

eNEWSLETTER



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

April 2004

The following articles were written by FOTBS member James B. Hale who, as an employee of the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1947, was the first Sharp-tail Grouse project leader to work at the DCWMA (then called the Douglas County Bird Sanctuary). His 1948 Field Notes and a 1952 article about grouse management activities are available on the FOTBS website.

Early Days with Douglas County Sharptails

By Jim Hale (written in 1996)

The area we now call the Douglas County Wildlife Area is nearly 50 years old. It was early in 1946 that representatives of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, U.S. Forest Service, field trial organizations and the press met in Milwaukee and recommended establishing a least two areas in central and northern Wisconsin for research and experimental management on sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chickens, and bobwhite quail. One of these areas was a block of forest crop land owned by Douglas County near Solon Springs. This area had been designated several decades earlier by the county as the "Douglas County Bird Sanctuary." There are still old-timers around who use that name today.

Later negotiations led to a number of meetings between Conservation Department personnel, the Douglas County Board, and the Conservation Commission. Public hearings were held. Finally it was agreed that the 63 county-owned forties (2,520 acres) of the Bird Sanctuary would be withdrawn from the Forest Crop program and leased to the Conservation Department for 50 years at \$.10 per acre. This arrangement was approved by the Conservation Commission in December, 1947 and the

withdrawals of Forest Crop lands for grouse research purposes were completed in March, 1948. A sharptail research project was started immediately with funding from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (usually called the Pittman-Robertson or P-R program).

I was put in charge of statewide sharptail and prairie chicken research late in 1947, and so became a one-man work crew on what is now the Douglas County Wildlife Area. I did have some temporary help, but the project was always a low-budget operation. The nuts and bolts of what we did are buried in lengthy reports in DNR archives, but some of the more interesting things that went on you won't find recorded there.

I became acquainted with several of the local people. Clare and Marie Wildner lived in the house that is still occupied just northwest of the present field trial building. Clare was a professional dog-trainer and field trial organizer, with strong political connections in the County Board and City of Superior. He was one of the major local backers of the new sharptail area. Clare and Marie both had feisty personalities. Clare would usually chew me out about something the minute I arrived at his place, but in the next moment pat me on the back and invite me in the house for a piece of Marie's apple pie. I learned early on that his bark was much worse than his bite; we always got along well.

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Marie was also a good friend. She too was inclined to tell me what I wasn't doing right in rather profane terms, but always ended with a smile and a second piece of pie. Among other things, Marie took great pride in her frequent mention that she was the first female ever hired by the Conservation Department to be a fire-watcher in a fire tower. This was sometime around 1920.

Wildners had an assistant trainer who lived with them. His name was Ted Holzer, an Ohio native who somehow ended up in Solon Springs. Ted was much interested in our sharptail project and became an invaluable field man, first as a volunteer and later as a full-time WCD Conservation Aid.

A neighbor down the road was a farmer named Al Etienne. Al and his son Harold donated many hours of their time, advice, tractor, and other equipment purely out of interest in sharptails. Eventually we could pay a little, but their efforts as volunteers were substantial.

There were other folks in the Solon Springs area I came to know quite well, but the most interesting individual of all was Mead Church. He lived alone in a small house in section 10 on the east-west road that is the northwest boundary of DCWA. This town road is now known as Mead Church Road, but it has nothing to do with a house of worship. The remains of Mr. Church's house still stand, but it is no longer occupied and is hardly visible behind a screen of brush. In 1948, however, none of that brush was there and an old shed stood across the road, the only thing that blocked a broad view of open grasslands.

Mr. Church told me he had lived in his house for 54 years. It had been build by his family who homesteaded there in 1894 after traveling by wagon from Grantsburg. They made this trip entirely on dry land except for crossing the Namekagon and St. Croix Rivers. He described their farm like an immense grassy park with scattered large

Norway pines, a few Jack pines, and scattered small potholes.

Raising crops exhausted what little fertility was in sandy soil in three years or less. He said grouse were abundant in the early years, but were primarily prairie chickens (yellowlegs) with only a few sharptails (pintails). Up until about 1930, as many as 200 prairie chickens used the field across the road from his house each spring. He used to hide in his cow shed and watch the birds. In the 1930's, sharptails began to replace chickens.

Mr. Church had a way with animals. Whenever I stopped by, we would sit on the back steps and talk. He always had a pocketful of corn, and would talk and at the same time hand-feed a flock of chickadees and four or five chipmunks that knew him well. I have often regretted not recording more of what he told me about the early days. Just for contrast, the farmer living just west of the Church house, Mr. Hanson, told me that in the spring of 1947, three or four sharptails danced on the same ground where Mead Church used to see 200 prairie chickens.

In 1952, the grouse research project was terminated and management of the DCWA was turned over to WCD game managers. The main reason for the change was the conclusion that limited funds could be more efficiently used by maintaining clearings and brush on more sites rather than spending it all on just one area.

This article originally appeared in the spring 1996 Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society Newsletter.

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Twenty Acres of Buckwheat

By Jim Hale (written in 1998)

This piece could well be titled “Sharptails on a Shoestring.” In the spring and summer of 1948, the first year that the Wisconsin Conservation Department (WCD) began sharp-tailed grouse research at the Douglas County Grouse Management Area, two experimental management projects were undertaken. The first was a controlled spring burn of 120 acres. Since intentional burning was just getting started as a management tool in the state, we wanted to know how fire actually affected plant growth on the sandy Douglas County barrens.

The burning was done by WCD Forest Protection crews. Actually, it was used as a training exercise so crews and equipment were brought in from all over the northwest part of the state. I was the only wildlife representative present, so I couldn't do much but watch. Judging by the number of men and machines present, it looked like the whole county was going up in flames. However, the fire went well. It was a hot one, and by the end of the summer most of the scattered aspens were dead and the bluestem and other grasses were growing well. As sharptail habitat it looked good. There were no people or wildlife casualties and similar controlled fires shortly became widely used on state-owned wildlife areas. Costs to our project for the fire, based on the Forest Protection manual of charges was \$82.87, or \$.69 per acre burned.

Our second objective that first year was to test the hypothesis that feeding sharptails in winter would result in better survival to spring than among sharptails wintering entirely on natural foods. To do this we had one biologist (me), one part-time assistant (salaried), and as many volunteers as we could recruit. The boss said we could have \$350 for the project, excluding salaries and travel.

First we staked out the boundaries of a 20-acre field west of the field-trial buildings. This area then had to be tilled, seeded and fenced against deer. Our best cooperators, Al Etienne and his son Harold, farmed land several miles west on the Moose Road. They volunteered to do the soil preparation and planting with their own machinery, and also donated a pile of pine fence posts. A couple of other neighbors also donated posts.

We borrowed two post-hole diggers and a fence-wire stretcher from the Gordon Ranger Station. We couldn't afford fence wire, but the local telephone company at Solon Springs was replacing their lines east of town and gave us all the used wire we needed for fencing. They even delivered the wire to the planting site at no cost.

We wanted to test a deer-proofing technique consisting of a single-wire fence about 30 inches above the ground. On this wire at 3-foot intervals were suspended 2" squares of galvanized sheet metal attached to 6" dangling copper wires. The entire fence was to be electrified so that a deer sniffing a dangler with a wet nose or otherwise touching the wire would get a good jolt.

The Ladysmith city dump was the source of the dangler components. We salvaged enough copper wire from the armatures of several disabled electrical motors and enough sheet metal scraps from a local heating company's waste to meet our needs. We were also able to borrow an electric fence controller from the WCD deer research staff at Ladysmith.

The main expense was buckwheat seed. Our only other equipment costs were for fence staples and a battery for the controller. Our hardest task was digging post holes by hand. Even at 16-foot spacing between posts, it was a lot of digging. We were glad we were in sand and not harder soil. Once the posts were in, we strung wire and hung danglers, and then watched and waited.

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The buckwheat sprouted on schedule. The deer fence wasn't perfect. A few deer went over or under the fence to enjoy the buckwheat, but others came to the fence and wouldn't cross it. Deer damage was minimal. When the buckwheat was ripe, Al Etienne mowed half the field. We stacked most of it inside the fence. A few bundles were stored for winter feeding elsewhere on the area. The unmowed buckwheat was left standing with the hope that enough seed would survive the winter to provide a volunteer crop in 1949.

In the fall and early winter of 1948-49 the buckwheat was heavily used. Up to 200 sharptails were counted in the field at one time. After there was a good snow cover, little sharptail use was seen again until next spring.

For the next few winters, a system of feeding stations was maintained on the area. However, feeding as a management tool was abandoned when it became apparent that over-winter sharptail survival was about the same on fed and non-fed areas, and that habitat restoration was better long-term management than artificial feeding.

Our bottom line was that the total operating costs of the 1948 buckwheat project was \$327.50, just under budget. The boss never said we did a good job, but he never complained, either.

This article originally appeared in the winter 1998 Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society Newsletter.

Excerpt from "Douglas County Grouse Management Project Field Notes"

Written by Jim Hale in 1948

April 23 – Bill Feeney and I flushed 2 sharp-tails from a small booming ground about 200

yards southwest of Wildner's mail box. Time – 4:15PM. This is in NE NE Sec. 15.

Wes Newcomb saw 2 sharp-tails budding in aspen trees in open field just north of county M in SW SE Sec. 16, on April 21.

Feeney, Claire Wildner and I cruised most of the project area by car in afternoon and did not see any grouse.

April 27 – I flushed 3 sharp-tails at west end of field in NE NE Sec. 16 at 330 PM.

Found one coyote scat containing white snowshoe rabbit hair and bone fragments; on course in NE SW Sec. 16. Scat was old.

Redtail hawk seen in SE NW Sec. 15.

April 28 – One male marsh hawk seen in SW NW Sec. 15.

Three sharp-tails on Sec. 15 booming ground at 830 AM. I watched them until 845. Two of the birds were displaying, while one remained inactive.

Found 5 owl pellets under a jack pine near trap line #2B marker. They were old and all contained white hair and bone fragments of snowshoe hare. Under the same tree was a partially gallinaceous bird skeleton, species unknown.

Found 2 coyote scats in jack pine clump at plant quadrat #4B. One was old and contained white snowshoe hair and bone fragments. The other did not seem to be too old, although it contained deer hair, bone and hoof fragments, apparently of a fawn.

Found 2 deer antlers in same clump that had been gnawed by small rodents.

Five sharp-tails were all booming on Sec. 15 booming ground when I arrived at 430. They were still there when I left at 530.

Jim Hale's 1948 "Douglas County Grouse Management Project Field Notes" in their entirety, and his 1952 article "Douglas County Grouse Management Area" on grouse management activities are available on the FOTBS website.