



# THE MINNESOTA SHARPTAILER

SUMMER 2017 NEWSLETTER

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Student Advisor - Bill Faber

MN DNR Representative - Jodie Provost

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Roche Lally

Bill Berg

Jamie Slade

## Greetings, Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society!

Dave Pauly, MSGS President

We wish to thank you all for your generous support of the 30 Years of Conservation Celebration Spring Fling at St. Croix State Park this past April. Your dedication to the Firebirds and their habitats helped to make it a resounding success.

Please join with me, the new Board of Directors along with Committee Chairs & Special Projects Coordinators in a rousing ‘THANK YOU’ to Roche (30 year President) and the other out-going Board of Directors for their diligent dedication to the Vision and Mission of your Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society!

Also, please join me in welcoming our new and returning Executives, Regional Representatives, and Coordinators (left sidebar). All new and returning sharp-tailed grouse enthusiasts are ready to continue the 30-year conservation legacy of MSGS. We will be affirming this at the upcoming Quarterly Board meeting in August.

I invite and encourage you all to be active participants in this organization and look forward to hearing from you. Along with utilizing our Quarterly Newsletter I encourage you to visit our website at [www.sharptails.org](http://www.sharptails.org) and Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/Minnesota-Sharp-Tailed-Grouse-Society-39074062403/](http://www.facebook.com/Minnesota-Sharp-Tailed-Grouse-Society-39074062403/) to stay abreast of all MSGS happenings and find your membership renewal form.

Regards,

David C Pauly

Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society

President | Habitat Projects Coordinator | Life Member

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*“We are not placed on this Earth to be curators of a museum....instead to be stewards of a green and bountiful garden.”*



## MSGs 30th Anniversary Celebration/2017 Spring Fling at St Croix State Park

Jodie Provost, MN DNR Private Land Specialist & MSGS DNR Rep.

In honor of MSGS's first gathering over 30 years ago at St. Croix State Park, members convened there on Saturday, April 29 for a very special anniversary celebration and Spring Fling, chance to catch up with friends, learn about the latest in the prairie grouse world, and raise funds for habitat. About 60 people joined in the merriment, ranging from original members and brushland managers such as George Davis and Lee Hemness, to our youngest attendees, Aiden and Justin Reisz, sons of Russ and Christine Reisz.

The day kicked off in the rustic Mess Hall of Norway Point Group Center with a warm welcome and MSGS history by founding fathers, Roche Lally and Bill Berg. Words cannot express the gratitude and respect we have for the first members who had the vision and resolve to launch and grow this very dedicated conservation organization. Roche, MSGS President of over 30 years, was recognized and thanked with special gifts. Carrol Henderson then wowed us with his photos of grassland birds and wildlife from the western hemisphere, putting the big picture before us. Paul Telander, DNR Wildlife Chief, followed with DNR's vision for sharp-tailed grouse in Minnesota. He explained that the current goal of a 30-40,000 annual sharptail harvest is a heavy lift, but we must work toward it by using the Farm Bill, funding opportunities, outreach, programs and partnerships. Charlotte Roy, DNR grouse project leader, polished off the morning with results of a landscape genetics study, emphasizing that the time is now to recover the declining east-central Minnesota sharptail population while genetic diversity is still adequate.

After lunch, folks settled in for fresh results from Lindsey Shartell's three-year, sharptail breeding habitat selection and survival study in east-central Minnesota. In her DNR forest habitat researcher role, she found radio-collared hens used a variety of habitats for nesting, brood habitat tended to be more open, and birds used lands actively managed for habitat. Mike Schrage, Fond Du Lac Band biologist, shared preparations for possible restoration of omashkoozoog, or elk, to southern St. Louis, Carlton and northern Pine Counties. We then heard about local efforts to restore savanna and barrens to 5,000 acres of St. Croix State Park from Rick Dunkley, DNR Park Manager, and to the local neighborhood for the benefit of Karner blue butterflies and pollinators from Anna Hess, DNR District Manager. A sure sign of success on the Park is return of two dancing male sharptail and a hen this spring! Finally, Bob Hanson and Steve Hoffman of WI DNR shared the latest from next door on Crex Meadows and the Northwest Sands of Wisconsin. Enhancing our habitat connections and gene flow across the St. Croix River is critical to sustainability of populations on both sides.

The day then moved into open floor time for managers and all interested to share updates on projects and populations in their work and home areas across Minnesota sharptail range, and discuss shaping the next 30 years. The annual membership meeting followed, including announcement of newly elected officers. Our event ended with a delectable BBQ rib supper, fundraising and socializing. Much thanks to all, \$2,882.44 was raised through Spring Fling for sharptail habitat projects.

On Sunday morn, April 30, a small group convened for coffee and rolls, then toured the Park's savanna restoration with Rick Dunkley and neighborhood sharptail habitat with Dave Pauly. MSGS genuinely thanks everyone that worked on and behind the scenes to recognize this special anniversary milestone.



## **First Ever MN Prairie Chicken Society & MN Sharp-tailed Grouse Society Brush Cut** Jodie Provost, MN DNR Private Land Specialist & MSGS DNR Rep.

MPCS and MSGS volunteers flocked together for the first time to wreak mutual woody destruction on a Brush Cut Day. Two public land, open and brushland habitat projects, spear-headed by MSGS, occurred again this past winter.

The first took place on March 4 at the Lee Nursery addition to Glacial Ridge NWR in northwest Minnesota. It was co-hosted by both Minnesota's prairie grouse societies which provided breakfast at the Ness Café in Erskine, and an outdoor lunch of pasture-raised beef burgers to highlight support of habitat with our purchases. Gregg Knutsen and Ben Walker of the USFWS organized and oversaw site work. Twenty-eight participants, including 21 students from Crookston, Bemidji, and Vermillion affected 10.9 acres. Congrats to Crookston for taking home the new, highly coveted Golden Saw Traveling Trophy for bringing the most students to the Northwest Brush Cut.

The second Brush Cut Day occurred on March 25 at the Sax and Fermoy WMAs in St. Louis County of northeastern Minnesota. MSGS provided breakfast at Wilbert Café in Cotton and another outdoor lunch of delicious, pasture-raised, beef burgers. Jessica Holmes and Jeremy Maslowski of the Tower DNR Wildlife Area provided project sites and oversaw work. Twenty-one people, including ten students from Brainerd Central Lakes College and Vermillion Community College, improved 32.2 acres of Sax-Zim Bog, an Audubon Important Birding Area. Congrats to Vermillion who earned the Golden Saw Traveling Trophy for the Northeast Brush Cut.

Of particular interest was participation of two students at both Brush Cuts - Nick Peterson and Isaac Johnson of Vermillion were especially dedicated. The most tenacious volunteer was long-time MSGS member, John Gislason, who in his late seventies again attended, and has never missed a Northeast Brush Cut since they began in 1993 - truly an inspiration!

At an average of \$90/acre for mowing or shearing trees down, these volunteers' effort on 43.1 acres is valued at nearly \$3,900. Their labor can serve as match for Expedited Conservation Partner Legacy grants secured by MSGS for habitat enhancement on WMAs, leveraging even more habitat support. MSGS sincerely thanks everyone that helped make the 2017 Brush Cut Days a success.

## **Featured Wildlife Management Area (WMA): Sax/Zim/Fermoy Complex**

Jeremy Maslowski, MN DNR Tower Asst. Area Wildlife Manager & MSGS NE Regional Rep.

Many people refer to this popular birding area as "Sax-Zim Bog", when in fact the area consists of three management units: Sax, Zim and Fermoy WMAs. The total management area is 247 square miles in central St Louis County. Features include prime birding habitat but also habitat for white-tailed deer, moose, black bears and small mammals. The majority of this area consists of county land, as well as scattered private lands. Recently, Ecosystem Investment Partners (EIP) acquired over 23,000 acres in this area to restore wetlands and sell credits to developers or other businesses who destroy wetlands to complete projects.

The Sax/Zim/Fermoy complex has been important sharp-tailed grouse habitat over the years, but has recently seen significant declines in the number of birds utilizing the area. Currently, Tower Wildlife staff are busy preparing sites for a sharp-tailed grouse habitat "Season of Burn Study" in which impact of fire seasonality on vegetation composition and grouse habitat use is being investigated. This study will occur over the next couple years with burns scheduled for spring, summer and fall, and dependent on weather conditions. In addition, Tower staff have recently administered a \$41,000 winter brush mowing contract that was funded with MSGS-PF Partnership OHF grant enhancement money. This project treated 250 acres of rank brush on Sax and Zim WMAs. In addition this past winter, MSGS held its annual Brush Cut volunteer event on Sax WMA. Students from a couple of local colleges, as well as volunteers from MSGS and DNR, hand cut about 32 acres of scattered tamarack, aspen and willow on two sites. These sites are within a burn unit slated to be burned when site conditions are suitable. The habitat management projects described above are all motivated by the mission to increase the quality of sharp-tailed grouse habitat in east-central Minnesota.

## **Landscape Connectivity for Sharp-tailed Grouse**

### **Charlotte Roy, MN DNR Grouse Project Leader**

In 2014 and 2015, Dr. Andrew Gregory of Bowling Green State University, Eric Nelson of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and I conducted a study to examine landscape connectivity for sharp-tailed grouse. With the help of DNR biologists, hunters, and MSGS members that submitted 831 samples for DNA analysis, including feathers collected from leks and wings from harvested birds, we used a landscape genetics approach to help us understand how grouse moved through the landscape.

We received results from the genetics lab in summer 2016, and learned we had sampled 451 different sharp-tailed grouse, including 367 from the northwest (NW) population and 84 from the northern half of the east-central (EC) population. Sometimes more than one sample was collected from the same bird, and sometimes samples didn't have much DNA or it was too degraded to use; so we ended up with fewer than 831 individuals. We found that genetic diversity in Minnesota sharptails is high and there is no evidence of inbreeding. Like an earlier study, we also found that birds in the NW and EC regions are distinct, but have had movement between them some time in the recent past. However, we learned lots of new things too!

We found that connectivity of sharp-tailed grouse populations is related to land cover (amount of agriculture and shrubland/grasslands) after comparing support for eight different hypotheses that looked at various combinations of variables including the amount of grass, agriculture, linear features such as roads and powerlines, human development, and physical distance. In the NW population, we were able to identify five clusters of genetically similar individuals that corresponded roughly to geographic areas of International Falls, Baudette, Thief River Falls, Bemidji area and a large western group that included Roseau, Kittson, and western portions of counties to the south. Each genetic cluster overlapped little with those from other areas, with one exception; the individuals from the Bemidji cluster were located in all the other areas, which can be interpreted as migrants out of the Bemidji area into these other areas. However, on the whole, sharptails didn't move very far in the NW.

In the EC population, we did not find evidence of separate genetic clusters as in the NW, but we did find evidence consistent with a recent population bottleneck. Given the recent population declines in this region, this finding is positive. It indicates that the genetic diversity has not yet been lost and if the population recovers quickly, the diversity in the population can be maintained. However, if the population remains at this smaller size, the genetic variability will slowly be lost and as it gets smaller, the loss will accelerate. Although many populations can persist with low genetic diversity for a long time (e.g., populations of invasive species often result from small numbers of founding individuals), a population with low diversity will have fewer options for coping with change. Thus, it is important that we recover this population quickly to give it the best chance possible for long term adaptability to changing conditions.

The habitat work that MSGS does will most certainly be an important part of trying to achieve this goal!

### **“The Sharp-tailed Grouse Experience”**

#### **Jake Granfors, Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist**

The annual Aitkin Rivers and Lakes Fair was held Saturday, June 17 at Aitkin High School. The Rivers and Lake Fair is a free family event that covers a wide variety of topics such as local wildlife, water quality, and aquatic invasive species. This year with the help of local Master Gardeners, we organized a booth called the “sharp-tailed grouse experience”. For our “experience” we had display boards of information, a photo slideshow of sharptails and their habitat, a mounted bird, and a DNR observation blind. The blind was set up in front of a large screen with a video and sound playing of dancing sharptails. The goal of our booth was for kids to experience this amazing and unique spring ritual and peak their interest in enjoying a morning in the blind.

The blind with the video was definitely a big hit! As soon as the kids walked into our booth, they headed straight into the blind. They watched and listened to the dancing sharptails cackling, cooing, stomping their feet, and rattling their tails. As they left we asked, “So what did you think?” The typical response was “That was awesome”. It was a great outreach event for sharptails because many of the folks that stopped would ask “Do we have these birds in Aitkin County!?” It was also fun talking with adults that would stop by to share stories about hunting sharptails in the area.

## **Sharp-tailed Grouse on the Move... Again!**

Brian Heeringa, US Forest Service Wildlife Biologist

Something is happening in northern Wisconsin that hasn't happened in a long time. People are coming across sharp-tailed grouse in locations where they haven't been seen in years! Thanks to a translocation effort lead by the US Forest Service, sharp-tailed grouse are again moving into areas that have been left vacant due to a struggling population. Along with several partners, including the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, the Chequamegon-Nicolet kicked off the second year of the 2-3 year trapping and translocation project that began in 2016. As many of you may already know, last year 29 Minnesota sharp-tails were released on the Moquah Barrens located on the Washburn Ranger District of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in NW Wisconsin. Monitoring through the summer and fall of 2016 showed that the transplanted birds were adapting to their new home, but some of them, unfortunately, were killed by predators or simply seemed to disappear. All of the released birds received white numbered leg bands and five of the males also received radio transmitters to track their movements. As 2016 came to a close, three of the radioed birds had died from predation, and two of them seemed to have vanished.

Prior to returning to Minnesota to begin our second season of trapping, early spring surveys on the Barrens revealed that some of the translocated birds survived winter! In fact, they not only survived but these birds were holding their own on the dancing ground against the local Moquah birds! It may be too early to claim success, but it sure was encouraging to see birds with white leg bands showing up to the dancing ground. Prior to last year's release, over the last several years of conducting spring surveys at the one known remaining active dancing ground only 2 males and maybe 1 female sharp-tailed grouse would show up. This spring we are up to 6 males, with 2-3 attending females. Not large gains, but progress none-the-less. With these encouraging thoughts we embarked on the 2017 effort with high hopes and a trapping team that was twice as big as the year before. Arriving in Karlstad, MN the week of April 17th we were ready to add to the success seen last year. Over the two week period spent trapping in the greater Karlstad and Roseau areas and one week in the Baudette area, we were able to capture nearly 200 sharp-tailed grouse, and ended up moving 67 (22 females and 45 males) birds to the Moquah Barrens. As with 2016, the large majority (13 out of 15 sites) of the trapping occurred on private lands where we received landowner permission.

All the translocated birds were inspected by a veterinarian in Duluth prior to entering Wisconsin and being released on the Barrens. Now, I know I breezed through the trapping part of the project pretty quickly, and having been there for the entire time I can tell you that it was an amazing experience to get to work with these birds up close and personal, but to be honest I think what happens after the birds were released is the truly fascinating part. To start, all birds trapped and moved were released the same day of capture. This meant a long car ride, over 6 hours, prior to being released into their new home sometime between 3 and 5 pm. A "soft release" was used by which sharp-tailed grouse calls and display sounds were broadcast to put the birds at ease and encourage them to linger at the release site rather than quickly flying out and away. In fact, this method worked so well that the playback calls attracted two of the local Moquah males and even some of the birds released in 2016! These birds showed up at almost every release and acted as the best welcoming committee anyone could have ever asked for.

As in 2016, all released birds received a white numbered leg band but this year they also received unique combinations of colored leg bands. A small subset of the birds (5 female and 5 male) received radio transmitters and were immediately monitored by a wildlife intern hired by the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in partnership with the Forest Service. Radio telemetry tracking has shown us that birds have been sticking around the release site as well as the larger barrens habitat. However, it has also shown us that these birds move! In fact, though naïve to the landscape and only recently released, they have started showing up in locations that were historically occupied by sharp-tails. Their movements, both direction and distance travelled, are also showing us that they may not be quite as isolated as we thought they were! For example, one male picked up and moved over 17 miles (straight line) E/SE from the release site to hang around the grass fields near the Ashland Airport, three other males moved over 5 miles west of the release site to some agricultural fields, and a female moved about 16 miles SW of the release site to land managed by Bayfield County where she eventually laid over 10 eggs. We try to obtain at least one location on each bird per week, but these far ranging and often directionally opposite movements can be challenging. The female on eggs is being monitored to determine when chicks hatch, but as of this writing she is still incubating. Other observations of note include several groups of sharp-tails being reported by members of the public, one 2017 banded male grouse was seen approximately 14 miles S/SW of the release site, and one of the 2016 radioed males that vanished has reappeared.

Interestingly he is now one of our most frequently found birds. Monitoring will continue through summer and into winter. Our hope is to get a better understanding of how these birds are interacting with their environment as well as perhaps what their seasonal movements are. With any luck we will see some of these birds show up at the dancing ground next spring. Dare I say, maybe a new dancing ground will be discovered or perhaps a historic one revitalized?

Our overall project goal still remains to bring 200 new sharp-tailed grouse (100 female and 100 male) to the Moquah Barrens. By the end of the 2017 season, we have successfully released 96 birds. The feasibility of a third and final year of trapping to get as close to this goal as possible is currently being looked into by tribal, state, and other partners. Whether another season of translocation happens or not, this project has already proven to be wildly successful and has given the struggling Moquah sharp-tail population a fighting chance. All these efforts would not have been as successful as they were without the support of MSGS. Thank you for your generous support and encouragement. We look forward to continuing to work with you in the coming year. In particular I would like to take a moment to personally thank Jodie Provost and Bill Berg for all the assistance, expertise, and time they provided to the project. Their help was instrumental in the accomplishment of our project goals. Thank you!

### **30 Years of Accomplishments in a Nutshell** Jamie Gangaware, MSGS Habitat Project Coordinator

**Volunteers**—Beginning in 1993, MSGS has organized volunteers Brush Cuts to improve habitat- all by hand! Since the beginning, 23 sites have been cut resulting in over 500 managed acres.

**Heritage Enhancement Grants**—These grants were created within the Legislature in 2001 and provided funding to local outdoor clubs for habitat improvement projects on state land. In 2001-2009, MSGS was awarded \$671,854 and 17,029 acres were enhanced.

**Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF)**—This fund is the result of the Legacy Amendment passed in 2008 by MN Voters. The OHF makes funds available in two ways: small grants and direct appropriation.

Small Grants Conservation Partners Legacy Grant Program (CPL) - MSGS was awarded \$300,400 in 2009 and 2016 because of a \$30,400 match from MSGS. As a result, 2,937 acres have been enhanced to-date.

Direct Appropriation - In 2011-2015 MSGS and partners were awarded \$8,217,000 where 7,136 acres benefited, including large land acquisitions.

In total, over 24,665 acres of land have been improved and made available for sharptail and the people of MN. Working with partnering conservation organizations has been incredibly important to meet these accomplishments. Partners include Pheasants Forever, MN Deer Hunters Association, National Wild Turkey Federation, Ruffed Grouse Society, MN Prairie Chicken Society, Woodcock MN and The Nature Conservancy.

### **Upcoming Events (Co-sponsored by MSGS)** Grazing Workshops

**NE MN Forage & Grassland Council, Grazing Workshop & Forage Field Day** - Friday, Sept. 29, 2017, 9:30 am - 3 pm at Roberts Farm, 41469 Osprey Ave., Aitkin, MN. \$5 if RSVP by Sept. 25, \$15 at event. For more information and to RSVP call Aitkin NRCS office at 218-927-2413.

**NW MN Stockmans' Association, Grazing Workshop** - Friday - Saturday, Sept. 15-16, 2017. Starts 3 pm on Friday one mile east of Zipple State Park (contact Tom Olson 218-395-0409 for more information). Continues 9 am on Saturday in Badger area (contact Dana Didrikson 218-689-1480 for more information).

***The Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society is “dedicated to the management and restoration of sharptails in Minnesota for hunters and non-hunters.”***

## Treasurer Summary

### Derek Frost, MSGS Treasurer

The table to the right shows current MSGS account balances. These accounts aid sharp-tailed grouse habitat conservation, management and outreach.

Including fundraising that occurred at the recent 2017 Spring Fling and 30th Anniversary Celebration, MSGS accounts total **\$12,172.04**.

**MSGS thanks Aitkin NWTF and Woodcock MN** for their recent donations of \$250 each for closing costs on acquisitions!

Account/Funding Source	Dollars
Regular Business Checking	\$7,401.15
Heritage/CPL Checking	\$500.00
SOS Savings	\$4,270.89

## Membership Update

### Dave Dickey, MSGS Membership Coordinator

As of June 20 2017, MSGS total membership is **263**. We have gained approximately 26 members since June 2016.

**Email addresses encouraged** - MSGS values its members, communications and funds. To reduce newsletter mailing costs, conserve funds for other important outreach and habitat opportunities, and allow special communications via email, members are encouraged to provide their email addresses to membership coordinator, Dave Dickey, at [99whitetail@gmail.com](mailto:99whitetail@gmail.com). MSGS will not share members' email addresses. Hard copies of newsletters will continue to be mailed to members with no e-mail address and/or that desire a hard copy.

Category	Members
Regular	127
Contributing	32
Sustaining	6
Life	23
Sponsor	1
Complimentary	33
Student	28
Landowners	13

## Hunters Can Contribute to Conservation Research for Prairie Grouse - Neonicotinoid Study

### Charlotte Roy, MN DNR Grouse Project Leader

This fall, we are asking licensed sharp-tailed grouse and prairie-chicken hunters for their help. We are conducting a study to examine recent exposure of prairie grouse to neonicotinoid pesticides through treated seeds or other means. We hope to determine whether residues are detectable in liver and tissues of harvested birds.

To contribute to the study, we are asking prairie grouse hunters to consider submitting samples from the birds they harvest, along with the GPS location where the bird was harvested. If GPS coordinates are not available, township, range, section, and quarter-section information is also useful, but GPS coordinates are preferred if possible, and will be kept confidential. If you would like to help, **please submit whole frozen liver or whole birds to your local Area Wildlife Office by appointment** during regular business hours. DNR Office Locator Application can be found at: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/contact/locator.html>. Harvest location information will be kept confidential. Please fill out the following information for each bird or liver submitted.



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Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources Prairie Grouse Sample Collection

Species: Prairie-chicken / Sharp-tailed grouse (circle one)

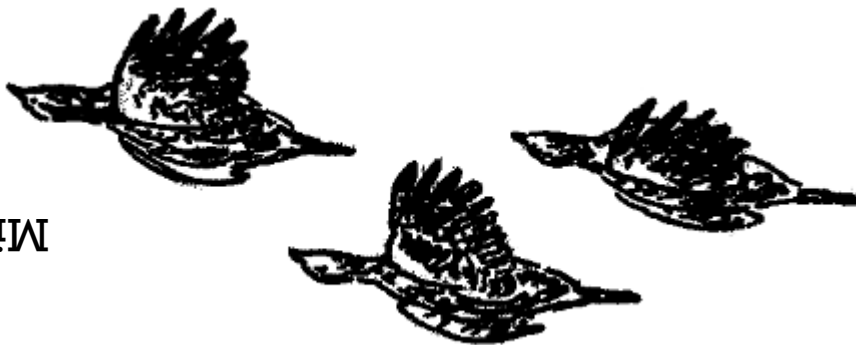
Sex of bird (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

Date of harvest: \_\_\_\_\_ Collector: \_\_\_\_\_

Township/Range/Section: \_\_\_\_\_ Example: T152N R38W S21

GPS Location if Possible: \_\_\_\_\_

# Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society



**PAPERLESS NOTICE- EMAIL ADDRESSES ENCOURAGED**

MSG values its members, communications and funds. To reduce newsletter mailing costs, conserve funds for other important outreach and habitat opportunities, and allow special communications via email, members are encouraged to provide their email addresses to membership coordinator, Dave Dickey, at 99whitetail@gmail.com. MSGS will not share members' email addresses. Hard copies of newsletters will continue to be mailed to members with no e-mail address and/or that desire a hard copy.

**MN Sharp-tailed Grouse Society**  
**P.O. Box 3338**  
**Duluth, MN 55803**

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