

WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Number 108

Spring 2026

AN AUGUST DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PROFESSIONAL DOG TRAINER

By: Paul Cook - Alder Fork English Setters, Danbury, WI

The Barrens properties of the northwest sands have become a special place for me over the last thirty years. I've worked there in a wide range of capacities from being a career Conservationist assisting with prescribed burns for twenty-five years to now a professional dog trainer, still utilizing this unique resource just in a different way. For at least four weeks each year the various barrens properties become my primary training grounds for exposing dogs to wild birds. Clients have sent dogs to me from all across the country - North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois... you get the idea. Some of these places used to have their own wild birds but populations have plummeted. For me this brings into perspective what a special resource we have and creates a sense of urgency in preserving it.

An August morning starts very early, the alarm barks at 3AM. I'm up to slug down coffee while loading up dogs for a morning run - English Setters, Pointers, German Shorthairs, Brittany Spaniels, any pointing breed will find it's way onto my truck. The dogs are of all ages from a group of four small littermate Pointer pups to a big burly 65 pound German Wirehaired Pointer. They all stand to benefit from the inevitable contacts they will get searching for and finding Sharptailed Grouse.

I believe it was in the late 90's when I first sat in a blind observing Sharptail on a lek. I witnessed a Goshawk swoop down and take a dancing male only to watch the others return within a minute and dance around the feasting hawk. I fell deeply in love with the magic of the barrens that day and committed myself to a lifetime of conserving it. Returning there now with dogs to train fills me with an anticipation that's hard to describe but it's certainly fed by those early experiences with the birds.

Driving north up Gomulak you'll pass a couple of recognizable rigs getting ready for their own morning of training. I pull up to my spot while it's still dark, lean back the truck seat and tip my hat down over my

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Day in the Life of a Professional Dog Trainer.....	page 1-2
Recap of 2025 Hunting Season.....	page 3-4
Treasurer's Report.....	page 5
Pheasant Fest 2026 Recap.....	page 6-7
Meeting Minutes.....	page 8-9
Habitat Improvement Projects.....	page 10-11
Membership Renewals.....	page 12



Photo Credit: Levi Glines

eyes to take a short nap while not really listening to a podcast and wait for the sun. As night gives way to dawn a familiar haze hangs over the scrub oak and willow brush. Bluestem, Hazelnut and New Jersey Tea are laden with heavy morning dew and the dog boxes begin to come alive with whining anticipation. As I roll down my window to feel the morning air the stark scent of that Sweet Fern fills my nose and the distinct echo of a dog bell jingles in the distance - time to get to work.

After donning rubber boots and chaps the tracking collars are turned on and connected as I run through my mental checklist: Kit and Patch need steadiness work, the pups will get some check-cording and handling training in the open field just south of us, the rest will be free run as they simply need bird contacts - each dog at a different stage of development yet they all benefit from these birds. Maybe you've heard the old saying "wild birds make bird dogs"? As a dog trainer, these are words I live by. But what I'm doing is nothing new. Dog trainers from the south have been traveling north to the prairies every summer for more

than a hundred years. If you ever get a chance, go visit the bird dog graveyard at the Douglas County Barrens. Bird dogs and field trials are inextricably linked to these Sharptailed Grouse and their unique habitats in north-west Wisconsin.

The training ends after all the dogs are worked and the cool morning gives way to the heat of the day. Sometimes it's only a few miles of walking and the next day it's six or seven. It's a short drive home back to the kennel to clean out runs, wolf down some lunch and steal a short mid-day siesta until the heat breaks and it's back to yard working young dogs in our training field or maybe on to a different barrens property for another short run before sunset.

The days of bird dog summer camp are very long with lots of kennel cleaning and physical labor. Shuffling dogs around all day will wear you down. I don't know a single dog trainer without a sore back. But the rewards are rich: you get to see the sand barrens wake up and go back to sleep most days, you get to see Sharptail in abundance thanks to all the habitat work and you enjoy the great privilege of changing the life and development of someone's best hunting buddy. ■



RECAP OF 2025 STG HUNTING SEASON

What Does a Bird Mean to You?

By: Ashly Steinke



To me this bird embodies hard work and hope. In 2021 the Sharptailed grouse population at Crex Meadows Wildlife Area was estimated at approximately 30 birds. Enter Kyle Anderson, Cody Richard Strong, The Wisconsin Sharptailed Grouse Society, tireless advocates of not only grouse but the entire barrens ecosystem of northwest Wisconsin. Landscape scale barrens restoration began with thousands of acres seeing prescribed fire for the first time in many years. The grouse responded. In spring 2025 the population was estimated around 250 birds. This population response led the Wisconsin DNR to hold the first hunting season for sharptails since 2018. Twelve permits were issued, good for one bird per permit. Over 700 folks applied. I was one of the fortunate ones to draw. Months of anticipation culminated with opening day. Mike Amman (who I consider the Aldo Leopold of the NW Sands) selflessly met me at Crex with his pointing dogs. We began the day watching the sunrise over this gem of a property while

drinking tailgate made coffee and marveling at the sounds of Crex waking up. The rest of the day was spent walking cover, seeing sharptails flushing wild. Finally at about 3pm and 8 or 9 miles on our boots I had a dream flush of an adult male sharptail at a mere 15 yards. We finished the day sipping IPAs on the tailgate admiring this gorgeous bird that so many of us work so damn hard to make sure stays on the Wisconsin landscape. My hope is that my boys will have an opportunity to do this same thing when they are my age.

Thank you Crex for a day that will go down as one of the more special of my hunting career.

(Continued on page 4)

THE WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY

Officers

President: Mike Cole
Vice President: Mike Amman
Secretary: Paul Kooiker
Treasurer: Mark Parman

Newsletter Compositor

Lauren Thomas

Board Members

Paul Cook
Ken Jonas
Ashly Steinke
Trevor Bellrichard
Steve Straub

Old Dog Gets a Chance

By: Mike Cole

I last harvested a Wisconsin STG in 2015 at Namekagon Barrens. The preference points I earned since then were enough to get me a 2025 Crex permit. My plan was to use my eleven year old shorthair. Remi is past his prime and tends to overheat easily. But he has paid his dues and given his age, this would be his only chance for a Wisconsin STG. I live very close to Crex and can hunt an hour or two a day, whatever Remi can handle.

I began running all our dogs (including a couple first-season pups) on STG at Crex in August. The areas I expected to hold birds did not, but I was fine with it. If we hunted the whole season and did not harvest a bird, we were going to have a heck of a good time trying. We started hunting for real the Monday after the STG season opened. It was warm, so we hunted a couple hours a day, trying new areas until we found birds, which took a few days to do. I brought the pups along once that weekend and



they found birds, but not Remi. Like all of us, he has days when he is not on his game. He works reasonably close and holds his points fine, but his old nose is suspect. I was really hoping he could pull this one off.

The second Monday of the season it happened. We were working an area where we had moved a few birds the previous week (an area that produced at least three of the five birds harvested at Crex in 2025). Remi stopped suddenly, but this bird was not going to wait around for us to walk it up; it flushed left-to-right. I kept the gun moving and in a second it was over. Remi slowly carried his first harvested Wisconsin STG back to me, tail thumping rapidly, then lay down and (I'd swear) smiled back at me. Thank you Crex! ■

FIND US ONLINE!

Facebook: *Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society*

Instagram: *wisharptails*

Website: *<http://www.wisharptails.org/>*

Email: *information@wisharptails.org*

WSGS TREASURER'S REPORT

12/10-25– 2/2/26

Starting Balance		\$ 28,025.00
Expenditures		
USPS-Shipped 16 hats, 14 prints, 20 stamps, 20 postcard stamps, 1 roll tape	\$ 304.54	
Check #1123- Merch, dark hats	\$ 1,431.60	
Check #1124- Merch, t-shirts	\$ 626.00	
Check #1125- PF Banner	\$ 178.82	
Check #1126- Summer Sunset Hats	\$ 572.40	
PF Booth Rental	\$ 780.00	
Specialty Insurance	\$ 244.70	
Federal 990 Form	\$ 50.00	
WI Dept of Financial Institutions	\$ 50.00	
Total	\$ 4,238.06	
Income		
Memberships	\$ 3,392.82	
Merchandise	\$ 281.60	
Donations- Michelson and McDaniel	\$ 200.00	
Total	\$ 3,874.42	
Net Loss for Period	\$ (363.64)	
Ending Balance		\$ 27,661.36

Membership	
12/10/2025	267 members (85 life, 9 courtesy)-- 14 removed July/August renewal dates, 12 pending removal (Sept-Nov renewal dates) if not paid by 1/1/26 renewal date
2/2/2026	282 members (91 life, 9 courtesy)-- 3 removed Sept/Oct renewal dates, 6 pending removal (Dec renewal date) if not paid by 3/15/26 renewal date

Submitted by Mark Parman 2/2/2026

WSGS PHEASANT FEST 2026 RECAP



WSGS had a booth at Pheasant Fest in Minneapolis on February 20-22. We were part of the “Grouse Camp” area, along with six other grouse conservation groups. Grouse Camp featured a stage with some very popular speakers throughout the weekend, a grouse viewing blind showing video of all types of grouse dancing, a lounge area and a social hour (free beer!) on Saturday night.

Several WSGS Board of Directors (Steve Straub, Trevor Bellrichard, Mike Amman, Mark Parman, Mike Cole and Bob Hanson from WDNR) covered the booth at various times from setup through teardown.

Our booth included a new backdrop photo collage printed on a vinyl curtain. This featured very recent pictures of STG habitat creation on various Wisconsin public land core properties. It also showed off a couple of the birds harvested during the 2025 STG season! Trevor Bellrichard designed this unique backdrop

that added impactful talking points to our display. Trevor also put together a colorful handout (using info provided by the various DNR core property managers) listing the STG habitat projects done over the last couple of years at each property. We told visitors this work was done just since the last time Pheasant Fest was in Minneapolis three years ago (with some of it funded by WSGS and other partners). Information from the handout is included in this newsletter for you to see on pages 10-11.

Crowds on Friday were surprisingly heavy and our booth had traffic shortly after the doors opened. It was great to visit with WSGS fans who knew we were there and made it a priority to visit Grouse Camp. Saturday’s crowd at our booth was the heaviest we have ever experienced! Sunday was slower, but popular presentations on the Grouse Camp stage kept people around. Teardown started about 3:30 and Mike Cole was able to get his truck into the loading dock area by about 4:15. We were on our way home by 4:40.

WSGS BOD member Mark Parman was pleased with the crowd reaction. “Many people I talked with at our booth were surprised to learn that Wisconsin had an indigenous population of sharp-tailed grouse and that there had been a limited hunt the previous October. They had no idea. But maybe that’s not shocking since it was at a Pheasant Fest. Plus, Wisconsin is so well known for its excellent ruffed grouse hunting. I was also pleasantly surprised to see that so many people who stopped by the booth bought memberships, merch or sometimes both. Maybe that was because Trevor and Steve worked the crowd so well. Although we have to

invest a substantial amount of time and money to show up at PF, it seems worth doing so since it generates significant exposure for WSGS.”

Over the weekend, we signed up 33 new members, including one Life member and several Sustaining members. We sold about half of our T-shirt inventory. Several styles of our hats were completely sold out at the show. Overall, we took in about \$4000 which more than covered our costs (additional dollars will come as well sell the remainder of the merchandise on-line over the next several months). These dollars will become part of the pool that we allocate to various STG habitat projects slated to begin this summer.

A special thanks to those who bought the Pyke Gear “Grouse Camp” T-shirts and hoodies on-line prior to the event, Pyke is giving all the profits back to the groups at Grouse Camp to add to the habitat dollars generated over the weekend.

WSGS BOD member Trevor Bellrichard summed it up: The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society had a fantastic time attending Pheasant Fest this year. Being surrounded by other native grouse organizations created a great space for conversations with people who share a passion for birds and conservation. We were excited to see a record number of folks sign up and become new members, helping grow our community and momentum. Just as important were the connections made—talking habitat, hunting, and conservation with so many like-minded people reminded us how strong and dedicated the grouse community truly is. Events like this reinforce how valuable it is to come together, share ideas, and keep pushing forward for the future of grouse and the landscapes they rely on. ■



WSGS MEETING MINUTES

February 2, 2026

*Present: Ken Jonas, Mike Cole, Mike Amman, Trevor Bellrichard,
Ashly Steinke, Mark Parman, Steve Straub, Paul Kooiker, Dave Evenson.*

Meeting started at 6:27 pm via ZOOM.

- Reviewed and approved minutes of December 10, 2025 BOD meeting (KJ/MP).
- Treasurer's report by Mark P. (12/10/25 – 2/2/26): beginning balance was \$28,025 with the ending balance at \$27,661. Expenses of \$4238 were primarily booth rental and merchandise for the upcoming Pheasant Fest. Income of \$3874 was primarily membership dues. Current membership is at 282, including 91 life members. This is up from 267 members previously. Treasurer's report was approved (PK/SS).
- Dog training issues: there has been concern over the intensive use by dog trainers on core sharptail properties, in particular Namekagon Barrens (NBWA) and Crex. The concern is that this level of training in late summer/early fall may have negative consequences for the local STG populations. Mike Amman recently talked to Eric Saetre of the Minnesota Grouse Dog Association. The MGDA shares these concerns. Nancy Christel has proposed moving the training starting date back to August 15 on the NBWA specifically. This would require an amendment to the property master plan. Any change to current training regulations would require a change in administrative code pertaining to dog training on all state wildlife areas. Mike A. proposed a meeting in early April, or possibly sooner, with interested parties including MGDA, a subset of WSGS BOD members, two other dog training groups, and Bob Hanson of WDNR. The intent would be to come up with reasonable changes that would ensure the welfare of the local STG populations, while ensuring that dog training continues on these properties.
- NBWA road closures: Ken reported that last spring NBWA property manager Nancy Christel signed all internal roads and firebreaks closed to vehicular traffic. The reasoning is to reduce disturbance effect to sharptail populations both spring and fall. This would at a minimum require an amendment to the property master plan as well as a public hearing. This would also affect dog training in the fall. More to come on this issue.
- Preference point system for sharptail hunt: WSGS would like to see the cumulative preference point system changed in favor of a pure lottery, similar to the elk lottery. Ken will contact Cody of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation to see if we can work together on this. Any change would require legislation. Mike A. has submitted a draft bill to his local legislators, with the hope that someone will sponsor the bill.

NOTE: On February 4 Mike A. reported to the BOD that Rep. Stroud has sponsored the bill and has a co-sponsor in the Senate. The bill would eliminate the preference point system and would increase the application fee from \$3 to \$9.75, with this money earmarked for sharptail habitat management. With the current legislative make-up the chance of the bill being enacted into law is questionable at this time but having a bill written and formally introduced is a great start.

- Carbon credits: Mike A. reported that Bayfield County receives carbon credits of \$4 to \$5 an acre on their forested acreage. Of interest is that grasslands are eligible for these payments as well. To date the state has not pursued this, although it appears state-owned barrens properties could be eligible.
- WSGS had previously committed to funding a jack pine seeding project on the Burnett County Forest adjacent to the south unit of NBWA. Estimated cost is \$4000, which would pay for jack pine seed once a timber sale on the site is completed. FNBWA has agreed to fund half the cost, so WSGS' share has dropped to \$2000. Aerial seeding of jack pine vs. row planting of red pine is more conducive to barrens management, especially considering the site's proximity to NBWA.
- WDNR St. Croix Area wildlife biologists are currently writing habitat improvement projects for state barrens properties, for potential funding by WSGS. We received a request from Nancy Christel for NBWA: four separate projects totaling \$30,000. Once we have received all the grant proposals (Mike C. will contact Cody Strong) the BOD will decide which projects we will fund.
- Ashly reported that the Eau Claire County Forest is conducting a Return on Investment (ROI) study to evaluate relative incomes of various management practices. County forests may find that alternative revenue sources other than traditional forest management practices (ie barrens management) may be worth considering. Other ideas along this line include leasing acreage for barrens management, or counties hiring wealth managers to evaluate long term costs vs. returns.
- Large scale barrens management: the BOD decided to meet in April to brainstorm this issue. How can we create new barrens acreage on a large scale, over and above the current management on our core sharptail properties? Trevor B. will canvas Board members for possible dates.
- Pheasant Fest: WSGS will again have a booth at PF February 20-21 in Minneapolis. Mike C., Trevor, Steve, Mark, and Mike A. will staff the booth.
- Backcountry Hunters and Anglers event: should WSGS co-host another fundraiser event with the UW Stevens Point student chapter of BHA? Trevor will make some contacts.
- Sporting Lead Free organization: Mike A. proposed that WSGS join SLF as a Conservation Partner. We have been a member of the North American Lead Free Partnership for five years. SLF is a sister organization which provides outreach materials for the public to learn about hunting and fishing with lead free ammo and tackle. A motion (KJ/MP) was made to join SLF as a Conservation Partner and it was passed unanimously.
- The next Board of Directors meeting is scheduled for April 6, 2026, at 6:30 pm.

Meeting adjourned at 8:15 pm.

Submitted by Paul Kooiker

February 16, 2026

NW SANDS HABITAT IMPROVEMENTS FOR SHARPTAILS

Completed and Future Projects

Overall NW Sands STG-specific habitat improvements ~2023-2025

- Burn 16,500 acres
- Mowing, roller chopping, biomass harvest 7000 acres
- NEW barrens habitat created 1000 acres*
- Future -- restoring 800 acres of new barrens habitat at Mott's Ravine* in Brule River State Forest

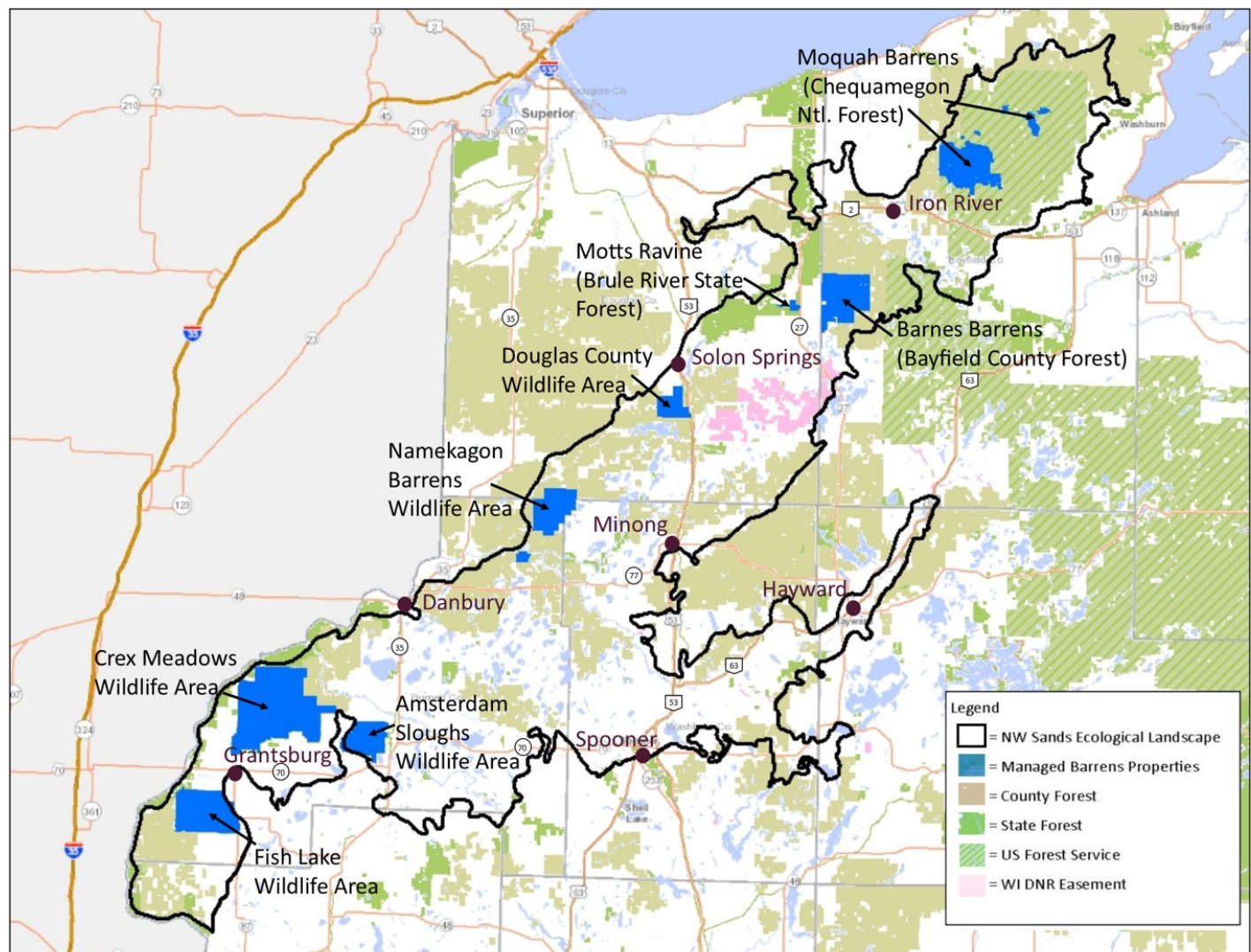
Barnes Barrens

Completed Projects ~2023-2025

- 300 acres of roller chopping
- 700 acres of prescribed burning

Planned Future Projects 2026-2027

- 200 acres of roller chopping
- 700 acres of prescribed burning
- Construct 2 miles of new and improved fuel-breaks



Bass Lake Barrens

Completed Projects ~2023-2025

- 760 acres of prescribed burning
- Constructed 2 miles of fuel-breaks
- 400 acres of roller chopping
- Herbicide treatment 165 acres

Planned Future Projects 2026-2027

- Construct 2.5 miles of new fuel break
- 200 acres of roller chopping
- 600 acres of prescribed burning

Douglas County Wildlife Area

Completed Projects ~2023-2025

- Burn 2030 acres
- Property-wide timber sale to remove scrub oak and promote grasses: 3,411 acres
- Mechanical treatment (mowing and shearing): 320 acres

Planned Future Projects 2026-2027

- Renovate 4 miles of firebreak bordering private lands to facilitate safer and more efficient prescribed burning
- Mechanical treatment (shearing): 80 acres
- Prescribed burns: 900 acres annually

Namekagon Barrens

Completed Projects ~2023-2025

- Mechanical (shear/roller chop) + herbicide Spot Treatment 1200 acres
- Burn 5347 acres
- Scattered mechanical treatments (shearing and mowing) across 6,200 acres

Planned Future Projects 2026 - 2027

- Knockdown trees and mow smaller trees and shrubs to improve the open landscape in a recently acquired 1,400 acres
- Log landing, furrow and trail rehabilitation, removing stumps, flattening spoils and restoring delicate mineral soil to promote native vegetation diversity and control exotics.

Crex Meadows Wildlife Area

Completed Projects ~2023-2025

- Mechanical treatments (shearing, roller chopping, and mowing): 1,463 acres
- Drone herbicide treatment to restore barrens: 105 acres
- Prescribed burns: 10,546 acres

Planned Future Projects 2026 - 2027

- Mechanical treatments (shearing, roller chopping, and mowing): 1,000 acres annually
- Drone herbicide treatment to restore barrens: 100 acres

Fish Lake Wildlife Area

Completed Projects ~2023-2025

- Mechanical treatments (shearing, roller chopping, and mowing): 113 acres

Planned Future Projects 2026 - 2027

- Mechanical treatments (shearing, roller chopping, and mowing): 380 acres
- Restore barrens habitat and create a new burn unit in northwestern corner of Fish Lake Wildlife Area. This will require a timber harvest to remove mature trees.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL
Newsletter is primarily electronic, with hard copy only on request.

Name: _____
Street/PO Box _____
City: _____ State: _____
Zip: _____
Phone: _____

Would you like to volunteer for:
_____ Board of Directors
_____ Newsletter articles
_____ Other

Email: _____ _____ Electronic Newsletter _____ Hard Copy Newsletter

Dues Enclosed:

\$ _____ Regular - \$30 (receive decal)
\$ _____ Family - \$50 (receive 2 decals)
\$ _____ Sustaining - \$100 (receive hat & decal)
\$ _____ Life - \$300 (receive decal, patch & hat)

***Specify which color hat you want (see <https://wisharptails.org> for hat photos) or let us pick one for you!

Total Enclosed: \$ _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO AND RETURN THIS APPLICATION TO:

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

Or visit our website for membership and merchandise orders at <https://wisharptails.org>

Questions? Please e-mail WSGS President, Mike Cole: colesfour@gmail.com

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

