

Alberta Conservation Association (ACA)

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Project Name: Habitat Legacy Partnership

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Partnerships

- Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development
- Landowners
- Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
- Magrath Rod and Gun Club
- Municipal District of Warner
- Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Lethbridge Chapters

Key Findings

- Planted more than 3,700 shrubs to create escape cover and winter habitat for pheasants, grey partridge and other upland wildlife species.
- Worked with partners to construct a protective fence around 150 acres of riparian habitat to protect it from encroaching agricultural activities. This area is open for hunting access.
- Seeded 90 acres of permanent cover for upland gamebirds.
- Maintained and measured survival on more than 17 km of shrub rows planted over the past four years.

Introduction

Upland gamebirds are valued for their showy colours, breeding displays and long history in the hunting tradition of Alberta. A mix of habitat features that provide conditions suitable for nesting, brood rearing, winter protection and travel is crucial to sustaining upland bird populations. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) and Pheasants Forever formed a partnership to improve upland bird habitats in southern Alberta. The Habitat Legacy Partnership works collaboratively with conservation groups, private landowners, irrigation districts and municipal districts to implement habitat enhancements on the landscape and monitor the effects of these enhancements. The goal is to create a network of key habitat features important for pheasants, grey partridge and sharp-tailed grouse, although we anticipate that other species will benefit as well.

Methods

Engaging the public has been instrumental in raising the profile of pheasants and creating habitat enhancement opportunities. We accomplish this outreach work through presentations at landowner advisory workshops, stakeholder meetings, novice shoots, public presentations and distribution of information booklets. To support enhancement activities on private land, we conduct site visits and use aerial photography to map existing and required habitat components important for nesting, brood rearing and winter cover. We meet with landowners and identify key habitat features that could be improved, and together we prepare long-term habitat plans to enhance these features.

We also evaluate the long-term effects of enhancement actions on upland birds (e.g., pheasants, grey partridge, and in some areas sharp-tailed grouse) as well as non-target bird and amphibian species that might also be affected. We monitor shrub growth and mortality to determine the shrub species and planting techniques that work best for developing habitat for these target species. We also use a photo-point protocol to document changes in habitat over time resulting from these habitat enhancements.

We partnered with Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, Lethbridge Fish & Game Association, Municipal District of Warner, Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Lethbridge Chapters, and Magrath Rod and Gun Club to initiate the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project, which is intended to improve wildlife habitat and connectivity, water quality and hunter access.

Results

In 2014, we planted approximately 3,700 shrubs, including many berry-bearing species, to provide a reliable food source and create winter cover for upland gamebirds. We continued maintenance on more than 17 km of shrub rows planted over the past four years to benefit wildlife. Our photo-point images have documented our success in establishing these shelterbelt habitats, which are being used for food, thermal cover and security by a variety of species, not just upland gamebirds.

Through the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project, we surveyed and fenced-off from agricultural activities 150 acres of riparian habitat along Ridge Reservoir and canal. Re-establishing the riparian habitat surrounding the canal and reservoir will create habitat buffers that will benefit upland birds and improve water quality. As part of this initiative, 90 acres of cultivated land was seeded back to a permanent habitat seed mixture, which will benefit upland birds and act as a buffer between cropland and the water reservoir.

Conclusions

The availability of key habitat components is critical to sustain upland bird populations over the long term. This is particularly challenging in landscapes heavily converted to cropland, where natural habitat features have often been removed or isolated. We have made considerable progress over the past five years in developing partnerships with key members of the agricultural community to elevate the value of upland bird habitat in this region. We are also gaining

recognition as a key partner to collaborate with to improve habitat features important for upland birds across the region.

Communications

- Delivered *Pheasants through the Seasons* booklets and habitat plans with our logo on them to landowners.
- Helped deliver the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative pamphlets.
- Provided a summary article on this year's habitat enhancements to Pheasants Forever – Calgary Chapter, which was sent out in an e-newsletter and e-mailed to Pheasants Forever members.
- Attended numerous meetings of Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs and Pheasants Forever to discuss habitat enhancements and partnership opportunities.

Literature Cited

N/A

Photos



A photo-point taken on the Bullock enhancement property showing shrub growth between August 2012 (left) and August 2014 (right). Photos: Kyle Prince



Reseeding of permanent cover conducted as part of the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project. Photo: Mike Uchikura



Planting a shrub row around a wetland complex on the Finley property. Photo: Kyle Prince