WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Number 105 Winter 2025

CONSIDERATIONS FOR HUNTING SHARP-TAILS IN WISCONSIN

By: Ken Jonas

Sharp-tailed Grouse are classified as a resident game bird by the state of Wisconsin. As such, there exists the possibility of having a sharptail hunting season established in any given year. Because of a relatively low population and limited distribution within the state, the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources Sharp-tailed Grouse Advisory Committee of which WSGS is a voting member, has been charged with reviewing annual observation data and research findings to create a new recommendation for holding a limited by permit only, fall hunt. Under existing policy on the books, the threshold for considering a hunt in any of the sharp-tailed hunting zones is 25 or more males observed on dancing grounds during lek surveys. Using that kind of low number for harvest guidance has been recognized as inappropriate for modern day, disconnected sub-populations. The last hunting season for sharptails in Wis. occurred in 2018

The new sharp-tailed grouse management plan formally approved last spring, recognizes "The long-term goal is a managed sustainable population, with biologically defensible best management practices for the persistence of the species". At the same time, guidance suggests ensuring a viable population of sharp-tailed grouse that can provide regulated harvest opportunities under defined conditions. The plan identifies the need for creation of a new hunting harvest and quota setting system whose implementation would pose extremely low risk to long term population goals. Beginning last fall The Sharp-tailed Grouse Species Advisory Committee began the difficult task of crafting the details of all considerations to be used for proposing any future stg hunting.

Before getting into all the details of the advisory team's final recommendations it needs to be stated that sharp-tailed grouse have a very short average life span with annual survival rates less than 50%. Population levels measured in the spring of the year regularly fluctuate and are highly dependent on brood and juvenile survival from the previous year to replenish adult numbers lost to natural mortality factors. In years with

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good nesting and brood rearing conditions, survival of juveniles to the following spring will be high and more than compensate for adult losses. There should be a corresponding increase in the number of males counted on dancing grounds the following spring indicating a higher total population level than the previous year. When nest success and brood survival is poor, the number of males counted at leks the following spring will be less, indicative of a population decline. Of course, annual survival of adult sharptail can also be highly variable due to a variety of events including winter snow conditions and temperatures, numbers of avian predators especially overwinter, disease exposure and rare extreme weather events.

In hunted populations, hunter caused mortality can play a role in cumulative annual survival of sharptails in a defined geographic area. Hunting losses are considered to be compensatory when the total number of birds removed from a population compensates for other types of mortality that would have naturally occurred. An example would be that when hunting lowers population density in an area, less avian predation might occur than would have happened had the density remained higher. The total number of birds that suffer mortality remains the same except it is now divided between human predation and avian predation. Hunting mortality is said to be additive when the number of sharptails removed by hunting increases the total mortality for the population above the level that would have taken place had that harvest not occurred. In this example hunting lowers the total number of birds surviving to the following breeding season above what it would have been without hunting. Any plan for hunting sharptails in Wis. would strongly lean toward a compensatory mortality design. The bottom line however, in all scenarios, is that habitat quantity, quality and configuration are critical for long term security of sharp-tailed grouse populations in any geographic area with or without hunting.

The following are the condensed recommendations from the Wis. Dept. of Natural Resources Sharp-tailed Grouse Specie Advisory Committee:

1) Harvest Season Considerations:

- Sub-populations considered for harvest should occur within an area of habitat that contains at least 10,000-acres of connected habitat as defined in the Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan. Following rule revision (s), hunting zones should be within these 10,000-acre habitat areas and will be defined by mapped property boundaries. Prior to rule revision, current Hunting Management Zones will be used.
- The habitat area should be compared to the Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan habitat quality goals in considering a season based on the habitat's ability to support sufficient recruitment to offset mortality from harvest. The plan calls for at least one-third of barrens habitat within the zone to be in an open early successional state, with no more than two-thirds in a brush prairie successional state.
- *Sharp-tailed grouse sub-populations considered for harvest should have an annual spring lek count and three-year average spring lek count of around or above 100-140 dancing males. Long-term lek count indices greater than this threshold provide increased confidence in the sustainability of any potential harvest.
- If harvest is to occur in one or more sub-populations, other sub-populations should have increasing or stable spring lek counts.

- Environmental conditions and their potential impacts on sharp-tailed grouse populations should be considered. Over-winter survival may be impacted by a number of weather events and their duration. Nesting and brood-rearing are influenced by the current and previous year's spring and summer weather and these impacts may be detected through brood survey results. Environmental conditions may increase or decrease confidence in the sustainability of harvest.
- The Sharp-tailed Grouse Advisory Committee's recommendation to provide a harvest season is reviewed and approved at the May DNR Wildlife Leadership Team (WLT) meeting. The Sharp-tailed Grouse Biologist Coordinator provides an issue brief which is discussed and decided upon at that meeting prior to elevating to other approval levels as required.

* The DNR Wildlife Leadership Team reviewed the recommendations of the Sharp-tail Advisory Committee on Feb. 18 and changed bullet #3 to use only the annual lek survey as a metric and not the 3-year average. Sharp-tailed grouse sub-populations considered for harvest should have a spring lek count of around or above 100-140 dancing males.

2) Hunting Quota/Permit Considerations:

- If a season is approved, consider the final quota for harvest based on latest information.
- Increase or decrease hunting quota based on the current year's spring-nesting and brood rearing weather and other information. Considerations previously used to determine the likely viability of harvest should be reviewed during this secondary process.
- Set permit levels from quota recommendations based on previous hunting success rates and best available information. Ensure an even permit number is selected and consider tribal stipulation.
- Following rule revision, hunting zones should be within 10,000-acre habitat areas and will be defined by mapped property boundaries (e.g., wildlife area property maps). Prior to rule revision, current Hunting Management Zones will be used.
- Quota and permit level recommendation from the Sharp-tailed Grouse Advisory Committee are submitted before the July WLT Meeting for consideration and other approvals. ■

PLANT DIVERSITY IN EARLY SUCCESSIONAL BARRENS IN NORTHWEST WISCONSIN

By: Bruce Moss

The vegetation found within the sand region of Northwest Wisconsin varies from one end of this expanse to the other. Historically trees such as red pine, white pine, aspen and oak predominated in separate parts of the region. Foresters use this knowledge to manage the forested lands within the landscape. Wildlife biologists, botanists, and others have recognized that vegetation in early successional barrens also have great diversity of plant species presence and abundance. We now have a scientific study of flora abundance and diversity across the Northwest Sands.

The Great Lakes Botanist, volume 63, January – June, 2023, published a study titled "The Barrens Flora of Wisconsin's Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape". While this treatise was not written for amateurs like me, I was able to take away some interesting facts about the barrens. They found less plant diversity as you move from southwest (Polk County) to northeast (Bayfield County). Prairie species are more common and dominant in the southwest, and dry forest species were more common and dominant in the northeast. Barrens covered an estimated 2.3 million acres historically. Only a fraction exists today. Barrens exist in the Northeastern United States but generally lack the prairie grasses and forbs of Northwest Wisconsin. Barrens are considered globally rare and Northwest Wisconsin is considered the best area to preserve and expand barrens.

The publication covers in detail what they documented in each of the eight locations surveyed. Property managers will want to study the findings for their respective properties, but the main takeaways are in the above paragraph. Their findings demonstrate the importance of maintaining all the remaining barrens if we want to preserve current species abundance, even relatively small natural openings that will never support a sharp-tailed grouse. For example, Sterling Barrens at 100 hectares of habitat is one of the smallest sites studied but had the largest plant species diversity of all the studied sites. The endangered karner blue butterfly is abundant on Crex Meadows but not found on any of the further north properties because the plant required for their existence isn't found much further north.

Aldo Leopold said that as we tinker around with the ecology we must save all the pieces. All the barrens pieces are not found on one barrens property. Sharp-tailed grouse are currently being managed by creating stepping stones between major properties to allow interchange from population to population of grouse. The same concept may be important for other populations of plant and animal species isolated on fragmented barrens habitat. The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society is dedicated to those barrens important to STG as it should be, but we should all support keeping the remaining barrens pieces for their species richness. ■

FIND US ONLINE!

Facebook: *Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society*

Instagram: *wisharptails*

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

Email: *information@wisharptails.org*

SHARPTAILS ON PRIVATE LANDS IN NORTHWEST WISCONSIN

Gordon McQuarrie once wrote about flocks of several hundred sharptailed grouse on private lands on the Lake Superior Clay Plains of Northwest Wisconsin. Landowners in the Oulu area love to tell stories of sharptails so thick in their pastures that when they were kids Mom would send them out with single shot .22 long rifles to head shoot sharptails for the family larder! Can you imagine the era that was! Remember the farms of the middle of the century, where every farm comprised of a small dairy herd with a small weedy oats field and overgrazed pastures? The farming practices of yesteryear are what kept an open landscape on the Lake Superior Clay Plain and provided year-round needs of sharptailed grouse resulting in the highest modern day populations in Wisconsin. Fast forward 50-75 years and the small dairy farm model is gone and has been replaced by small beef cattle herds and hay fields. Most of the pastures that once harbored grouse are now grown up in woody succession that no longer provide habitat for sharptails. However, hay fields supporting the current beef herds are still there providing habitat for a myriad of grassland songbirds, including very low populations of sharptails.

Fortunately, there is a glimmer of hope in for private land sharptail habitat in the Lake Superior Clay Plain! Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) has been introduced in Wisconsin with the hire of Ashly Steinke as the first Audubon Grassland Ecologist in the state, ACR promotes grassland bird habitat on private, working landscapes by working with landowners to manage habitat to meet the needs of both landowners and wildlife. Ashly has hit the ground running throughout Wisconsin and has been especially active in the NW Wisconsin reaching out to folks about habitat on their farms. And turns out, those landowners who talk about hunting sharptails with .22's, they lament the loss of sharptails. Many habitat projects are in the planning process and hopefully we will be setting the stage for a recovery! The birds already told us what habitat they need on this landscape to thrive, now its time re-create the old farm model and see if history repeats itself with grouse populations booming. ■

NEW INCENTIVE FOR AUTO-RENEWING MEMBERSHIPS

During the month of January WSGS had a very successful auto-renew membership drive using a stylish dancing sharp-tail t-shirt to encourage participation. Your Board of Directors thought that since that went so well, we would like to continue using our surplus print stock for an incentive. Buy a new or renewing membership at the general ($30) or family ($50) level, choose the auto-renew option at sign-up and we will mail you one of the fine art prints shown below. Some are low in stock, and this is a limited time offer. So don't delay! ■





WSGS BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING MINUTES
DECEMBER 10, 2024

Present: Ken Jonas, Mike Cole, Mike Amman, Bruce Moss, Trevor Bellrichard,

Paul Kooiker, Mark Parman, Paul Cook, Ed Frank

Meeting started at 6:30 pm via ZOOM.

- Approved October 8, 2024 BOD minutes (MC/BM).
- Treasurer's report by M. Cole (10/8/24 – 12/10/24). Beginning balance was $21,210 and ending balance was $23,211. New memberships and renewals brought in $1700. Current membership is 231 including 72 life members. The Project Upland and Facebook/Instagram ads have resulted in six new memberships to date. Treasurer's Report approved (MA/PK).
- Project Updates:

1. Crex biologist Joe Dittrich reported that the lupine seed purchased with the balance of the Jim Evrard fund will be used to seed newly constructed firebreaks, as well as sites within existing Karner blue butterfly refugia on Crex.

2. Fish Lake WA habitat management: WSGS board members (Ken, Mike A., Mike C. Paul K.) met with WDNR wildlife staff Kyle Anderson, Joe Dittrich, Cody Strong, and Bob Hanson to discuss the status and future management of barrens/sharptail habitat on Fish Lake. Crex staff have plans to open up new barrens habitat through commercial timber sales, roller chopping, and possibly aerial herbicide application. Some former prescribed burn blocks at the southwest corner of the property have been abandoned as barrens units due to a heavy aspen component and will now be managed for ruffed grouse habitat. Emphasis will now be on connecting existing barrens units to the north and east with large wetlands in the center of the property. WSGS offered financial help to fund any habitat projects, and we learned that as a non-profit we can apply for Turkey or Pheasant Stamp dollars to be used on FLWA.

3. Audubon Oulu update: Ashly was not able to be at this ZOOM meeting so this topic was deferred until the next BOD meeting.

- Rollout of auto-renew membership incentive: Trevor B. described this as a promotion to recruit new members. Incentive is a free T-shirt, and future annual dues are automatically charged to their credit card. Response has been good: eight new members in a relatively short time of two weeks. Responses have come from both the WSGS website and the Project Upland ad.
- The board discussed our relationship with Ugly Dog Hunting, which had recently given a donation of $500 to WSGS to demonstrate their commitment to sharp-tailed grouse management, among other conservation

issues. It was noted that WSGS as a non-profit cannot promote Ugly Dog in any way. Trevor will draft an article for the next newsletter.

- Mike A. brought us up to date on progress being made on Bayfield County barrens properties. The county recently received a grant through the Important Bird Area fund in the amount of $10,000 to continue barrens work at the Bass Lake Barrens in the form of invasive treatments and contract roller chopping. The new roller chopper was moved to Douglas County Wildlife Area to clear 50 acres. A proposal to increase Barnes Barrens by 500 additional acres will go to the county board for approval. Bayfield County now has an agreement with The Nature Conservancy: TNC will provide a crew to work on prescribed burning and associated barrens habitat. The agreement is for three years, and the crew will spend 4 to 6 weeks in Bayfield County each year. They will be able to work on WDNR properties as well.
- Potential new projects: we have a balance of $23,000 but have not received any new project requests. Possible projects are the Fish Lake WA habitat management described earlier, possibly the Oulu grasslands project, as well as additional habitat work at Mott's Ravine. No commitments made at this time. ■

WSGS TREASURER'S REPORT
DECEMBER 10, 2024– FEBRUARY 4, 2025

Starting Balance December 10, 2024	**23,210.98**	
Expenditures		
USPS — Shipped 36 shirts, 4 hats, 4 knives. 20 first class stamps		**279.60**
Duluth Screen Printing (20 "Auto-renew Membership" T-shirts)		**197.00**
Trevor Bellrichard (December and January Facebook ads @ $300)		**600.00**
Filing form 990-N for tax exempt organizations		**50.00**
Walmart (shipping labels & padded envelopes)		**10.95**
Total		**1,137.55**
Income		
Memberships		**2,279.93**
Merchandise		**63.34**
Donations (Smith, Michelson)		**600.00**
Total		**2,949.27**
Net Gain for Period	**1,811.72**	
Ending Balance February 4, 2025	**25,022.70**	

Membership Totals

12/10/2024	229 (includes 72 life members, 9 courtesy) — 4 were removed (May/June/July 2024 renewal dates), 4 pending removal (Aug/Sept/Oct renewal dates) if not paid up by 1/15/25. New memberships thus far from Project Upland and Facebook/Instagram ads: 6
2/4/2025	252 (includes 75 life members, 9 courtesy) — 3 were removed (Aug/Sept/Oct 2024 renewal dates), 5 pending removal (Nov/Dec 2024 renewal dates) if not paid by 2/15/25.

Submitted by Mike Cole 2/4/25

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL

We are going to a primarily electronic newsletter, 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, Ken Jonas: kenjon@centurytel.net

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102 East Crex Avenue
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