

**Alberta Conservation Association
2008/09 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: *Landowner Habitat and Access Program*

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

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Primary ACA staff on this project

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Partnerships

There are no external funding partners at this time. The partnership component of this program is with the landowners.

Key findings

- We secured 2 landowner habitat/access agreements in the Boreal protecting 730 acres for a period of 10 years.
- We secured 2 landowner habitat/access agreements in the Parkland protecting 284 acres over a 10 year term.
- Four landowners agreed to idle important wildlife habitat and allow reasonable public foot access.

Abstract

In 1986, Alberta's Fish and Wildlife Division launched the Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) to curb the destruction of native wildlife habitat. The program was structured to make annual (in some cases 5-year) payments to landowners who agreed to retain wildlife habitat on private land for a minimum of 5 years. While the LHP provided a very cost effective tool for preserving wildlife habitat, expiring agreements have not been renewed in recent years. Like the LHP, the newly formed Landowner Habitat and Access Program (LHAP) provides cost effective habitat protection. It has the added advantage of providing recreational opportunities for sportsmen. 2008/9 was the first year that the ACA offered LHAP agreements to landowners. Many landowners were reluctant to guarantee reasonable public foot access, but four landowners did agree to this and entered into 10-year LHAP agreements. These agreements protect a total of 1,014 acres for a 10 year period, and provide access for Alberta's hunters and anglers.

Introduction

Alberta's land base is under intense pressure from a variety of industries: oil and gas, agriculture, forestry, residential and recreational development, mining, etc. All of these activities reduce the quality and quantity of habitat available to wildlife. In parts of Alberta's "White Zone" (the settled portion of the province) upland game bird populations have already declined (e.g. Allen 1988) as a result of habitat scarcity, and waterfowl populations are in jeopardy (Byersbergen et al. 2004). In 1986, Alberta's Fish and Wildlife Division launched the Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) to curb the destruction of native wildlife habitat. The LHP made annual (in some cases 5-year) payments to landowners who agreed to retain wildlife habitat on their private land for a minimum of 5 years. Landowners were given the option of entering into 5, 10, 15, 20, or even 25 year contracts. The Fish and Wildlife Division delegated responsibility for the LHP to the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) in 1997. Many of the original LHP agreements have already expired, and many more will expire in the next few years. While the program provided a cost effective tool for preserving wildlife habitat, it did not insure that the sportsmen funding the program received recreational benefits from the agreements that were made. Expiring LHP agreements have not been renewed in recent years. This was because the ACA wanted to insure that sportsmen would also obtain a recreational benefit. The newly formed Landowner Habitat and Access Program (LHAP) provides cost effective habitat protection with the added advantage of providing recreational opportunities for sportsmen and correcting the misconception that legal harvest jeopardizes game populations.

Methods

The ACA has adapted the past landowner habitat program to provide both habitat protection and recreational access for sportsmen. ACA retained most of the features of the original LHP, and added a new clause requiring that the landowner provide "reasonable public access" (foot access).

We offer 5 or 10 year agreement terms, and only accept idled land. Landowners receive either 10 annual payments or one "lump sum" payment. If landowners fail to meet their obligations under the agreement, they are required to repay an "early termination fee" ($\$ \$ \text{ received} \times 4\% \times \text{number of years not served}$) to the ACA. Compensation provided to landowners reflects the value of "foregone agricultural income" associated with eliminating agricultural use of the land. The minimum annual payment is the amount of municipal taxes. The maximum payment made is \$10/acre/year of idled wildlife habitat.

Landowners are given the option of either controlling access themselves, or allowing the ACA to control access. Signage identifies the party who is controlling access, and the appropriate phone number. ACA employees confirm that the contact phone number on project signage is correct, and that reasonable public access is granted.

The full value (10 times the amount of the annual payment) of each contract is removed from the project budget as agreements are signed. This insures that LHAP agreements will not have undue impacts on budgets in future fiscal years.

ACA's guidelines for access control are as follows: Reservations will be for either a half day (non-consumptive use, fishing, bird hunting) or a full day (big game hunting). Name, phone number, and WIN card (or license) number will be required to make a reservation. A maximum of 4 people will be allowed on a reservation. Reservations will not be accepted more than 14 days in advance, and an individual can only hold 1 reservation at any point in time. Signage (developed by the ACA's communication team) advertising the availability of the property for "Reasonable Foot Access" is mandatory.

Landowners who elect to control access themselves and subsequently prove to be either uncooperative (or difficult to contact) will be required to either transfer access control to the ACA, or relinquish their rights under the LHAP agreement. Agreements do not include any compensation for the provision of public access.

Results

The rationale and mechanics of the LHAP were explained to approximately 30 landowners in the Red Deer area associated with recently expired LHP agreements. While the majority of landowners agreed that hunting is beneficial, only four of the 30 landowners agreed to enter into LHAP agreements. While this level of acceptance was less than expected, four agreements were signed. By making these agreements, we secured 1,014 acres of idle high quality wildlife habitat for a period of 10 years, and we insured that sportsmen will be able to access this land.

Conclusions

The Landowner Habitat and Access Program (LHAP) protects important wildlife habitat, and increases awareness of the need for habitat retention. It also provides the ACA's stakeholders with recreational opportunities, and demonstrates to landowners that the ACA is working to avoid and resolve conflicts between landowners and recreational users. We encourage sportsmen to act responsibly and build good relationships with landowners. We plan on promoting the program and attracting additional landowners and potential partners in 2009/2010.

Communications

- We did not advertise this program by mass media. Instead, we targeted a very select group of landowners who were previously involved in the former LHP program. We explained the rationale and mechanics of the Landowner Habitat/Access Program (LHAP) to approximately 30 landowners.

Literature cited

Allen, J.R 1988. Sharp-tailed grouse in Game Bird Zone 5 – A compilation and interpretation of survey data. Unpublished Report. Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife, Fish and Wildlife Division, Red Deer, Alberta. 44 pp.

Byersbergen, G W, N D Niemuth and M R Norton, coordinators 2004. Northern Prairie and Parkland Waterbird Conservation Plan. A plan associated with the Conservation for the Americas Initiative. Prairie Pothole Joint Venture. Denver, Colorado. 183 pp.



Idling the land in the LHP program for the past 20 years has produced dense thickets like this - where snowshoe hares are safe from all aerial predators and most terrestrial predators, and where tender young saplings are abundant. (Photo: Andy Murphy)



Roy Schmelzeisen (ACA biologist on the left) and Marshall Stockal (right) have reached an agreement to retain 90 acres of native Aspen Parkland for 10 years. (Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen)