

Alberta Conservation Association 2008/09 Project Summary Report

Project name: *MULTISAR*

Project leader: Paul Jones

Primary ACA staff on this project (including seasonals):

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Partnerships

Alberta Innovation and Science Program

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (Public Lands and Fish and Wildlife divisions)

Canadian Natural Resources Limited

Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk

Landholders

Nature Conservancy Canada

Tourism, Parks, and Recreation

Key findings

- 4,720 wildlife observations on 27,770 acres of rangeland in the Milk River drainage.
- Developed four habitat conservation strategies covering 88,450 acres of rangeland in collaboration with landholders, Public Lands and Fish and Wildlife.
- Secured habitat for species at risk through signed habitat enhancement agreements with three landholders benefiting ferruginous hawks, loggerhead shrikes, grassland birds, northern leopard frogs, and pronghorn.
- Enhanced native grasslands and riparian zones by developing a riparian pasture, seeding 140 acres of cultivation back to native grasses, and preparing an additional 90 acres of abandon cultivation for seeding back to native grasses.

Abstract

MULTISAR's habitat conservation strategies actively engage landholders, government organizations, and conservation groups in developing a plan to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat on both private and public lands. This program takes a multi-species stewardship approach that focuses on species at risk habitat that in turn benefits a variety of wildlife. Wildlife and range surveys followed protocols outline by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development while riparian surveys were completed by the Cows and Fish Program. Wildlife inventories resulted in 4,720 entries into the Fish and Wildlife Management Information System in 2008. Some key sightings include burrowing owls, swift fox, ferruginous hawks, short-horned lizards, and greater sage grouse. We completed four habitat conservation strategies on 88,450 acres after detailed baseline inventories of wildlife, range, and riparian habitat were completed. We also signed three habitat enhancement agreements allowing for the creation of a riparian pasture, restoration of 140 acres of native grasses, and managing 90 acres of downy brome to be

reclaimed to native grasses. Through open communication, MULTISAR will continue to work towards building long-term relationships with landholders, government, non-government organizations, and industry in order to implement habitat conservation strategies that benefit both wildlife and landholders.

Introduction

Albertans have an interest in species at risk management. For some, this interest is expressed in a desire for actions to avoid declines or allow recovery of native species. For others, there is a concern that rural economy and lifestyles may be impacted by species at risk initiatives. Management agencies and conservation organizations face a formidable challenge to reconcile differences of perception with respect to species at risk. Management initiatives have historically concentrated on inventories and conservation of individual species prioritized through species status processes. As more wildlife become categorized as "At Risk", "May be at Risk", and "Sensitive", and become legislated provincially and nationally as *Endangered* or *Threatened*, the challenges of management and recovery become greater. In situations where numerous priority species are present on the same landscape, the challenge is further confounded by management objectives that may conflict among species. While continued attention is needed for individual species at risk, it is clear that a more innovative approach is needed to meet the multi-species challenge. MULTISAR is a process for multi-species conservation at the landscape level. MULTISAR promotes stewardship activities through voluntary participation of landholders on both Crown and private land in the development and implementation of Habitat Conservation Strategies (HCS) for multiple species. The primary goal of MULTISAR is to implement an effective process to manage multiple species on a defined landscape. The Milk River Watershed (6,776 km²) and surrounding areas were chosen as the MULTISAR project area because it supports the highest number of species at risk of any definable landscape in Alberta.

Methods

We completed wildlife inventories following standard survey protocols (e.g. point counts for breeding birds). We incorporated the results of the wildlife inventories and range assessments into HCS and all observations were entered into the Fish and Wildlife Management Information System (FWMIS), a database maintained by the provincial government. Based on these assessments we incorporated recommendations for improving, enhancing and conserving habitat for selected species at risk, taking into account the socio-economic goals of the landholder. MULTISAR uses an open communication process through face to face meetings to determine the goals and objectives of all parties and to incorporate these where possible into an agreed upon strategy for conservation. As part of the Information and Education component of the program we delivered presentations to schools and at conferences, set up landowner focus groups to discuss issues around implementation of Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs), and met and discussed species at risk conservation with landholders, either through one-on-one meetings or group presentations.

Results

During the 2008 field season we conducted wildlife surveys on ~27,700 acres and range health surveys on ~88,450 acres under the MULTISAR Habitat Conservation Strategies component of the program. We entered 4,720 wildlife sightings into the FWMIS database (Figure 1). Species of interest detected during the surveys include burrowing owl, swift fox, ferruginous hawk, short-horned lizard, loggerhead shrike, Sprague's pipit, northern leopard frogs, greater sage grouse, long-billed curlew, prairie rattlesnake and pronghorn. Five of these species are considered endangered in Alberta (Figure 2).

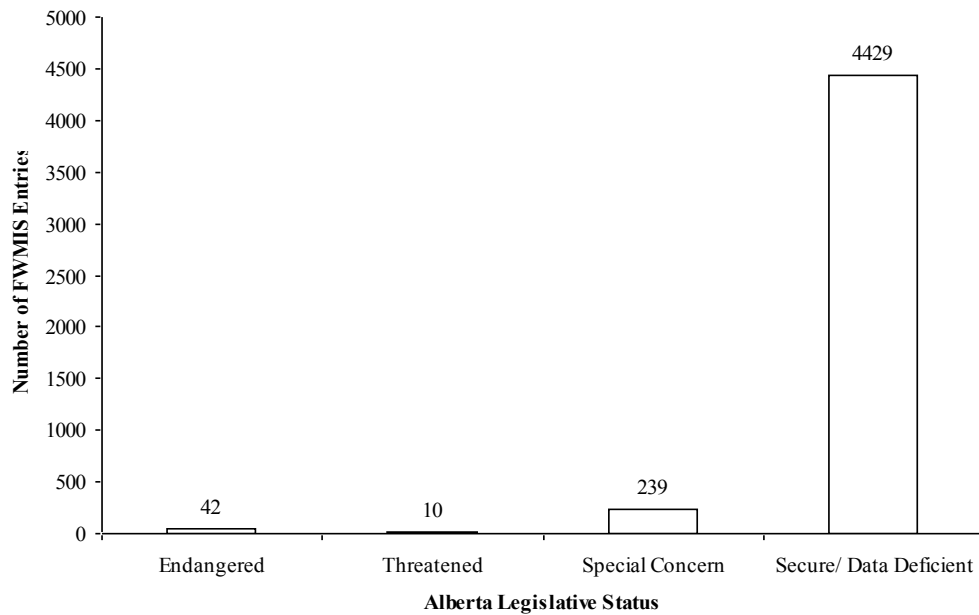


Figure 1. Number of FWMIS entries in 2008 by Alberta Legislative Status (one entry can equal >1 individual).

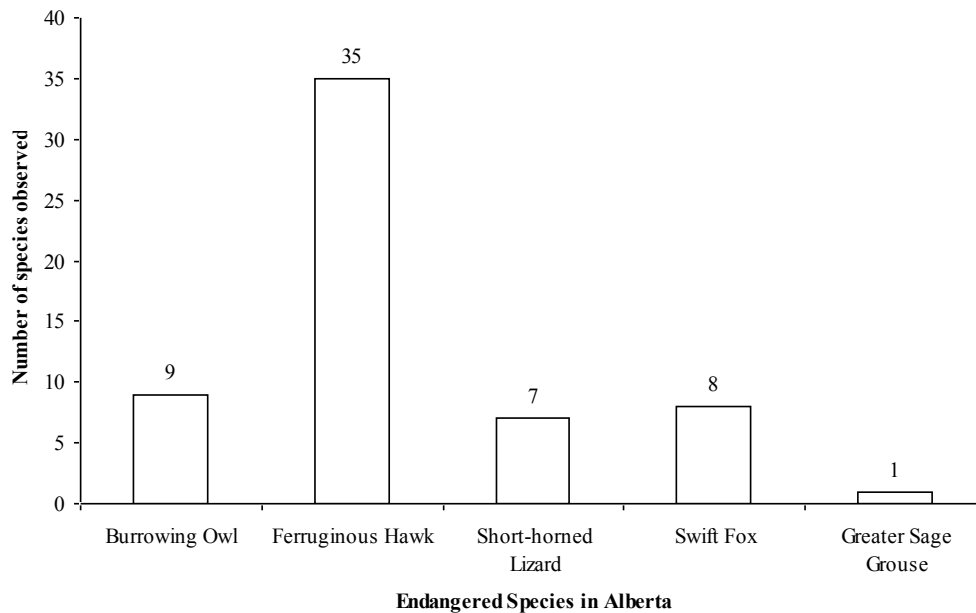


Figure 2. Number of individual *Endangered* species observed in 2008.

We completed four HCS (88,450 acres) with cooperating landholders, Public Lands and Fish and Wildlife. These strategies incorporated the results of the wildlife surveys and range assessments into a strategy to conserve species at risk while accounting for the economic needs of the landholder. As part of the implementation phase of the HCS program we signed three habitat enhancement agreements with landholders. Associated with these agreements, we implemented habitat enhancement recommendations outlined in completed HCS including the creation of a riparian pasture along the Milk River, restoration of 140 acres of native prairie, and managing downy brome to be reclaimed with native grasses. We implemented these enhancements to conserve and enhance habitat for ferruginous hawks, loggerhead shrikes, grassland birds, northern leopard frog, burrowing owls, and pronghorn.

Conclusions

MULTISAR is a collaborative effort between government, non-government organizations, and landholders and is succeeding at this level through co-operative teamwork with all partners working towards a common goal of habitat and species conservation. MULTISAR's approach is to gather information on the entire wildlife community on a ranch, then prioritize conservation needs based on these surveys. Priority is given to higher listed species (i.e. *Endangered*), considering which additional species are present. Continued monitoring of success and the multi-species over a single species approach is required. In addition, we need to determine the success of achieving individual goals for specific species and pastures for individual ranches.

Through open communication, MULTISAR will continue to implement components of species at risk recovery strategies, provide information and awareness, team based wildlife habitat planning, and strive to build long-term relationships with landholders, government, non-government organizations, and industry.

Communications

Presentations

- MULTISAR Program - Presentation at the Environment Conference in Edmonton (SRD) - April 2008
- MULTISAR Species At Risk School Program - Presentations in Lomond and Enchant Colonies (SRD) - April 2008
- MULTISAR Species At Risk School Program - Presentations in Bindloss and Jenner Schools (SRD) - April 2008
- MULTISAR Habitat Conservation Strategy - Presentation to Sandstone Grazing Coop (ACA) - May 2008
- MULTISAR Program - Presentation to ACA Provincial Wildlife Team (ACA) - June 2008
- “The use of range / wildlife correlations to achieve ecological diversity on native grasslands in Alberta, Canada” - Poster presentation at the International Conference on Grassland Ecosystem Management- Inner Mongolia, China (SRD) - June 2008
- Species at risk and their habitat - Presentation at Southern Alberta’s Grazing School for Women (SRD) - July 2008
- Species at risk and their habitat - Presentation at Range Days for Kids at Writing On Stone Provincial Park (SRD) - July 2008
- MULTISAR Species At Risk School Program - Presentation in Trochu School (SRD) - September 2008
- MULTISAR Program - Presentation to the Prairie Conservation Forum (SRD) - September 2008
- MULTISAR Species At Risk School Program - Presentations in Bow Island (SRD) - October 2008
- MULTISAR Species At Risk School Program - Presentations in Calgary, 3 in English and 3 in French (SRD) - October 2008
- MULTISAR Species At Risk School Program - 2 presentations in JT Foster School Nanton (SRD) - November 2008
- MULTISAR Program - Presentation at research station in Lethbridge (ACA) - February 2009
- MULTISAR Program - Presentation to the Northern Sagebrush Steppe Initiative (SRD) - February 2009
- MULTISAR SARC Program - Presentation to Livingston Landowner Group (SRD) - March 2009
- MULTISAR Program - Presentation to BC Grasslands Conservation Council (SRD) - March 2009

- MULTISAR Program into the Future - Presentation at Fish and Wildlife Conference (SRD) - March 2009
- MULTISAR Program- Presentation to the Habitat Stewardship Program (ACA)- March 2009

Newspaper/Magazine/Media

- Northern Leopard Frog tour with 66 Grade five Students - Media event for Environment Week on CTV (ACA/SRD) - June 2008
- ACA's involvement and MULTISAR's role on the Sandstone Ranch - Media event for Sandstone Ranch celebration, interview on CTV (ACA) - June 2008
- "MULTISAR: Continues Stewardship of Species at Risk"- Article in the Prairie Conservation Forum Newsletter (SRD) - September 2008
- "Managing The Land: Keeping Native Grasslands Intact" - Article in ACA's Conservation Magazine (Fall/Winter 2008) (SRD)
- "Sandstone Ranch: An inspiring Example of Conservation Partnerships" - Article in ACA's Conservation Magazine (Fall/Winter 2008) (NCC)
- MULTISAR Program - Call of the Land Radio Interview (SRD) - December 2008
- Grassland Gazette - Bi-annual newsletter published by MULTISAR (SRD) - February 2009

Reports

- Alberta's Strategy For The Management of Species At Risk (2009-2014) (SRD) - SRD Report - January 2009
- MULTISAR: A Multi-Species Conservation Strategy For Species at Risk in the Grassland Natural Region of Alberta 2008-2009 Report - Species At Risk Series Report (ACA/SRD) - March 2009



Pronghorn friendly riparian fence line (Photo: ACA)



Young short-horned lizard (Photo: ACA)



Native grassland in the Milk River Watershed (Photo: ACA)



Brad Downey scanning for burrowing owls (Photo: ACA)