



Bob Hanson, Wildlife Biologist
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Robert.Hanson@wisconsin.gov

November 17, 2023

Re: Comments on the Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan

Dear Mr. Hanson,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan on behalf of the Badgerland Bird Alliance (formerly Madison Audubon Society).

Badgerland Bird Alliance (BBA) has over 3,400 members who actively engage in bird conservation efforts and enjoy the benefits of conservation through birdwatching, hiking, hunting, camping, and more. BBA's service area covers parts or all of 10 counties in south-central Wisconsin, and is interested in state-wide conservation efforts to conserve birds, especially those whose populations have declined. Many of our members enjoy birding throughout Wisconsin, including the northwest barrens. BBA owns and restored 2,500 acres of land in Columbia, Jefferson, and Dane Counties and is a nationally-accredited land trust.

The comments provided below were developed by BBA staff and members with extensive experience in habitat protection, bird conservation, and ecological restoration. In particular, comments were collected from and provided by:

- Jim Shurts is an original member of the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society and was on its board of directors for six years. He continues to play a role in advocating for sharp-tails and the landscape that they inhabit, and is also an avid upland bird hunter. Jim served on the Madison Audubon board of directors and is a long-time member of the organization.
- Mark Martin worked for the DNR for 40 years, including 29 years with the State Natural Areas program, is a Certified Wildlife Biologist, member of the Friends of the Namekagon Barrens, and has hunted Prairie Grouse in South Dakota for 34 years and Sharp-tailed Grouse in Wisconsin. Mark has been the co-manager of BBA's Goose Pond Sanctuary since 1979.
- Susan Foote-Martin was a DNR conservation biologist and completed the Great Wisconsin Birding and Nature Trail that included four properties in this plan. Sue has been the co-manager of BBA's Goose Pond Sanctuary since 1979.
- Topf Wells volunteers for numerous conservation organizations and served on Madison Audubon's Board of Directors, and continues to serve on the BBA's Advocacy Committee.
- Matt Reetz conducted research and helped create a habitat conservation plan for Wisconsin's Sharp-tailed Grouse in 2013 as a post-doctoral research fellow at the UW-Madison.

The feedback below is geared toward maximizing the benefit to birds and sustainability of the efforts. We appreciate your thoughtful consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt Reetz".

Matt Reetz, Executive Director

PLAN COMMENTS

HABITAT:

Badgerland Bird Alliance (BBA) recommends a goal of providing **permanent protection, restoration, and management of 75,000 acres of high-quality barrens habitat** to benefit all associated flora and fauna, including Sharp-tailed Grouse, of this globally-rare habitat type. Many research reports in the Literature Cited part of the plan outline the significance of the barrens and ideas to help improve sharp-tail numbers.

BBA recommends that the core properties and all other possible properties be examined to see their project boundaries could be expanded.

- Stepping stone areas should be as large as possible with ideally 2,000 acres in high quality barrens habitat.
- In “Rolling Barrens” areas, we recommend a 2,000-acre core area of high-quality barrens habitat surrounded by over 2,000 acres of rolling barrens.

STAFFING, FUNDING & PARTNERS:

- A permanent biologist should be assigned to the Northwest Barrens Project along with support staff: wildlife technicians, limited term employees, and land agents.
- Dedicated funding should be provided for protection, restoration, management and research associated with the Northwest Barrens Project.
- We urge the DNR to:
 - Work with all public land partners including Bayfield, Burnett, and Douglas Counties, and the US Forest Service.
 - Work with other partners including Landmark Conservancy, private and large industrial landowners, and possibly the Natural Resources Conservation Service who may be able to provide landowner incentives.
 - Work with the Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, Friends of the Namekagon Barrens, Friends of the Bird Sanctuary - Douglas County Wildlife Area, Friends of Crex Meadows, and other Friends groups that could provide volunteers and help secure grants as needed.
 - Work with the DNR Division of Forestry to increase their capacity to conduct prescribed burns. The DNR Bureau of Wildlife Management should have enough

equipment and staff to cut, mow, and shear vegetation. Hiring of contractors should also be considered.

DOG TRAINING AND FIELD TRIALS:

BBA recommends that **dog training and trialing run from September 15** or the date that the Ruffed Grouse season opens **until March 15** on all properties with Sharp-tailed Grouse.

BBA believes that dog training and bird dog field trial events are negatively impacting bird numbers.

- August 1 is too early a date to run dogs on Sharp-tailed Grouse habitat. Broods may be very young at this time, especially late broods resulting from re-nesting efforts.
- BBA is concerned that dog trainers focus on Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing grounds in the spring up to April 15 and that dog training may have an impact on lek establishment. The Friends of the Namekagon Barrens has viewing blinds for visitors on three dancing grounds that are available April 1. From the plan, “Minnesota DNR research found that users may interfere with breeding if blind guidelines are not strictly followed. Out of an abundance of caution, Wisconsin observers are now required to sign a user pledge that was modeled after Minnesota’s in order to reduce possible negative impacts.” BBA would like to ask if the DNR considered having dog trainers and participants in bird dog field trial events sign “a user pledge”.
- On average, trainers make 14 visits per year to train their dogs on Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse, but some make as many as 60 visits per year. This represents a large number of training events on sharp-tails. If 40 trainers would use the areas to train dogs, and they visit 14 times per year that equates to 560 training events. This does not include dog trialers.
- BBA is concerned that most trainers use the Namekagon Barrens due to the larger number of sharp-tails present which probably results in high levels of brood flushes at Namekagon throughout the training period.
- The DNR should conduct research on the impact of dog training and trialing on Sharp-tailed Grouse. In the meantime, dog training and field trials should be restricted on properties with Sharp-tailed Grouse, and stopped on properties with low populations.