

WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



2024 NATIONAL PHEASANT FEST SIOUX FALLS SOUTH DAKOTA

The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society will, once again, make a presence at the National Pheasant Fest and Quail Classic to be held this year March 1 – 3, at the Denny Sanford Premier Center, 1201 West Ave., Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

We will have a booth on Grouse Trail, in close proximity to the North American Grouse Partnership, and Ruffed Grouse Society. In addition to the typical display, we will set up a sharptail observation blind which will have a video playing a 6-minute loop of all 12 North American grouse species, going through their breeding displays complete with live sounds. We will be selling hats, prints, the Fire and Sands book, note cards and decals as well as memberships to our elite organization.



A big part of attending a huge festival like this is the opportunity to interact with a large number of people who are interested in wild gamebirds and expose them to our organization while spreading the word about sharptails in our state. It also serves as a major fund-raising event that through the sale of merchandise

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and memberships will provide for needed habitat work on the ground to benefit Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse. If you're looking for a fun mini-vacation head out to Sioux Falls to take in Pheasant fest and remember to visit the WSGS booth on Grouse Trail. ■



WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY/AUDUBON SOCIETY

GRASSLAND PROJECT

The Oulu Grasslands is an area of private ownership largely composed of small grass-based farms in Bayfield County, Wisconsin. These grasslands have long been recognized by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as an important grassland ecosystem for a myriad of specialized open landscape bird species including LeConte's Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper, and Sharp-Tailed Grouse. Additionally, the new WDNR Sharp-Tailed Grouse Management Plan recognizes the Oulu Grasslands as a "stepping stone" connecting existing habitat on the Moquah Barrens managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bass Lake Barrens managed by Bayfield County. These stepping stones or habitat islands are designed to facilitate the movement of sharptails with the intent of improving genetic variability of fragmented populations.

The Oulu Grasslands were once home to a thriving Sharp-tailed Grouse population. As recently as 2021 there was an active historical lek located almost in the immediate center of the grassland complex. Unfortunately, the lek has been lost in the last two years. Anecdotal reports from local landowners indicate STG are still present albeit in small numbers. Declining pasture acreage that once harbored sharptails has developed into early successional brush and saplings. The age of the increasing woody growth coincides almost perfectly with the reduction in livestock grazing that likely resulted in a decline of sharp-tail grouse numbers on the Oulu Grasslands. Much of that grazing reduction is the result of an aging farmer demographic.

Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) has been introduced in Wisconsin with the hire of Ashley Steinke as the first Audubon Grassland Ecologist in the state. ACR promotes working with landowners to facilitate grassland habitat quantity and quality that meets the needs of both landowners and wildlife. Ashley has met with several landowners at the Oulu Grasslands who have expressed sincere interest in managing their lands for sharptail habitat. Most of these landowners are old enough to remember high STG populations on their farms and have expressed the desire to manage their lands to help bring grouse back. Audubon is uniquely situated with Ashley on board to work with landowners in the area facilitating on the ground habitat projects that will increase grassland acreage. In addition, Ashley will work with willing livestock producers on grazing practices that provide benefits not only sharptails but the entire suite of grassland songbirds found on the Oulu Grasslands.

To complete this work, WSGS has approved \$5,000 in funding through 2024 to the Audubon Society that will offset travel (rental car and/or standard mileage reimbursement, meals, and lodging) costs while working in the area.

Audubon will create and share a database of all landowner contacts, reporting the result of each communication. As opportunity presents, Audubon will enroll willing landowners in the ACR Program and work with interested landowners to connect them with other partners to facilitate appropriate habitat practices. ■

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 or emailed to information@wisharptails.org.

WSGS OFFICERS

President: Ken Jonas
Vice President: Mike Amman
Secretary: Paul Kooiker
Treasurer: Mike Cole

BOARD MEMBERS:

John Probst
Bruce Moss
Trevor Hubbs
Ashley Steinke
Trevor Bellrichard

Newsletter Compositor: Lauren Thomas

USFS UPDATE

The United States Forest Service, Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Washburn Ranger District continued habitat management and monitoring on the Moquah Barrens in 2023. The barrens had 3000 acres surveyed, walking, and driving surveys were completed on 14 days during the core Sharp-tailed Grouse breeding season. A Forest Service Drone was used over the course of 3 days during grouse nesting season. 3 known grouse were detected by the drone, no other grouse were detected during the survey. A credible source reported his hunting dog flushed two coveys of grouse during Fall. Habitat work included a 174-acre growing season burn, 110 acres of brush saw work, and 76 acres of knapweed treated. The Washburn Ranger District continues to implement the Greenwood Vegetation Project which generally surrounds the Moquah Barrens core area and provides temporary open habitat.

The 2024 season for the Moquah Barrens has already begun in early February. With the unseasonably warm weather and no snow, technicians have fired up brush saws and started cutting brush. Surveys and monitoring will begin in March and run through April. Camera traps will be deployed early to help assist with monitoring efforts. 200 acres of brushing will be put out for contract work that would be completed by the end of October, if awarded. 3621 acres in the core area are set to be burned this year to improve habitat for sharp tailed grouse and other open lands species.

The Riley Lake State Natural Area on the Park Falls Ranger District also continued to see open land management in 2023. Habitat work for Riley Lake included 1034 acres of fire, and 129 acres of brushing. In 2024 plans are to burn 1,392 acres, and 20 acres of seeding on a newly converted grassland. ■

WINTER SHARPTAIL QUESTIONS AND REPORTS

Although we are just two weeks past the middle of the winter season, in the northland it seems like we are still waiting for it to start. Snowfall has been far below average, and records are being set for the warmest daily temperatures ever recorded for far too many days to keep track of. Many folks are wondering about the impacts to wildlife as a result of this atypical non-winter like weather. Sharp-tailed grouse are well adapted to the usual seasonal changes that winter brings throughout their current range in Wisconsin. Roosting under snow cover is an evolutionary adaptation that grouse use to avoid predation overnight when their plumage coloration stands out in a white landscape. Additionally, snow roosting allows sharptails increased insulation from the usual extreme cold that occurs frequently in the long overnight hours of winter. Feeding on the winter buds and catkins of trees and shrubs provide plenty of nourishment to keep needed energy levels high. While the typical large winter flocking behavior increases survival by having many eyes on the sky.

So how did those adaptations work in this warm mostly snowless winter? It appears lack of snow roosting has not been an issue as warmer than average nights have not had the energy drain that would normally occur in sub-zero temperatures. Normal cryptic plumage also works very well when there is mostly no snow-white background to make sharptails stand out, thus minimizing predation. A positive observation is that larger than average numbers of sharp-tailed grouse have been showing up regularly on the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area this winter with some large flocks estimated to be 60 or more birds. This is a sure sign that winter survival has been excellent so far and with it bringing high hopes for good nesting and brood rearing conditions this coming spring and summer to keep populations building.

Have the warm conditions affected normal phenological behaviors like mating displays and breeding? It doesn't appear that there has been any change in those types of behaviors. Sharp-tailed grouse like most wildlife species have evolved their breeding, nesting and birthing behaviors on daylight duration and how that day length occurs, with increasing or decreasing cues. For sharptails, the increase of day length heading toward spring is the impetus for males to increase attendance on dancing grounds, with activity really ramping up towards the end of April or mid-spring. Female visitation on the dancing ground for breeding purposes is day length dependent and ensures that clutches are being incubated at the right time allowing broods to be hatched when warm temperatures are more prevalent and in synchrony with high insect numbers to nourish chicks. The short answer is that no breeding nesting or egg laying is taking place. However, a few male sharptails have been observed on at least some dancing grounds early in the day but that occurs every year about this time even with snow cover. ■

FIND US ONLINE!

Facebook: *Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society*

Instagram: *wisharptails*

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

Email: *information@wisharptails.org*

JOIN THE WSGS BIRD-A-THON TEAM

WSGS Digital Media Specialist Trevor Bellrichard shared the following message:

The Great Wisconsin Bird-a-thon is right around the corner. Last year our WSGS team raised \$625, netting \$312 for the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society. It was only Mike Amman and I on the team last year. We could raise significantly more if a few more participated.

Is anyone interested in being on the WSGS Bird-a-thon team this year?

A brief rundown: family, friends, strangers, offer to donate whatever size sum they would like either as a lump sum or on a per bird basis. i.e. \$5 per bird. At the end of the event, whatever funds we raise are split 50/50 with the Natural Resources Foundation and us.

We had a few donations come in just for having a team from individuals and groups.

Easy way to earn a few dollars. Let me know if you are interested.

Please contact Trevor tbell@wisharptails.org to let him know of your interest in joining the Wis. Sharp-tailed Grouse Society Bird-a-thon Team and raising needed funds for bird conservation.

The Wisconsin Bird-a-thon is back this spring from April 15th to June 15th!

Funds from the Great Wisconsin Bird-a-thon support the Bird Protection Fund, which provides critical support for high priority bird conservation projects that benefit Wisconsin's birds throughout their lifecycles. These projects will protect threatened and endangered birds by restoring habitat, monitoring bird populations, and inspiring new bird conservationists.

Nonprofit organizations that participate in the Great Wisconsin Bird-a-thon are eligible to keep 50% of the funds they raise. In 2023, thanks to the efforts of the 34 organizational teams that participated, we were able to put \$26,842 back into their local bird conservation and outreach projects! ■



WSGS T-SHIRTS

Get your new shirts and support WSGS at the same time!
Go to <https://wsgs.myspreadshop.com/> and proudly wear our new logo.



BAYFIELD CO. - NORTHWEST SANDS **ROLLER CHOPPER PURCHASE**

The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society has recently supported a very important purchase to ensure the long-term commitment of creating and maintaining high quality barrens located in the Northwest Sands. As most of us already know, prescribed burning is a very important tool to maintain barrens. Fire alone is sometimes not enough to keep brush and trees from slowly taking over. Other tools need to be in the quiver to ensure success and that includes periodic mechanical treatment. Currently many of the barren's properties located within the northern tier of the Northwest sands lack easy and affordable access to the equipment necessary to periodically treat the needed acres. The specific piece of equipment that is built to do this job well is called a Roller Chopper. A roller chopper is a large, heavy metal drum with metal blades that when pulled behind a tractor, bulldozer or skidder it will physically knock down the trees and brush. This reduces the woody height and density issues, sets back succession and allows for a hotter more effective prescribed burn in follow up years to make room for more prairie grasses and forbs.

Series 1100




AGRO-FORESTRY SOLUTIONS

FEATURES

Frame Specification: 4" x 6.5" x 1/2" wall heavy duty tubing with fabricated blade holders and bearing brush deflectors for improved bearing life

- Drawbar Specification: 4" x 8" x 1/2" wall tubing, 2" T1 Lugs, and replaceable Swivel
- Pin on for various configurations, includes built in jack
- Roller Specification: 24" or 36" diameter Pipe with 1/2" wall
- Blades Specifications: 7" (standard) beveled AR400 Blades. 10" blades optional
- Configuration Options:
 - 1) Single Drum
 - 2) Tandem for Rear to Rear or Side to Side Running Configuration
 - 3) Wheel Landing System for ease of transport and loading. (See Wheeled Brush Choppers)

HEAVY DUTY WHEELED CHOPPERS



Currently, many barrens' properties in the northwest sands rely on a single private contractor to meet their mechanical treatment needs. Unfortunately, this contractor is the sole contractor that does roller chopping in addition to spending most of their work time doing other site preparation related to reforestation within

the Lake States area. Many property managers have had roller chopper work fall through due to time constraints from the contractor. The inability to roller chop the necessary acres within the barrens system when needed is obviously a big issue. If the trees and brush get too tall the property is moving away from open and low-density brush barrens into other seral stages outside the stated goals of the barrens managed properties. The Bayfield County Forestry Dept. identified this issue early on and worked hard to find a solution to this growing problem. They decided the best approach was to purchase a roller chopper that could be shared amongst barrens focused properties within the NW sands. The barrens story is a charismatic one when explained in detail and thus allowed grant money to pour in towards the purchase. The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society was eager and generous in supporting this effort. Bayfield County secured \$50,000 from the Enbridge Ecofootprint grant, \$8,000 from the Important Bird Area grant and \$8,000 from WSGS. Bayfield County put in the remaining amount to secure the purchase of the \$74,000 piece of equipment. As of this writing the roller chopper should be delivered towards the end of February.

The goal is to share the roller chopper with the Douglas County Wildlife Area, Mott's Ravine SNA and Moquah barrens. In addition, it will be used on the Barnes and Bass Lake barrens of the Bayfield County Forest. There is an annual need on these properties for some mechanical treatment and with the chopper located locally and available for a small fee, it will ensure good barrens habitat outcomes for decades to come. ■



Photo: Roller Chopper at Work

*Photo: Completed
Roller Chopper Work*



RESPONSE TO PROPOSED REPEAL OF DOG TRAINING RULES

Recently a Legislative alert was sent to everyone on our extended WSGS e-mail list. That email was sent out to create an awareness and suggest action on parallel bills moving through the Wisconsin Assembly and Senate that proposed repealing existing dog training and trialing activities across the northern part of the state during the months of May and June. At the time of that mailing, Assembly Bill 512 had already been approved and forwarded to the Senate for review and approval. On Feb. 13 the legislative proposal was read for the second and third time in the Senate and was passed without any further discussion. The Senate and Assembly approved bill has now been presented to Governor Evers for his review, where it now resides awaiting his decision for action.

The WSGS Board of Directors obviously has major concerns about the negative impacts to wildlife if the proposal is signed into law. We felt that passage of the bill in the Assembly and Senate was a sure thing based on the sponsors who introduced it and the voting likely along straight party lines. From the beginning we felt the Governor's office was the only place that we might put a stop to the legislation and that is where we laid out our case to do the right thing for the wildlife resource. Additional support helps to make a loud statement with the Governor so we encouraged you the Wis. Sharp-tailed Grouse Society membership as well as other organizations to weigh in with your concerns and a recommendation to veto.

WSGS Board member and digital media specialist Trevor Bellrichard ran an analysis of the response to the Legislative Alert email and sent the following report: "I crunched the numbers quickly on our email campaign Legislative Alert. Of the 285 recipients, 207 opened the email. Of that 207, 61 clicked the link to make their opinion known to the Governor. Beyond that, I have no data, I can't tell how many actually completed the form. However, those are decent numbers. 73% opened the email and 29% clicked the link. Typical email campaigns have a 20% open rate, so our audience far surpasses the averages."

But we always knew the WSGS membership was above average! The Board of Directors extends our sincere thanks to those who looked at that message and to those who put themselves out there, sending a message expressing your concern on a form where the information could be made available to the public. By the time you read this Governor Evers will likely have made his decision to sign or veto. We hope for the best. ■

WSGS TREASURER'S REPORT **DECEMBER 5, 2023– FEBRUARY 5, 2024**

Starting Balance December 5, 2023	26,586.95
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Expenditures

USPS—Mail 7 hats, 1 book, 3 shirts, 1 roll tape	71.51
Roller chopping bill donation to Bayfield Co.	3,000.00
Donation toward shared roller chopper	8,000.00
Specialty insurance— insurance for Pheasant Fest	164.17
Wisconsin screen process— WSGS Decals	423.53
Membership Renewal— Friends of the Bird Sanctuary	50.00
Total	11,709.21

Income

Memberships	854.65
Merchandise (not including spreadshirt t-shirts)	220.08
Spreadshirt t-shirts	20.52
Donations (Smith, Michelson, 1 unknown)	680.00
Total	1,775.25

Net Gain for Period	-9,933.96
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Ending Balance July 15, 2023	16,652.99
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Jim Evrard Memorial Account	366.46
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General Account Fund	16,286.53
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Pending expenses:

Hats for Pheasant Fest

Membership Renewal— Friends of the Namekagon Barrens \$50

Membership Totals:

12/5/23 192 (includes 43 Life Members, 9 Courtesy)

2/5/24 200 (includes 44 Life Members, 9 Courtesy)- lots of Jan & Feb renewals to chase

Submitted by Mike Cole 02/05/24

TERMINATING AFFILIATION WITH WIS. WILDLIFE FEDERATION

By Ken Jonas

The following is most of the letter Wis. Sharp-tailed Grouse Society recently sent to the Wis. Wildlife Federation executive director, informing him that due to drastic differences in what we believe to be legitimate wildlife conservation measures, we no longer wish to continue our membership. This was a difficult decision for your Board of Directors to make, but in the end, we felt it was absolutely necessary. We continue to support the use of trained dogs for hunting, however, there is a time and place for everything. Springtime in Northern Wisconsin is neither the time nor the place to have free running dogs being trained on any type of wildlife.

Dear Cody,

After much deliberation, the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (WSGS) has made the decision to not renew its affiliated club membership with the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation (WWF). Reluctance to continue our long-standing affiliation is primarily a result of the WWF's support for two parallel bills moving through the Wisconsin legislature, namely Assembly Bill 512 and Senate Bill 545. Those legislative bills would repeal Dept. of Natural Resource administrative codes prohibiting a person from hunting or pursuing any free roaming wild animal with the aid of a dog from May 1 to June 30 in the northern zone of Wisconsin and additionally repeal restrictions on dog training and trialing on free roaming animals in that area during the period.

The existing NR Administrative codes provide protection for young of the year wildlife in Northern WI during the time of year that they are most vulnerable to disturbance and susceptible to capture, by free ranging dogs in the process of being trained. We feel the proposed repeal of existing rules can negatively affect breeding, nesting and brood rearing of sharp-tailed grouse, a species listed as special concern and greatest conservation need. In addition, other ground nesting birds, such as turkeys, waterfowl and songbirds as well as young of the year mammals with reduced mobility will be put at risk. WSGS supports the protection provided to wildlife during the two-month period under the current law.

It has been highlighted that there are no restrictions for running dogs off leash during spring in southern Wis., an area dominated by private land holdings needing landowner permission to access. A major difference for the north is that there are literally hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands with open access, teeming with a variety of wildlife that get used intensively by dog enthusiasts when the training restrictions come off on July 1. To open those lands for training of dogs off leash without seasonal restrictions would likely be deleterious for wildlife during the reproductive and recruitment phase of the annual cycle, adding another disturbance and mortality factor that is avoidable.

Continued membership in the WWF implies support for the Wis. Wildlife Federation's position that advocates repeal of current law ...as expressed by WWF at the Assembly's legislative committee public hearing. WSGS will not lend credence to legislative proposals that will certainly have negative impacts on wildlife. It is apparent that our two organizations' perspective and basic philosophy of what constitutes sound

wildlife conservation have significantly diverged.

For this reason, we decline to be an affiliated organization of the WWF for the foreseeable future.

WSGS Board of Directors

NR 10.07 General hunting.

(1) PROHIBITED METHODS. No person shall:

(i) *Dog use.* Hunt or pursue any free roaming wild animal with the aid of dog or dogs May 1 to June 30 in that portion of the state north of the highways shown on the following map except for dog trials and training under permit as established by ch. NR 17:



WSGS BOARD OF DIRECTORS NOMINATIONS

Nominations for the Wis, Sharptail Grouse Society Board of Directors are now being accepted. The term of office for three WSGS board members, Paul Kooiker, John Probst, and Ashley Steinke expire this year. Nominations are being sought for a three-year term for each of the expiring positions. All WSGS members in good standing can be nominated for the positions by other society members, or self nominated . Please include the candidate's name and contact information with the nomination along with a short write-up of their qualifications and interest to: *Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, 102 East Crex Avenue, Grantsburg WI 54840.* Nominations will close on June 1st and a ballot that lists all candidates will be sent to the membership shortly thereafter. Votes may be cast by the membership until they are tallied at the Annual Meeting. ■

2024 WSGS BOARD OF DIRECTORS NOMINATION

Name of Candidate _____
Contact Information _____
Name of Nominator (*can be self*) _____
Contact Information _____
Qualifications, Experience, Interest (*attach a short write-up*) _____

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

Enclosed:

\$ _____ Dues (Regular - \$30 (receive decal), Family - \$50 (receive decal), Sustaining - \$100 (receive hat),
Life - \$300 (receive decal, patch & hat) (*Dues are fully tax-deductible*)
\$ _____ WSGS Logo Decal (\$1.50)
\$ _____ Four-color Cloth Patch (\$3.50)
\$ _____ Orange or olive cap (\$25 – indicate color choice)
\$ _____ King sharptail limited edition print (\$30)

(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

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

Questions? Please e-mail WSGS Treasurer, Ken Jonas: kenjon@centurytel.net

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

