Alberta Conservation Association
2017/18 Project Summary Report

Project Name: MULTISAR – South Saskatchewan

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leader: Brad Downey

Primary ACA staff on project: Brad Downey, Julie Landry-DeBoer, Amanda McDonald, Adam Moltzahn, Allie Olson, Mike Verhage, and Rachel Whitehouse

Partnerships

Alberta Beef Producers
Alberta Environment and Parks
Canadian Cattlemen's Association
Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef
Cows and Fish – Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society
Government of Canada
Landholders
Prairie Conservation Forum

Key Findings

- Collaborated with ranchers and completed six Habitat Conservation Strategies on roughly 58,000 acres.
- Partnered with four producers on six enhancements including tree protection, hawk-pole installation, and fencing for riparian protection.
- Six properties (~26,000 acres) have been identified to collaborate with in 2018.

Introduction

Numerous species at risk occur in the southern part of Alberta, often overlapping with agricultural landscapes. Often, existing management practices on these lands is what has allowed these species to persist, but there are also many opportunities on these lands and adjoining lands to further enhance habitat quality for these species. We work collaboratively with multiple partners to increase, maintain, and improve habitat for species at risk within the Grassland Natural Region of Alberta. This partnership involves habitat assessments, development of voluntary habitat conservation plans, and subsequent implementation and monitoring of on the ground enhancements.

A Habitat Conservation Strategy (HCS) is a five-year extendable voluntary plan that identifies beneficial management practices and habitat improvement recommendations to encourage sustainable ranching operations. We develop these plans after first taking in-depth habitat, wildlife and fish surveys, along with vegetation inventories, and range and riparian health

assessments. We evaluate these results with the needs of species at risk, and balance the plan with the needs and objectives of the ranching operation. Mutually agreed solutions are adopted and integrated into the strategy, and with priorities listed along with a monitoring plan to assess progress. After signing a five-year stewardship agreement, we assist the producer with implementing the agreed to enhancements and grazing strategies. Progress is re-assessed every five years with adjustments incorporated into a living management plan for the operation. A landowner questionnaire is also completed to identify what is or isn't working from their perspective, which helps us re-adjust the plan going forward. Another five-year stewardship agreement may be signed for continued implementation of the strategy.

Methods

We completed point count surveys on three ranches to measure the occupancy of birds (Landry-DeBoer and Downey 2010). We surveyed riparian areas on these ranches by walking along the edge of the waterbodies listening and observing for amphibians (Kendell 2002). We also setup bat meters and song meters in key areas to identify bats and record birds and amphibians that may have been missed during point counts.

In early August, we surveyed short-horned lizards at sites that were predicted to be highly suitable habitat based on habitat models and historical occurrences (James 2002). In early October, we surveyed coulee slopes to identify new snake hibernacula (dens) (Alberta Sustainable Resource Development 2010). We also completed range health assessments (Adams et al. 2005), and incorporated these results along with those from the wildlife inventories into landholder-specific Habitat Conservation Strategies (HCS). These plans map out objectives going forward along with potential habitat enhancements to guide future work.
A large part of our effort goes into communication activities. These activities included presentations and tours to funding agencies and partners, and participation in several conferences and workshops.

Results

In 2017, we completed detailed wildlife, range, and riparian surveys on six ranches (~58,000 acres) and developed the associated management plans (habitat conservation strategies). We identified 214 different species on these six ranches, including 49 that are considered *Endangered, Threatened, or Species of Special Concern*. In all, we had 5,565 observations of species. On these same six ranches we also conducted 213 detailed range transects, 384 range health assessments, 81 tame pasture assessments, 47 forest health assessments, and 21 riparian health assessments on the ranches.

We completed six new habitat enhancements as part of Habitat Conservation Strategies created in 2017. We installed fencing to protect two wetland and dugout complexes that contain tiger salamanders and waterfowl, and two portable electric fencers, one of which will protect one kilometre of trout bearing creek to encourage willow growth, improve water quality and reduce temperature to extend trout habitat. We also installed a hawk pole in a location to aid in the control of Richardson's ground squirrels. We installed wiring around the base of cottonwood trees along a creek to prevent beaver damage.

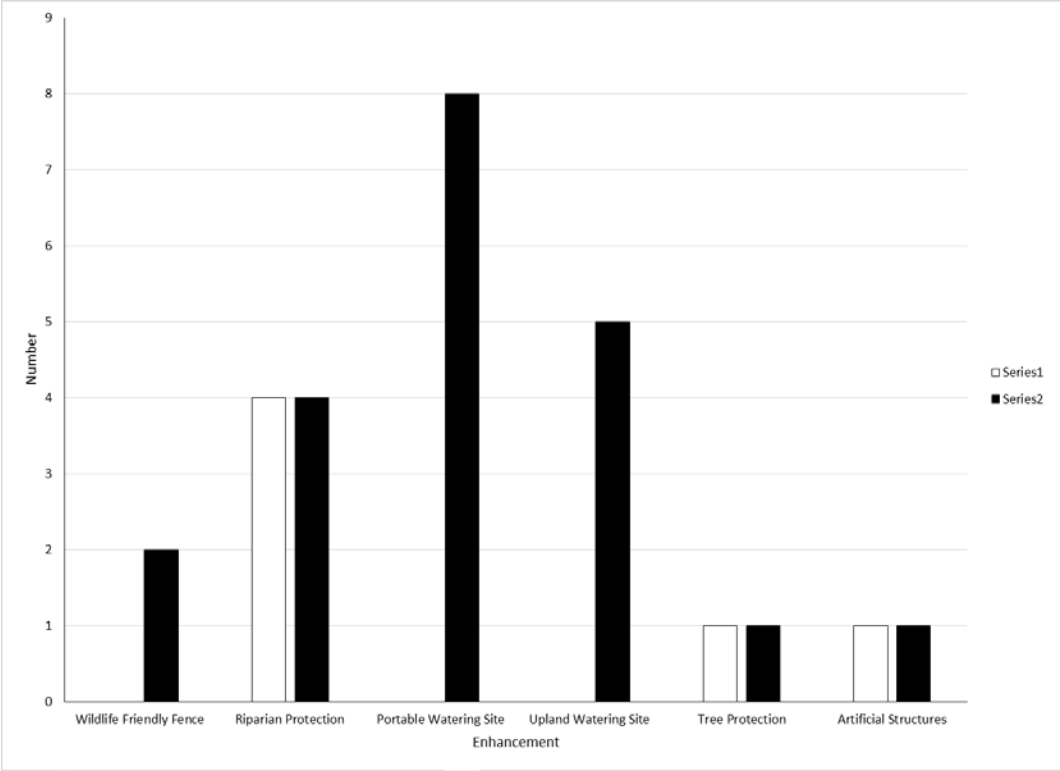

Figure 1. The number and type of habitat enhancements implemented through the MULTISAR – South Saskatchewan project from 2016 to March 2018.

Conclusions

Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landowners have allowed us to collaborate with producers and implement enhancements on close to 400,000 acres through the original MULTISAR – Milk River project. Landholders view this collaboration as non-threatening, and new relationships are being formed because of this awareness and through promotion of the program in the local community. MULTISAR – South Saskatchewan was initiated as a result of the positive feedback and desire of landholders for us to expand beyond the Milk River basin. The South Saskatchewan expansion has led to funding partnerships (~$380,000/year) and the support of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association and Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. It is through these partnerships that we strive to foster mutually beneficial relationships with the agriculture community and improve wildlife habitat for all species on this land base.

Communications

ACA

- Presented to the Southern Agriculture Fieldsman about MULTISAR and species at risk, Tilley, Alberta, Brad Downey, June 2017.
- Presented to the OH Ranch about MULTISAR, Brad Downey, February 2018.
- Presented to the Circle E Ranch about MULTISAR, Julie Landry-DeBoer, March 2018.
- Article in the *Medicine Hat News* about prairie species at risk, Tim Kalinowski, January 2018.
- Article in about prairie species at risk, Tim Kalinowski, January 2018
- Hosted a booth at the Medicine Hat Stampede, July 2017.
- Presented to the Waterton Biosphere on wetland and riparian enhancements, Brad Downey, September 2017.
- Poster on the MULTISAR process at the ESRI Conference in San Diego, California. Mike Verhage, July 2017.

Partners

- Published *MULTISAR: A Multi-Species Conservation Strategy for Species at Risk in the Grassland Natural Region of Alberta 2017/18*, MULTISAR, March 2018.
- Published *Grassland Gazette* newsletter, Winter 2017/18 issue.
- Maintained and updated MULTISAR Facebook page and Twitter account, Kristen Rumbolt.

Literature Cited

Adams, B.W., G. Ehlert, C. Stone, M. Alexander, D. Lawrence, M. Willoughby, D. Moisey, C. Hinz, A. Burkinshaw, and J. Carlson. 2005. Rangeland health assessment for grassland, forest, and tame pasture. Public Lands Division, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Pub. No. T/044, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 128 pp.

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. 2010. Sensitive species inventory guidelines. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 69 pp. Available online: http://srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeManagement/documents/SensitiveSpeciesInventoryGuidelines-Aug2010.pdf.

James, J.D. 2002. A survey of short-horned lizard (*Phrynosoma hernandesi hernandesi*) populations in Alberta. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 29, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 25 pp.

Kendell, K. 2002. Survey protocol for the northern leopard frog. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 43, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 30 pp.

Landry-DeBoer, J.P., and B.A. Downey. 2010. Habitat Conservation Strategies. Pages 12 – 23. *In:* F. Blouin, B.L. Downey, B.A. Downey, S.L. Frank, D.J. Jarina, P.F. Jones, J.P. Landry-DeBoer, and K.S. Rumbolt. MULTISAR: A Multi-Species Conservation Strategy for Species at Risk 2009 – 2010 Report. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 135, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 71 pp.

Photos

Alberta Conservation Association staff member Adam Moltzahn working at the Calgary Stampede booth. Photo: Brad Downey


Alberta Conservation Association seasonal staff member Brook Skagen setting up song meter. Photo: Brad Downey

Alberta Conservation Association seasonal staff member Emma LaRocque recording flora.
Photo: Brad Downey