



THE MINNESOTA SHARPTAILER

Winter 2017 NEWSLETTER

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

2017 Spring Fling	2
“Want to Dance?”	2-3
Winter Board Meeting Minutes	4
Students In	4
STG in the Tallgrass	5
Call for Volunteer	6
MSGS Election	7
Membership Update	7

- ### MSGS Board & Coordinators
- Roche Lally, President
 - Dave Pauly, Vice President
 - Gregg Nelson, Secretary
 - Ward Julien, Treasurer
 - Matt Breuer, Web Coordinator
 - Bill Berg, Director at Large
 - Bill Faber, Student Advisor
 - Bill Goldberg, Accountant
 - Dave Dickey, Membership
 - Jodie Provost, MN DNR Rep.
 - Melissa Koelsch, Newsletter

2017 MSGS BRUSH CUTS– GET THOSE SAWS READY! Jodie Provost, MN DNR Rep.

The MN Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGS), MN Prairie Chicken Society (MPCS), DNR and USFWS cordially invite you to join us at the 2017 Brush Cuts spearheaded by MSGS. Please join the flocks for camaraderie, fresh air, good food, and prairie and brushland habitat enhancement for prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse.

NW MN Brush Cut, March 4 - We will meet at Ness Café in Erskine at 8 am for a breakfast buffet provided by MSGS and MPCS. After foraging we will head out to Glacial Ridge NWR where refuge folks will guide us in hand cutting scattered trees from an old nursery on a relatively new acquisition. If going directly to the site, we will likely be working near Highway 32, but contact me beforehand to be sure.

NE MN Brush Cut, March 25 - We will meet at Wilbert’s Cafe in Cotton at 8 am for a similar breakfast buffet provided by MSGS. After foraging, we will proceed to the Sax/Zim WMA complex. DNR Tower Wildlife Area folks will lead the effort. If going directly to the site, we may park and work off County Road 7 as in the past, but contact me beforehand to be sure. Weather and ground conditions can sometimes cause a change in plans.

Grilled burgers will be provided at both events for lunch. Please come dressed properly and bring a water bottle. Layers are good for shedding as we warm up. Warm, dry footwear is also important. If we get deep snow, snowshoes can be very helpful. Hand saws will be provided, but please feel free to bring your own hand saws and nippers if you have them, to ensure there are enough tools for all. For safety, no chain saws are allowed, other than by trained DNR or USFWS personnel.

All attendees will be signed up as volunteers for the day, and all students will receive a one-year, free, MSGS membership. Also, this year for the first time, the MSGS Golden Saw, Traveling Trophy Award will go to the college bringing the most students. Will it be Brainerd, Bemidji, Vermillion, Crookston, or...? The more people that attend and put in sweat equity, the more volunteer power MSGS can show as match to its Expedited Conservation Partners Legacy grant. It would help greatly and be much appreciated!



Give Jodie a holler (office 218-429-3052, cell 218-838-3553, jodie.provost@state.mn.us) by one week prior to each event if you can join us, so we can get a head count, ensure adequate eats, and if you have questions. We’ve been having a great time and improving habitat at these events for many years. We all look forward to catching up with old friends and making new ones!

SAVE-THE-DATE for the 2017 Spring Fling, April 29-30!

Dave Pauly, Vice President & Life Member

Gather your flock and plan to join us at St. Croix State Park on April 29th & 30th for a gala gathering at Norway Point Group Camp, the site of our first society membership meeting. This year marks a great milestone for MSGS as we celebrate 30 years of sharp-tailed grouse conservation! It seemed quite fitting to return to the site where the MSGS story began.

Festivities will begin Saturday at 9:00 am with sharing of coffee and rolls amongst ample conversation. In addition to visiting with fellow sharptail enthusiasts, members will have the opportunity to vote for Board members. The remainder of the day will be filled with presentations, discussions, and networking with brushland conservationists from MN, WI and perhaps MI and Manitoba. At lunch, a “Build-Your Own Sandwich Bar” will be ready with all the fixings. The afternoon agenda will include an MSGS Membership Meeting with project updates and election results.

As evening arrives, a social with fundraising raffles and auctions will begin at 5 pm. Some of the items include a German wire-haired puppy, handcrafted furniture and other outdoor items. A Smoked Barbequed Rib Dinner with beverages of your choice will be served during the fundraising. You are welcome to stay overnight in the cabins and enjoy optional Sunday morning field trips of possibly sharptail/habitat observation, savanna restoration projects, and spring bird migration in the river corridor.

Those attending the celebration will not be required to have a Park sticker. We look forward to catching up with many of you. If interested in attending this special event, Save-the-Date! Pre-registration forms will be mailed to members in March.

WANT TO DANCE? (It's Important)

Bill Berg, Director at Large

If you're a sharptail, it's a dancing ground. If you're a greater prairie chicken, it's a booming ground. If you're a lesser prairie chicken, it's a gobbling ground. If you're a sage grouse, it's a strutting ground. And if you're a black grouse, you just lek, period. But all of these are mating display areas, or leks. In 2003, Dr. John Toepfer wrote a great paper entitled “*What the Heck is a Lek?*” In it, he provided some background of the term “lek,” which may be a derivation from the Swedish “leika” which means “play.” Others define lek as a “mating site.” After describing several alternatives and derivations of “lek” Toepfer encouraged folks to use the actual term for the species. So I'm just using “dancing ground” because the sharptails on a dancing ground are not playing. The males there have one thing on their mind, and unlike playing, their activity could hurt them or even kill them. But it perpetuates the species.

The dancing ground is the most critical part of the habitat complex. I have surveyed spring sharptail males on around 170 different dancing grounds, and I know of at least three studies contracted though DNR that investigated what makes a lek (oops---dancing ground) tick. The only requirement of a dancing grounds is that is open, and the less tall grass, brush and (heaven forbid) trees, the better. Most dancing grounds cover one acre or less, and may be on the edge or in the center of the habitat complex. I have surveyed dancing sharptails on grass, sedge, stubble, cultivated field, gravel and blacktop roads and airport runways, abandoned wild rice paddies, and mine tailings basins. As long as it was open, the boys appeared happy. When the habitat began closing in, the dance seemed subdued. And no matter what the habitat was, when a female showed up, the males seemed really happy. It seems that red-tailed hawks love near-by trees, and they learn fast. Some dancing grounds are slightly raised, and raised sites always seem to be vibrant. A few dancing grounds have a single marker, such as a single boulder, fence post, or even a tree. Scandinavian biologists I have hosted remark that black grouse often have a similar marker.

Story Continues on page 3...

Unless dancing ground habitat is damaged or changed drastically by succession or development, dancing grounds are traditional and can potentially last forever. There are dancing grounds in the Roosevelt and Williams area that have been used every year since 1963, either on the very same piece of ground or on an adjacent parcel.

Over the years (my first sharptail counts were in 1971) it seemed like most dancing grounds were on private lands, and there were a few on the more open DNR WMAs. Charlotte Roy, DNR's Grouse Biologist, recently tallied dancing ground ownerships for a couple years, and at least 80% were on private land, in most cases, ag land. To me, that's a red flag, and management efforts on some DNR WMAs need to be gradually tailored to not just manage for one large contiguous grass-brush complex using shearing or burning, but to pay special attention to improving the characteristics of a known dancing ground, or to build a new one.

Males never go far from the dancing ground. Even now, in mid-winter, the males may visit the site on a clear cold morning, three months before any mating will occur. The same males may stay into mid-June, but since all the hens have been bred, may just stay for a short time. Some males return to dancing grounds in autumn, and even display physically and vocally. Maybe they are thinking about the singles bar that will occur in spring, if they live that long. Decades ago there was an experiment in Saskatchewan where all the males were intentionally shot from the dancing ground, so there would be no surviving males that remembered the site. But the following spring, new males recognized the site, and occupied it. That's because when a dancing ground had been used for a couple decades, the millions of times those little sharptail feet have stomped on the ground, and the uncountable times sharptails have pooped on it, have altered the substrate. Moss forms, little mounds build, and the vegetation gets trampled and recycled. Some of these characteristics can even survive successional changes. I recall one dancing ground in Manitoba's Interlake Region where brush and trees displaced it, and once it was sheared and enhanced with grass, the sharptails recognized it and returned. Several studies have documented that the males and females on a particular dancing ground complex never go far from it. Most females nest within three-fourths of a mile. One exception in some areas is that where ericaceous and stunted conifer bogs exist, sharptails may migrate from the traditional complex in winter to browse on Arctic birch and other shrubs.

Over the years, I have been deeply saddened by the loss of sharptail complexes, and particularly the loss of dancing grounds. Examples are Lakewood Township in Lake of the Woods County, where in the early 1970s there were more than 26 dancing grounds, Today, there are maybe eight. Itasca County had more than fifteen dancing grounds in 1975, and by the late 1990s, there were none. Every year, a few dancing grounds expire, while no new ones are created. Every sharptail area in the state has seen these declines, although perhaps not as dramatic. Often the dancing ground goes first, and the birds are forced to display in less open habitat. Without fail, display vigor is lost. Other times, the complex deteriorates while the dancing site stays good. The outcomes are always the same.

Two memories of dancing ground surveys stand out. One is of a red-tailed hawk hitting a sharptail on the dancing ground. It was a literal explosion of feathers. The other memory involved not a sharptail, but a single sandhill crane on the dancing ground. On the far side of the crane was a coyote stalking the crane, and on my side was a bobcat crouching cat-style, creeping up to the crane. Neither predator was successful at getting breakfast that morning, as the crane just hopped around, just like dancing. So if you want to dance, do it quickly.

MSGs IS ON THE WEB!

Watch for our upcoming announcements and giveaways

Check out the MSGS website at the following address: www.sharptails.org

Like the **Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society** on **Facebook®** for announcements, giveaways, & news!

**DEDICATED TO THE MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION OF SHARPTAILS
IN MINNESOTA FOR HUNTERS AND NON-HUNTERS**

WINTER MSGS BOARD MEETING

January 5th, 2017

The meeting convened at 5:30 pm. Present: Roche Lally (President), Dave Pauly (Vice President, Habitat Project Coordinator), Ward Julien (Treasurer, Magazine Editor, Acquisition Coordinator), Gregg Nelson (Secretary), Bill Berg (Director at Large), Bill Faber (Student Advisor), Dave Dickey (Membership), Jodie Provost (DNR Rep), Melissa Kolesch (Newsletter Editor)

A membership update was given by Dave D. Membership currently stands at 246. Membership expiration dates will be placed on mailing labels from here out versus membership ID numbers to help members to renew on time. A check box will be added to membership applications to allow members to opt out of membership gifts if desired. Gifts received for each membership level will be adjusted. Members that recently donated \$100 will each receive a 30th anniversary hat along with a thank you. More hats need to be ordered. Ward will coordinate matting and framing of prints in the future for a much more economical price.

The next newsletter will go out in early February to promote and share information on the March 4 and March 25 Brush Cuts in the NW and NE, respectively. Another brief newsletter will go out in March to promote the Spring Fling/30th Anniversary and elections

Acquisition and habitat projects, the annual budget and finances were discussed. Fundraising is needed for acquisition closing costs on four tracts protected with the FY15 MSGS/PF Outdoor Heritage (OH) grant. A recent pledge by the Aitkin NWTF Chapter Match toward closing costs will help. About \$400,000 of the OH grant remains for enhancement projects on public lands in NE MN over the next two years (LSOHC extended the time period allowed to expend it). Match for the six Expedited Conservation Partner Legacy grants recently secured will be obtained through an \$8,000 pledge by the MFRC East-central Landscape Committee, and in kind work through Brush Cuts, Dave Pauly's grant administration and project coordination time, and MSGS insurance costs. Funding from other conservation/sportsmen's groups is also still possible.

The next meeting will be a specially scheduled gathering in late January at Hinckley to plan the Spring Fling/30th Anniversary celebration. The meeting adjourned at 8:30 pm.

STUDENTS IN CONSERVATION—"The Fire Bird"

Gary Patton, Central Lakes College Natural Resource Program

The male sharp-tailed grouse (STG) uses open landscapes called "leks", with other males for breeding rights from March to June, but the highest use occurs at the end of April. The males "dance around" on the lek by stomping their feet, rattling their tail feathers, inflating their purple necks, and make cooing calls to get the attention of hens.

The STG uses a variety of different habitats to include brushlands, grasslands, woodland edges, prairies, farmlands, bogs, and boreal forest edges. These habitats are used throughout the year depending on the season. STG use different habitats for feeding, mating, nesting and raising young, and for winter cover. For the hens, finding nesting habitat is a priority during mating season.

Nest sites share characteristics such as thick tall vegetation mixed with woody vegetation at or within a close distance to the nest. When the chicks are born, they are precocial, meaning their eyes are open and the hen does not need to feed them after hatching .

The loss of habitat is one decimating factor in the decline of STG populations. Suitable STG habitat decline is caused by forest succession, lack of fires on the landscape, replanting of forests, logging practices, and non-native plants and trees introductions. However, the primary cause of habitat loss comes from our agricultural practices!

When managing habitat for STG, we must consider the different habitats that they use throughout the year. Instead of just managing a single habitat, we need to manage the "lekking", feeding, wintering, nesting, and brood habitats. STG populations are declining due to loss of habitat. They are noted as a Species in Greatest Conservation Need by MN DNR in their State Wildlife Action Plan. By implementing and practicing sound conservation and management principles, we can ensure the survival of STG for future generations to enjoy.

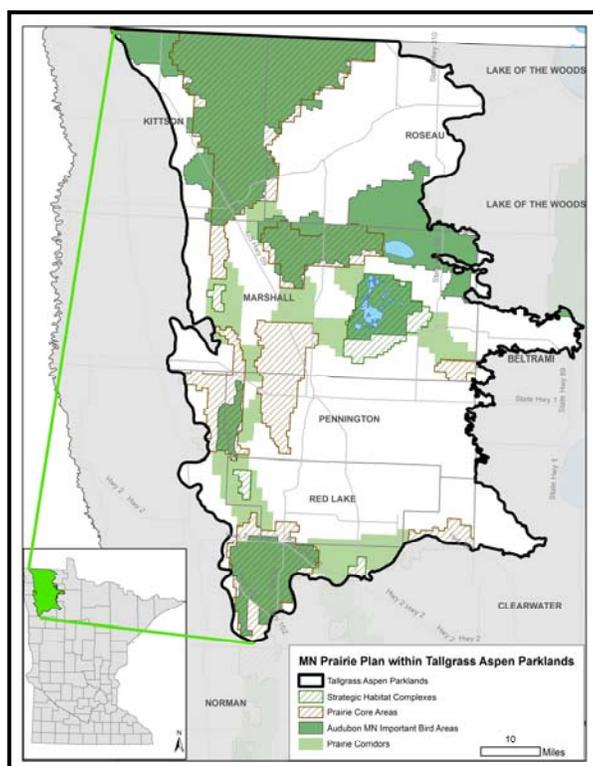
SHARP-TAILED GROUSE IN THE TALLGRASS ASPEN PARKLANDS

Alexandra Wardwell, Audubon Minnesota

The Tallgrass Aspen Parklands ecoregion covers a portion of southeastern Manitoba and most of northwestern Minnesota. Within Minnesota, the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands (TAP) province covers over two million acres and is a unique landscape not found anywhere else in the United States. Luckily, it is still a place to find sharp-tailed grouse. Historically, sharpies thrived across much of Canada, the northern reaches of the Midwest, and several western states. As a result of altered landscapes, sharp-tailed grouse have been selected as a priority species for a number of conservation agencies and non-profit organizations on both sides of the international border.

Audubon Minnesota (mn.audubon.org) has prioritized this region due to its distinct bird life and because of its transitional habitat characteristics; It is the divider between prairie to the south and west, and forests to the east, retaining qualities of each. Bird enthusiasts appreciate that this region is home to 165 breeding and permanent avian residents, not to mention the 114 bird species that utilize its habitats during migration and in winter months! Audubon Minnesota is working to conserve parcels through voluntary high-quality conservation easements in partnership with Minnesota Land Trust, another Minnesota non-profit. Conservation easements allow the habitat to be conserved while keeping private landowners on their land. The TAP Program focuses conservation efforts on Audubon's five Important Bird Areas located in the TAP, Prairie Core, Prairie Corridor, and Strategic Habitat Complexes as laid out by the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan. Audubon Minnesota selected five focal species that represent the diversity of habitats found in the TAP and help guide our work: American bittern, least bittern, Franklin's gull, upland sandpiper, and the sharp-tailed grouse.

Sharp-tailed grouse, once one of the most common game birds in the state, have steadily declined in the last half century. This quintessential TAP bird requires large open areas of early-successional habitats which are currently threatened by unchecked succession, fragmentation of habitat, and agricultural and urban development of suitable habitat. Audubon Minnesota selected the sharp-tailed grouse as a Target Conservation Species for brush-prairie in the TAP due to population declines in the region, their dependency on vulnerable habitat, and the species prioritization by many other natural resource agencies. Habitat conservation of open brush land used by sharp-tailed grouse provides valuable habitat for a host of bird species including: northern harriers, yellow-billed cuckoo, yellow rail, sandhill crane, brown thrasher, clay-colored sparrows, Nelson's sparrow and many more!



Ample opportunities exist to work with private landowners to manage and conserve sharp-tailed grouse habitat. Audubon Minnesota and Minnesota Land Trust hope to be part of the solution in the TAP and throughout Minnesota.

For more information on the TAP Program please visit: mn.audubon.org/TAP To view Audubon Minnesota's Blueprint for MN Bird Conservation by eco-region visit: mn.audubon.org/birds/minnesota-target-species To see how climate change may affect the sharp-tailed grouse's range visit: www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/sharp-tailed-grouse

The funding for Protecting and Restoring Minnesota's Important Bird Areas: TAP Program was provided from the Outdoor Heritage Fund to restore, protect, and enhance Minnesota's wetlands, prairies, forests, and habitat for fish, game, and wildlife.

 **Audubon** MINNESOTA

CALL FOR VOLUNTEER SHARP-TAILED GROUSE TRAPPERS & DRIVERS

Dan Ecklund, USFS Biologist & Project Leader

The Chequamegon Nicolet National Forest plans to continue sharp-tailed grouse trapping in northwest Minnesota for translocation to Moquah Barrens of northwest Wisconsin in April 2017. This project was initiated in 2016 to move up to 200 sharp-tailed grouse to provide genetic and demographic rescue to one of Wisconsin's last nine managed populations of sharptails. This particular population resides within restored pine barren habitat in the Washburn Ranger District of the Bayfield Peninsula.



Minnesota DNR graciously granted the USFS approval for this effort. In 2016, under direction of USFS district biologist and former project lead, Tom Doolittle, 29 sharptails were translocated from northwest Minnesota to Moquah Barrens. **In 2017, Dan Ecklund, USFS forest biologist and current project lead, welcomes MSGS members or other conservation-minded folks, to volunteer with trapping and/or transport teams during the time period of April 18–28.**

Trapping Team volunteers will work in the Karlstad or Baudette areas. Exact locations are yet to be determined. Volunteers will be paired in teams of two. At least five to ten teams willing to commit to at least three consecutive volunteer days are desired. Each team will scout, deploy and monitor captured sharp-tailed grouse at assigned dancing grounds. Birds captured for translocation will be brought to a processing facility for prep and transport the same day.

USFS hopes to cover hotel and some meals costs, but are unsure at this time. Volunteers can expect early mornings, a bit of a drive to trap sites, damp ground, cold weather, some walking on uneven terrain, and light to moderate physical labor to install or remove the traps. A great sunrise, good conversation with teammates, awesome wildlife viewing, and adventure can also be expected.

Transport Team volunteers will be needed each day to move sharptails. Drivers must be able to commitment a day. They will get a call informing them that day if sharptail need to be transported or not. Birds will be transported from the processing facility to a swap site, likely in the Grand Rapids area. There, volunteers will pick up and take birds to a veterinarian in Duluth for a health check. After the vet visit, volunteers will continue driving east to Moquah Barrens, north of Highway 2 in Ino where a person will await to assist with release. They will either take the transport box and give a new box, or release drivers to return home.

Although sharp-tailed grouse will be in a transport box(es), their care is important on the trip. A mini-van, truck with a cab, suburban type vehicle that can hold several crates on the floor, bed or cargo area, that is well ventilated, but enclosed, is needed. This protects birds from weather and prevents jostling. Unfortunately, there are no means to cover fuel costs. It will be part of your contribution to conservation. Round trip from Grand Rapids to Ino is 280 miles.

If interested in assisting in this important conservation effort, please contact Brian Heeringa (bheeringa@fs.fed.us or 715-373-2667) or Dan Ecklund (deklund@fs.fed.us or 715-762-5194).



MSGS Election Notice

Preparations are underway for an election prior to and at the Spring Fling/30th Anniversary Celebration on April 29. Open positions will include President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and four Regional Representatives (NW, NE, SE, SW). Vice President and NE and SW Regional Reps will be elected for one year terms this one election, then two year terms thereafter. Remaining positions will be filled as two year terms. If you would like to nominate someone or yourself for one of these important roles, please e-mail Dave Pauly at griz@scicable.net with the candidate's biography and why they are interested in the role by March 1. A March newsletter will contain a ballot and candidate biographies, in addition to the Spring Fling Agenda and Pre-Registration Form. Election results will be announced at the Spring Fling Meeting and on the MSGS website and Facebook.

Membership Update Dave Dickey, Membership Coordinator

As of January 27, our total membership is 249. Last June we had 237 members. Since then we have added 13 non-paying members and lost 1 paying member. 27 renewals are pending through January 31 and 19 coming up in February. **Starting winter 2018, newsletters will only be sent via e-mail. Please send your e-mail address to: 99whitetail@gmail.com** Fall magazines will still be mailed regularly.

Category	Members
Regular	118
Contributing	27
Sustaining	8
Life	22
Complimentary	31
Student	30
Landowners	13



MSGS Membership– New Members and Membership Renewal

Category	Gift for New Members	Donation
Regular	Newsletter and Decal (received by all categories)	\$15
Contributing	MSGS Hat	\$50
Sustaining	Sharptail Print	\$100
Sponsor	T-shirt & Print	\$200
Life	Framed Print	\$500
(One-time Donation)		

Category Selected:

Save Our Sharptails (SOS)

Voluntary Donation for Habitat:

Total Enclosed:

Check box if you opt out of receiving gift

THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING MSGS!

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Phone _____

Please remove this application from the newsletter and mail to the following address:

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

Minnesota Sharp-tailed
Grouse Society
Celebrating 30 years of
Conservation!



PAPERLESS NOTICE
MSGSG strives to contribute as much financial support as possible to aid in sharp-tailed grouse and brush-land conservation. In an effort to decrease postage costs, newsletters will be distributed to members via email starting with the **2018 Winter Newsletter**. Magazines will continue to be printed and distributed through the mail. If you have any concerns please contact MSGSG (mailing address located on page 7).

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

Stamp

Address Service Requested

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