

# eNEWSLETTER



An informational e-newsletter for the friends of the Douglas County Wildlife Management Area

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## Sharp-tailed Grouse Dancing and Nesting

*This article is based on WI DNR publication PUBL-WM-135 86. Sharp-tailed grouse images are courtesy of Rick Baetsen.*

Young male sharptails probably begin establishing breeding display territories as early as their first fall. During this fall period of display, the young birds set up territories on which they will perform their courtship displays the following spring. Then, usually beginning in April, the male and female sharptails gather on these grassy openings, called dancing grounds.

Twice a day, in early morning and evening, male sharptails gather to perform their courtship dance. First, they advertise their locations and the general location of the display grounds by cackling and "flutter-jumping." During flutter-jumping, the male jumps into the air, flies a few feet forward and lands again.

Male grouse also use several displays to show aggression toward one another on the dancing grounds. These aggressive displays may include several postures and calls like "chilk" and "cha" notes, squealing sounds, whining, and gobbling sounds. Also common is the "cooing" display which resembles the "booming" of the greater prairie chicken. During this display, the sharptail cocks his tail, lowers his head and inflates his esophagus to make a low-pitched cooing sound. In addition to these aggressive displays, male sharptails commonly fight for the attention of the females, using their beaks, claws and wings to attack each other. To attract female sharptails, males use several courtships displays, the most complex of which is the "tail-rattling" or

"dancing" display. This display consists of a series of rapid stepping motions performed with the tail erect, the head held forward and the wings outstretched. After assuming this stiff posture, the male "dances" in a small circle or arc. While dancing, he vibrates his tail feathers, which makes a clicking or rattling sound. Male sharptails often perform this "tail-rattling" in synchrony and frequently stop to "pose" before the females. When the male has successfully attracted a female, they mate and the female leaves the dancing ground area for her nest site.

The female sharptail generally selects a nest site near the dancing grounds (within 1/2 mile) in grassy openings with scattered brush. She lines a nest scrape with down and lays one egg per day until the clutch of 10-14 eggs is complete. The eggs are a drab olive color, with fine reddish-brown speckles. There is usually only one clutch per year, although female sharptails may reneest if a first clutch is destroyed.

The female incubates her eggs for about 23 or 24 days. Following hatching, the brood remains in grass and brushland cover where they feed on insects and plants. They begin to fly in about 10 days and by six to eight weeks; they are fully independent of their mother. At this time, the broods begin to disperse and the young sharptails often move several miles from their hatch sites.



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## Sharp-tailed Grouse Status at DCWMA

Number of Dancing Males Counted during past spring surveys:

2003	20	1999	20	1995	12
2002	12	1998	18	1994	8
2001	11	1997	9	1993	2
2000	16	1996	9	1992	4

The fall population is usually estimated at four times the number of springtime dancing males (adult males + adult females + two offspring per pair).



## History and Current Status in Wisconsin

The Sharp-tailed grouse is native to Wisconsin's prairies and was once found statewide. Recently, however, man-made and natural changes in sharptail habitat have caused the population to decline. Modern land-use practices, especially farming, have resulted in the destruction of virtually all of Wisconsin's prairies. There may be as little as 1,000 square miles of Sharp-tailed grouse habitat left in Wisconsin, and most of that is poor quality.

Currently, Wisconsin's sharptail population numbers about 5,000. These birds are mainly found on 11 state wildlife areas and adjacent privately-owned lands. These wildlife areas are located in pockets of suitable habitat in the northern third of the state and in the central forested region.

Presently, however, the state's sharptail population is declining at an estimated rate of 2 percent per year, mainly because of habitat loss. To maintain a stable sharptail population in Wisconsin, management efforts on the state's wildlife areas must be intensified.

## Description and Diet

The Sharp-tailed grouse closely resembles the greater prairie chicken and female ring-necked pheasant, but has a distinctive pointed tail edged with white. Also, the sharptail's body feathers are extensively speckled with white, buff, tawny brown and black, giving it a mottled appearance. Conspicuous white spots cover the wings, and the amount of white increases toward the breast and flanks which are intricately patterned with V-shaped brown markings. Male and female sharptails are nearly identical in plumage and size. Adult sharptails are 16-18 inches long and weigh about 2 pounds. The main difference between the sexes is the pinkish to pale violet patches of bare skin on the male's head. These patches, along with the small, inconspicuous, yellow headcomb, are expanded during the male's courtship display.

Adult Sharp-tailed grouse feed on 90% vegetative matter and 10% insects, and their diets change with the seasons. During spring, they feed mainly on weed seeds, waste grain and leaves and sprouts of plants like prickly lettuce, dandelion, clovers and wild grasses. Preferred summer foods include flowers, leaves and fruits of many green, herbaceous plants. Insects like beetles, grasshoppers, crickets and caterpillars are also part of the sharptail's summer diet.

In the fall, the grouse feed on a variety of seeds and fruits from plants like poison ivy, dandelion, mountain ash, wild rose, birch, willow and aspen. Many of these plants provide twigs and buds that make up the sharptail's winter diet. Paper birch, aspen and hazel buds and catkins are especially important winter food items.