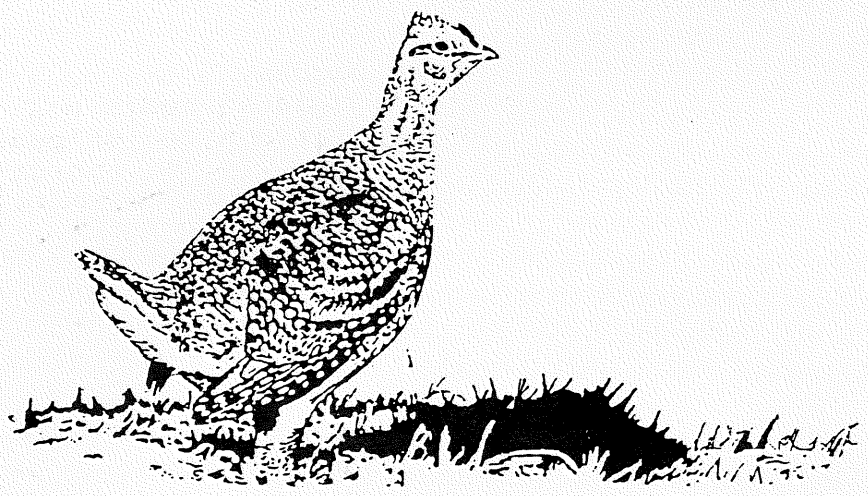
WISCONSIN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Volume 30 **FALL-WINTER, 2000**

SPRING MEETING

When you get your 2001 calendar, be sure to mark April 28th and 29th for the annual WSGS meeting. This year we will meet at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center near Ashland. Survey efforts will be on Moquah Barrens or perhaps some of the red clay dancing grounds. Be there for a good time.

DNA SAMPLING

The University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point is continuing to run DNA samples of Wisconsin sharptails. If you got a permit this year you also got notification to send in a feather or two out of this study. Keith Warnke, Upland Game Specialist, WM/4, Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707 volunteered to collect the feathers. You also can help out by sending in feathers you might be able to salvage from car or predator kills, or fresh feathers found on a dancing ground. Apparently too much sunlight wrecks the sample, so make sure they're pretty fresh. Put your samples in an envelope with as close a description of location as you can give. Thank you!

Ashland Area Sharp-tailed Grouse

History: Historically most of Lake Superior's clay plain was covered by a transition forest type consisting of white pine, white spruce, and white birch with lesser amounts of aspen, balsam, red maple, and black ash. As the area was settled the forests were cleared, first for their timber values then for agriculture and livestock. The land was repeatedly burned, both intentionally for clearing and by wildfires. The clearing and agriculture resulted in large expanses of habitat suitable for sharp-tailed grouse which was the dominated grouse in the hunters bag until the 1950's in Douglas, Bayfield, and Ashland Counties (Grange, 19??). Sharptails now exist only on the Pine Barrens habitat and clay soils farms country on northern Douglas and Bayfield counties. The last flock of sharptails in Ashland County was seen in approximately 1985-90 (Myron Anderson, Pers. Comm.).

No active management has been done to retain sharptails on the clay soils region but have persisted in low numbers despite the decline in active agriculture in the region. There are 3 well known leks north of the Maple-Brule area that have 8-15 dancing males for the last 5 years. There are numerous reports of sharptails in others areas throughout the clay farm country, but casual surveys have not located additional stable leks.

Habitat Evaluation: Aerial photography from 1994-99 was used in an attempt to evaluate the potential suitability of Ashland county for local re-introduction. General habitat categories were used to classify units of land that were definable on the photographs. Intensive habitat surveys documenting exact percent cover or species of grass, forbs, shrubs, or trees were not done. About 75-80% of the 1999 photos was ground truthed to verify land use this past year. Similar methods and classification was used for a 1-mile radius around each of the well known leks in Maple, Cloverland, and Oulu as a way to evaluate what composition and size of area may be suitable on the clay soils region. Finally, 1975 aerial photos were used to get a vague idea of the rate of land use changes and future stability of the Ashland county site.

Table 1. Habitat types (acres and percent) found in a 1-mile radius around known leks as compared to habitat in the formerly occupied area near Ashland, Wisconsin.

	Maple	Cloverland	Oulu	Average	Ashland	
Land Type[1]					2000	1975
Crops	3 (2)	-	-	14 (1)	9 (1)	( )
Pasture	269 (14)	113 (6)	88 (5)	157 (9)	178 (2)	(6,622)
Hay	621 (33)	258 (14)	740 (40)	540 (29)	3,377 (34)	(65%)
Grass	295 (16)	350 (19)	354 (18)	333 (18)	1,753 (18)	( )
Shrubs	108 (6)	50 (3)	120 (7)	93 (5)	1,397 (14)	{ 2,013 }
Trees	133 (7)	44 (3)	90 (5)	89 (5)	1,048 (11)	{ 20% }
Forest	389 (21)	1,007 (55)	444 (24)	613 (33)	2,071 (21)	1,562 (15)
Total	1,858	1,822	1,836	1,839	9,973	10,197

[1] Land Type Categories: **Crops** - consist of corn, oats, and sunflower; **Pasture** – for cows and horses; **Hay** – actively managed/mowed hay lands; **Grass** – fallow areas dominated by cool season grasses and forbs that have gone unmowed for 1 or more years and have up to 25% shrub cover; **Shrubs** – areas with 25% or more shrubs cover but less than 25% small trees; **Trees** – areas with small trees covering 25% - 75% of the site; **Forest** – land with 70% or more canopy cover of large trees or recently clear-cut areas of aspen.

The big question is, if habitat is suitable, why aren't the birds here? Local observations indicate the birds disappeared during a low in the grouse cycles and that unregulated hunting may have played a role in removing the last large flock known in the area. Other known areas of birds (Moquah Barrens, Pine Barrens, and Red Clays all lie 10-20 mile from the Ashland Area and are generally divided by mature forest cover that may preclude natural dispersal into other suitable areas (land sat imagery???).

Vegetation: The plants found on these old fields starts out dominated by typical pasture and hay grasses such as timothy, red-top, brome, trefoil, and clovers. In some cases reed canary or bluegrass dominate. As the fields become fallow they are invaded by forbs, notably goldenrods. Other common forbs are sunflowers, black-eyed susans, strawberries, common milkweed, asters, and tall buttercup. Shrubs begin to appear first along drainages or odd areas and are typically dominated by alder, willow, red-osier dogwood, gray dogwood, hawthorns, and nanny berry. Succession from a hay field or pasture to a fully wooded condition takes 25-30 years or more.

Wildlife Values: The clay soils fallow farm fields offer an opportunity to maintain "surrogate" grasslands that were historically a minor part of this landscape, but now mimic native grasslands in their structure and function. The fallow fields in early stages attract meadowlarks, bobolinks, upland sandpipers, and sedge wrens. As shrubs encroach the old fields, species such as clay-colored sparrows and rufous-sided towhees. Additional opportunities to restore and create sedge type and shallow marsh wetlands are easily achieved on clay soils. Casual surveys indicate these wetlands can be very productive for waterfowl broods, shorebirds, and leopard frogs.

Threats: The future threat to this surrogate grassland complex is the encroachment of tree and woody vegetation through the typical methods:

- New housing and resulting wind breaks/tree planting
- Conifer plantations
- Loss of agriculture (plus and minus) resulting in natural succession towards forest condition
- Watershed programs with goals to reforest 60% or more of the land base

Questions:

The big question is not only **can we** restore sharptails, but also **should we** consideration this is not a native grassland type? Should we actively strive to maintain these grasslands/brush lands?

If yes:

1) Suggestions on methods – timing, number, methods of capture and transport?
2) Documentation – surveys using leg bands and volunteers adequate?
3) Detailed habitat surveys –are they needed and what type of information?
4) Habitat management – what management options do we have on PLM, especially funding?

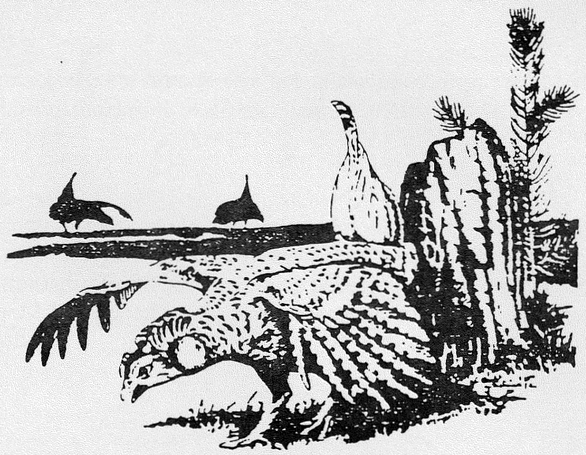
ASHLAND SHARPTAILS?

On October 23rd a group of Wisconsin DNR wildlife managers met with Myron Anderson and other Ashland citizens to tour the area where sharptails only recently disappeared. This area focuses on the Ashland Airport and two or three other large grassy openings. Much of this area was intensively farmed, but presently is lying fallow. DNR Biologist, Greg Kessler, did a quick and dirty analysis of a 10,000 acre block and found 34% hay land, 18% grass, 14% shrubs, and 11% scattered trees. Twenty-one percent was closed canopy forest.

The biologists saw some hope for a sharptail future, although the habitat probably is not quite there right now. The grassland parcels are not as connected as probably necessary for sharptails to thrive.

The next step will be to create a good map of the area to see where connectivity is needed. Bruce Prentice, a teacher at Ashland High School, will tackle part of that project. With that map local enthusiasts will be able to visit with their neighbors and show places where tree removal could be helpful for opening up long vistas and giving an open feel to the landscape.

If local citizens and the local biologist are able to make some headway on opening up the landscape, the DNR will re-evaluate and decide whether to re-introduce sharptails into this area which they only recently left.



MINUTES OF WSGS BOARD MEETING

July 12, 2000 Necedah NWR

President Ed Frank called the meeting to order at 12:23 PM. Board members attending Don Bronk, Jim Evrard, Ed, Paul Hayes, Tom Jancoski, and Tom Ziegeweid.

Larry Wargowsky, Necedah NWR Manager, gave us a brief summary of current refuge projects including the whooping crane reintroduction project and massasauga rattlesnake research project.

The first agenda item dealt with exhibitions/ expositions. It was decided not to participate in the events (Wild Bird Festival in Waukesha, Ducks Unlimited Great Outdoors Festival in Oshkosh, and the St. Croix River (watershed) Exposition in St. Croix Falls, this year. Ed suggested creating a policy on the use of the WSGS exhibit.

Ed suggested as a potential WSGS project, polling the 2000 or so sharptail hunting permit holders to determine participation rates. Ed will talk to Brian Dhuey of the DNR to determine best method although Keith Warnke of the DNR will again attempt to remove the "free" sharptail hunting permit application from the patron license, making a poll of the permit hunters a moot point.

Several federal programs, CARA and CREP, hold the promise of substantial funding for barrens habitat restoration. Ed passed around a letter from Greg Kessler, DNR wildlife biologist at Brule, about the possibilities of a sharptail habitat restoration site of about 7,000 acres on the red clay agricultural lands south of Ashland. This is the project supported by Myron Anderson. Ed also discussed sharptail translocation potentials with John Toepfer.

Professor Neal Niemuth has left the UW-Stevens Point for a position with the federal government in Bismark, North Dakota. This is a loss for our group. Larry Gregg will be asked to oversee sharptail survey efforts.

The potential for a statewide sharptail survey was again discussed. Volunteers in Clark County presently census the prairie chicken found there. The Breeding Bird Atlas results for the sharptail were also discussed as a starting point for the survey.

It was decided to hold the annual meeting in Ashland on Saturday, April 28 with the business meeting held in either the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center or the Sigurd Olson Institute depending upon availability. A census/tour of the Moquah Barrens would take place on Sunday morning. Wausau could be the site of a future Board meeting.

Ed brought up the question of awards. Jim Hale was the last person to receive an award. Potential future awardees include Larry Gregg, Neal Niemuth, and Ed Frank.

We then moved to the main business item, the Central Wisconsin Initiative. The first need was to form a committee made up of Ed, Tom J., and Tom Z.

The second need was a sharptail habitat feasibility/ opportunity map for central Wisconsin. Perhaps, John Kubisiak could be contacted to discuss a potential mapping project. DNR's Mike Mossman and Eric Epstien were also discussed as information sources.

The final need was to create advocacy partners with potentials including the Sand County Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, the DNR, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point and Madison, the cranberry association, the Stan Plis Club, the National Wild Turkey Foundation, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Wayne Hall, DNR wildlife biologist at Sandhill WDA and the new wildlife biologist at Black River Falls were involved in this discussion. Problems discussed were deer hunters, DNR fire control, etc.

Following the meeting, Rich King from the Necedah NWR gave the group an auto tour of the prairie and savanna restoration projects on the refuge. About 4,000 acres now exist with a potential to double that amount. Much of the habitat appeared suitable for sharptails.

The board elected officers for the coming year. Ed chose not to run for President. Jim is the new president, Tom Z., the new Vice President, and Paul, the new Secretary/Treasurer. The next board meeting will be on Saturday, November 11 at a yet undetermined site.

2000 SHARP-TAILED GROUSE PERMITS BY UNIT

Unit	# 1st Choice Apps.	Total # Permits	# 1st Permits	# 2nd Permits	# 3rd Permits	# Losers	# 2nd Choice Apps	# 3rd Choice Apps	# 4th Choice Apps
2	434	1,000	557	443	0	1	134	110	102
8	229	100	100	0	0	91	142	143	74
9	179	200	200	0	0	0	292	193	101
10	246	250	250	0	0	2	94	75	102
20	281	50	50	0	0	178	171	66	47
30	185	50	50	0	0	117	208	50	53
	1,554	1,650	1,207	443	0	389	1,041	637	479

EARLY WISCONSIN SHARPTAIL STUDIES

By Jim Hale

Among the important sources of information on sharptail and prairie chicken status in pre-1900 Wisconsin are two publications, the first being "Birds of Wisconsin," by Ludwig Kumlien and Ned Hollister, published in 1903 and reprinted by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology in 1951. The second is A.W. Schorger's 1944 report in the Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters, "The Prairie Chicken and Sharp-tailed Grouse in Early Wisconsin," in which he chronicled every mention of grouse appearing in all pre-1900 Wisconsin newspapers, and published descriptions of early Wisconsin travelers.

Casual identifications in early accounts make it difficult to tell whether sharptails or prairie chickens were observed. References to prairie grouse, prairie hen and pinnated grouse often included both species. Even more obviouse names such as sqware tail and yellowlegs for chickens, and bur-oak grouse and pintail for sharptails at times became mixed with each other.

Sharptails apparently were actually or potentially found in all of Wisconsin and northern Illinois until the 1860s. They were called "abundant" in southern Wisconsin in 1840 by Kumlien & Hollister. However, as settlement increased, sharptails disappeared from the southern counties and drifted northward. By 1870 they were nearly gone from the southern quarter of the state. Also in 1870, central Wisconsin counties held more sharptails than prairie chickens. Sharptails were reported abundant at Lac du Flambeau in 1877. They were more common than chickens at Babock and Necedah in 1901 and in Oconto County in 1902.

Both publications offered comments on the future of sharptails. Kumlien & Hollister in 1903: "At the present time it is found in any numbers only in isolated sections of the central and northwestern part, and is probably doomed to speedy extinction in this state." By 1944, Schorger took a different view: "The anticipated extinction of the sharp-tailed grouse has not been realized nor is it within the realm of probability. There is every reason to believe that under present land policies the species will continue to be plentiful. The replacement of the virgin coniferous forests with hardwoods, the growth of brush on drained marshes, and withdrawal of marginal lands from cultivation have improved its habitat in many sections of the state. It is thoroughly capable of thriving in regions untouched by agriculture. In fact, it seems to be incapable of existing without a certain amount of wild land."

It might be that we are still not sure who is right.

(NOTE: This is the first in a series on past Wisconsin sharptail research. Next time: A review of F.J.W. Schmidt's studies of sharptail food habits in the 1930s.)

PLEASE CHECK THE DATE ON YOUR MAILING LABEL BELOW TO DETERMINE IF YOU ARE PAID UP (FOR EXAMPLE 01 00 MEANS YOU ARE PAID UP UNTIL JAN, 2000)

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL

(Annual Dues $10.00)

Name:_____

Address:_____

City: _____ **State:** _____

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Phone: _____

Volunteer Activities

_____ **Board of Directors Address:**

_____ **Newsletter Writing**

_____ **Bird census work**

_____ **Publicity**

_____ **Education**

_____ **Fund Raising**

Enclosed: $_____ **dues**

(Regular - $10) (Supporting $25)

(Contributing $50) (Sustaining $100)

(Sponsor $200)

Dues are fully tax-deductible

_____ **Four color cloth patch ($3.50 postage inc.)**

_____ **Deluxe corduroy dress cap ($14.00 postage inc.)**

_____ **WSGS logo window sticker ($1.50 postage inc.)**

_____ **Total amount enclosed**

Thank you for your continued support,
Board of Directors

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO AND RETURN THIS APPLICATION TO: Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, P.O. Box 1115, Cumberland, WI 54829

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