker

Volunteer Sharptail Surveyors

For the second year the DNR provided funding for those volunteers who census displaying sharptails in late April and early May. The volunteers work under the supervision of DNR field biologists who provide maps, forms, and other support materials to census sharptails in the areas under their jurisdiction.

In addition, the DNR provides a \$35 per diem payment to help cover travel costs (mostly fuel) of the volunteers. To reduce administrative costs, the funds are provided to the WSGS that in turn makes the per diem payments to the volunteers.

This spring, eight volunteers spent 22 days counting displaying sharptails. Six volunteers, working under the supervision of DNR Biologist Greg Kessler stationed at Brule, counted sharptails in Douglas and Bayfield counties. Four volunteers looked for sharptails in Central Wisconsin under the direction of DNR Biologist Michele Windsor. And one volunteer helped DNR Project Manager Pete Engman and the Crex crew count birds in Crex Meadows.

Many thanks to volunteers Keith Crowley, Dave Evenson, Jim Evrard, Paul Hayes, Fred Hennessy, Steve LaValley, Louie Neuer, and Rolf Skogstad. In addition DNR personnel spent many mornings looking for and counting sharptails as part of their scheduled work. It is hoped that the volunteer service can continue in future years.

Sharptail Publicity

By Jim Evrard

The sharp-tailed grouse and the WSGS recently received some statewide publicity in the printed media. The Wisconsin Outdoor News (WON) published a story written by Bill Thornley and titled "Dancing on the Namekagon Barrens". Thornley wrote a similar story in the same publication some years ago.

Basically the story describes Thornley's experience traveling from his home near Spooner to the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area (NBWA) to watch and photograph sharptails in the spring during their courtship displays. The DNR maintains several blinds located on leks or dancing grounds in the wildlife area. Thornley describes walking to his blind in the dark with camera and Thermos in hand. He flushed several sharptails in the dark, but they returned as the sun rose over the horizon. He then described the intricate displays the males perform to attract a female to their territory. The hen then mates with the cock of her choosing and the next sharptail generation begins.

Thornley also describes the NBWA's history and management. The DNR leases about 5,000 acres from Burnett County for the wildlife area. DNR Project Manager Nancy Christel assisted by Wildlife Technician Gary Dunsmoore do a great job in managing the NBWA and maintaining a healthy sharptail population in the project. Nancy has proposed that the DNR eventually buy the NBWA from Burnett County, assuring the future of the wildlife area and the sharptails found there.

The most recent publicity about sharptails published in the WON was a news release, complete with a group photo, written by Dan Eklund, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) wildlife biologist for the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. The article describes a cooperative habitat project in the Riley Lake Wildlife Management Area of the Chequamegon National Forest east of Fifiield. USFS and DNR personnel assisted by WSGS volunteers and students from the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point and Madison and Northland College in Ashland, cut brush and small trees this winter to improve habitat in the Riley Lake project. The hand work was completed in areas too difficult to use machinery. The brush cutting project was funded by the WSGS led by President Dave Evenson and Vice President Tom Ziegeweid. Since the first-time event was successful, it might become an annual affair.



MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL

Name: _____
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Would you like to volunteer for:
_____ Board of Directors
_____ Bird Censusing
_____ Newsletter articles
_____ 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)

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

(all prices include postage and handling)

Total Enclosed: \$ _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO AND RETURN THIS APPLICATION TO:

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

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