

2023 Upper Midwest Prairie Grouse Summit – Addressing Fragmented Greater Prairie-Chicken and Sharp-tailed Grouse Populations



The Upper Midwest Prairie Grouse Summit was attended by about forty greater prairie-chicken and sharp-tailed grouse managers and researchers on August 1-2, 2023. Here participants are pictured behind metal art of displaying sharp-tailed grouse outside the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area visitor center. It was created in honor of Jim Evrard, long-time Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society leader.

Last March, a call went out from managers of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. They were concerned about the state of sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie-chicken populations, their common issue of fragmented populations from loss and degradation of habitat (primarily from natural succession, fragmentation, and conversion), and lack of awareness of the birds and the issue. Thus, the idea of an Upper Midwest Prairie Grouse Summit was “hatched”.

The North American Grouse Partnership ([NAGP](#)) proceeded to gauge interest from the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society ([MSGS](#)), Minnesota Prairie-Chicken Society ([MPCS](#)), Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society ([WSGS](#)), Wisconsin prairie-chicken population and [festival](#) managers, and Michigan Sharp-tailed Grouse Association ([MSGA](#)). Then invited each state’s Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to also be involved on a planning team to craft the agenda. WSGS and NAGP teamed up to co-host, tackling logistics and securing speakers.

The Summit occurred on August 1-2 at the Crex Meadows Wildlife Area in the Northwest Sands of Wisconsin. Its primary purpose was to serve as a forum for professionals to share management and research information, learn from one another, and initiate a more collaborative approach to determine and implement strategies to sustain and recover prairie grouse populations across our ecoregion. A secondary purpose was to raise awareness and understanding among the public for the birds and their habitats to increase support for their management. The agenda consisted of one and a half days with twenty presentations and three designated open group discussions, and a half-day, morning tour of habitat projects on Crex Meadows Wildlife Area.

The Summit was launched by a welcome from WSGS and NAGP, population and management overviews from each state’s DNR, and history, accomplishments, and challenges from each

grouse organization. A presentation regarding the “[Conservation Strategy](#) for the Greater Prairie-Chicken and the Plains and Prairie Subspecies of Sharp-tailed Grouse” then framed the event and noted why fragmented populations are a concern. The Strategy, completed in 2022, was developed by an interstate work group of fourteen states and endorsed by the Western and Midwestern Associations of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The intent is to use greater prairie-chicken and sharp-tailed grouse as flagship species to conserve and restore large blocks of grasslands and shrublands, ideally a network of 50,000 acre blocks, because the status quo is not working, and their habitat continues to be lost.

The remaining agenda was broken into population (the birds), habitat (the places), and outreach (the people) management-related presentations, along with three designated times for open group discussion and brainstorming. Topics included translocation, hybridization, ‘rolling barrens’, prescribed fire, conservation ranching, private land biologists, a festival, Farm Bill policy, and ramping up conservation delivery. All presentations and the program are available on the NAGP website as pdf files under the "[Lakes States Collaborators & Resources](#)" tab. The program has the agenda and abstracts of each presentation along with e-mail addresses for speakers.

A morning tour of Crex Meadows Wildlife Area focused on challenges and management approaches to creating and enhancing barrens habitat. Local staff described how Wisconsin DNR uses a comprehensive set of management tools, including prescribed fire, mechanical treatment, chemical treatment, and commercial timber harvest, to restore and maintain it. They also shared how the property’s management contributes to habitat connectivity for sharp-tailed grouse and other barrens species at the landscape scale within the Northwest Sands. Managers, researchers, and grouse enthusiasts asked questions of local staff and provided insights from their own experience elsewhere in the Upper Midwest.

Key take-home messages from the presentations, discussions, tour, and parting questionnaire included:

Population Management

- Urgency exists in turning population declines around, such as sharp-tailed grouse in east-central Minnesota and greater-prairie chicken in North Dakota.
- At a minimum, a goal should be populations that support limited hunt seasons to maintain hunter interest and support. Many hunters simply appreciate the opportunity to see birds and experience the hunt.
- Translocation is costly, time consuming, and should only be used if the receiving habitat is of high enough quantity and quality to sustain a population. It is much more efficient to sustain and recover populations while they still exist.

Habitat Management

- Most managers struggle to meet their prescribed burn acreage goals due to factors such as weather and ground conditions (e.g., drought, too wet, no frost), restrictions from poor air quality due to wildfires, and lack of qualified burn bosses.
- All habitat management tools are needed in an array of space and time to mimic the natural disturbances under which prairie grouse evolved, including burning, mechanical,

selective herbicide, grazing (and rest), and biomass harvest treatments. Each site/plant community and landscape are different.

- More creative methods are needed, such as Bayfield County's 'rolling barrens' and their incredible cooperation, and Michigan's hunting access program that incentivizes farming practices for sharp-tailed grouse.
- Prairie grouse can move long distances if needed, but large blocks of habitat should be present and connected enough to increase the likelihood they will find and use them. The birds should not be forced to move long distances to meet their habitat needs.
- Collaboration across landownerships is essential to attaining large habitat blocks such as the 50,000 acre blocks recommended in the Conservation Strategy.
- Landscape-scale conservation programs, such as the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program and Environmental Incentives Quality Program with adequate incentives and ability to meet landowner and wildlife needs, are critical for positive, broad-reaching habitat impacts across private lands.

Outreach

- Public and professional awareness, understanding, and support must be raised about grasslands, shrublands, and prairie grouse. Social media can be instrumental, as evidenced by WSGS recent growth in support, as well as festivals and viewing blinds, especially those that engage youth.
- Partnerships and community/private landowner support are critical, take much work, and require a designated care taker. Great opportunity exists in collaborating with Indigenous nations.
- Sufficient local, on-the-ground staff, such as Farm Bill Biologists, to deliver assistance to private landowners is essential. Pay and benefits should be high enough for them to stay in positions long-term, to build relationships and a projects base.
- Volunteers can play an important role in habitat management and provide in-kind support to leverage grants, such as through Adopt-A-WMA and Brush Cut Habitat Days.

Overall

- The states have a great deal in common, all struggling to hang on to habitat and prairie grouse populations. Yet they do not communicate or collaborate regularly.
- Management plans to sustain and recover populations are key communication tools and guides for securing and directing resources to targeted areas. Each state should have a plan and designate priority open landscapes. A coordinator is needed to implement the plan and serve as a liaison with partners.
- Attendees appreciated the array of speakers and stakeholders at the Summit and opportunity to exchange information, hear what has worked and what has not, and network. They would like to stay connected and gather again in two years.
- A work group should be formed to explore Summit ideas and collaboration, implement strategies, and organize the next Summit.

Thank you immensely to WSGS, especially Ken Jonas their president, for co-organizing this event with NAGP. And to all that shared information and attended from local grouse and conservation societies, universities, and agencies. Our shared knowledge is power for a better tomorrow for grouse, their habitats (and the multiple benefits they bring), and grouse enthusiasts.

Submitted by Jodie Provost, Sept. 28, 2023
NAGP Communications Director



Ken Jonas, WSGS president, shared about the Society's objectives and accomplishments over its 33 years.



A morning tour of projects on Crex Meadows Wildlife Area gave a glimpse of its 30,000 acres of wetlands, brush prairies and forests that area scattered across a gently rolling landscape in the Northwest Sands of Wisconsin.



Kyle Anderson, Crex Meadows Wildlife Area Property Supervisor, showed participants a roller chopper and discussed its use in maintaining barrens habitat.