Alberta Conservation Association
2011/12 Project Summary Report

Project Name: *MULTISAR*

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leader: Paul Jones and Brad Downey

Primary ACA staff on project:

Kayla Balderson, Brad Downey, Brian France, Paul Jones, Julie Landry-Deboer, Adam Moltzahn, Lee Moltzahn and Corey Rasmussen

Partnerships

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
AltaLink
Canadian National Sportsmen Shows
Canadian Natural Resources Limited
Environment Canada – Environmental Damages Fund
Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk
Landholders
Prairie Conservation Forum

Key Findings

- Seeded 680 acres back to native grass, 320 acres of which are identified as greater sage-grouse critical habitat.
- Planted 400 silver sagebrush plugs on ACA's Silver Sage Conservation Site.
- Together with our Land Management group, secured an additional $610,382 from partners for the purchase of 960 acres of land east of Medicine Hat, the majority of which is native prairie.

Introduction

Albertans have an interest in wildlife conservation. 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 the rural economy and lifestyles may be impacted by species at risk initiatives.

MULTISAR is a program focused on multi-species conservation at the landscape level that promotes stewardship through voluntary participation of landholders on both Crown and private lands. The program is a collaborative effort between Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (ASRD), Prairie Conservation Forum and landholders. The primary goal of MULTISAR is to implement an effective process to manage multiple species on a defined landscape. These processes are compiled into landholder-specific

Habitat Conservation Strategies (HCS), leading to the implementation of habitat enhancement activities that benefit both the landholder and wildlife. We chose the Milk River Watershed (6,776 km^2) and surrounding areas as the MULTISAR program area because it supports the highest number of species at risk of any definable landscape in Alberta.

Methods

We completed multi-species point count surveys on all HCS properties to measure the occupancy of birds (Landry-DeBoer and Downey 2010). We surveyed all riparian areas on five ranches (19,489 acres) by walking along the edge of the waterbodies listening and observing for amphibians following protocols by Kendell (2002). In early October, we surveyed coulee slopes on foot to identify new snake hibernacula (dens) using the survey protocol described in the Sensitive Species Inventory Guidelines (ASRD 2010). We completed detailed range health transects and assessments following Alberta Lands Division protocols (Adams et al. 2005). We monitored seven enhancements completed in previous years, and we evaluated the benefit of strategies applied to one ranch by measuring the change in habitat and wildlife use and diversity at 100 survey sites previously visited in 2005. Data collected will help determine if enhancements and ranch-specific actions (HCS) implemented since 2005 are having the desired effect on wildlife habitat (Downey and Jones 2010).

We incorporated the results of the wildlife inventories and range assessments into landholder-specific strategies (HCS's), identified potential habitat enhancements, and entered all wildlife observations into the Fish and Wildlife Management Information System (FWMIS).

As part of an Information and Education component of the program, we delivered presentations at Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park and at several conferences and workshops. We also developed and printed an issue of the *Grassland Gazette*, developed the *Ferruginous Hawk Artificial Nest Platform* brochure, and met and discussed species at risk conservation with landholders, either through one-on-one meetings or group presentations.

Results

In 2011, we completed detailed wildlife and range surveys on five ranches (19,489 acres). We conducted 153 detailed range transects, 203 range health assessments, and entered 4,393 wildlife observations into the FWMIS database. Species of interest encountered during wildlife surveys included ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) and Sprague's pipit (*Anthus spragueii*).

We completed 15 habitat enhancements in 2011, including reseeding 680 acres back to native grass, planting 400 silver sagebrush shrubs and 200 thorny buffaloberry and chokecherry shrubs, installing three hawk platforms in partnership with Altalink, and installing 3.6 km of wildlife-friendly fencing to protect reseeded areas and improve cattle distribution. We installed fencing around three prime ferruginous hawk nest sites (trees) to protect them from cattle, controlled areas for the spread of leafy spurge, and developed a watering site to improve cattle distribution. This work brings the total number of enhancement projects completed by MULTISAR participants since 2005 to 51 (Figure 1). We also reassessed 100 sites as part of an evaluation of

one ranch resulting in 100 range health assessments and 1,107 wildlife observations entered into the FWMIS database.

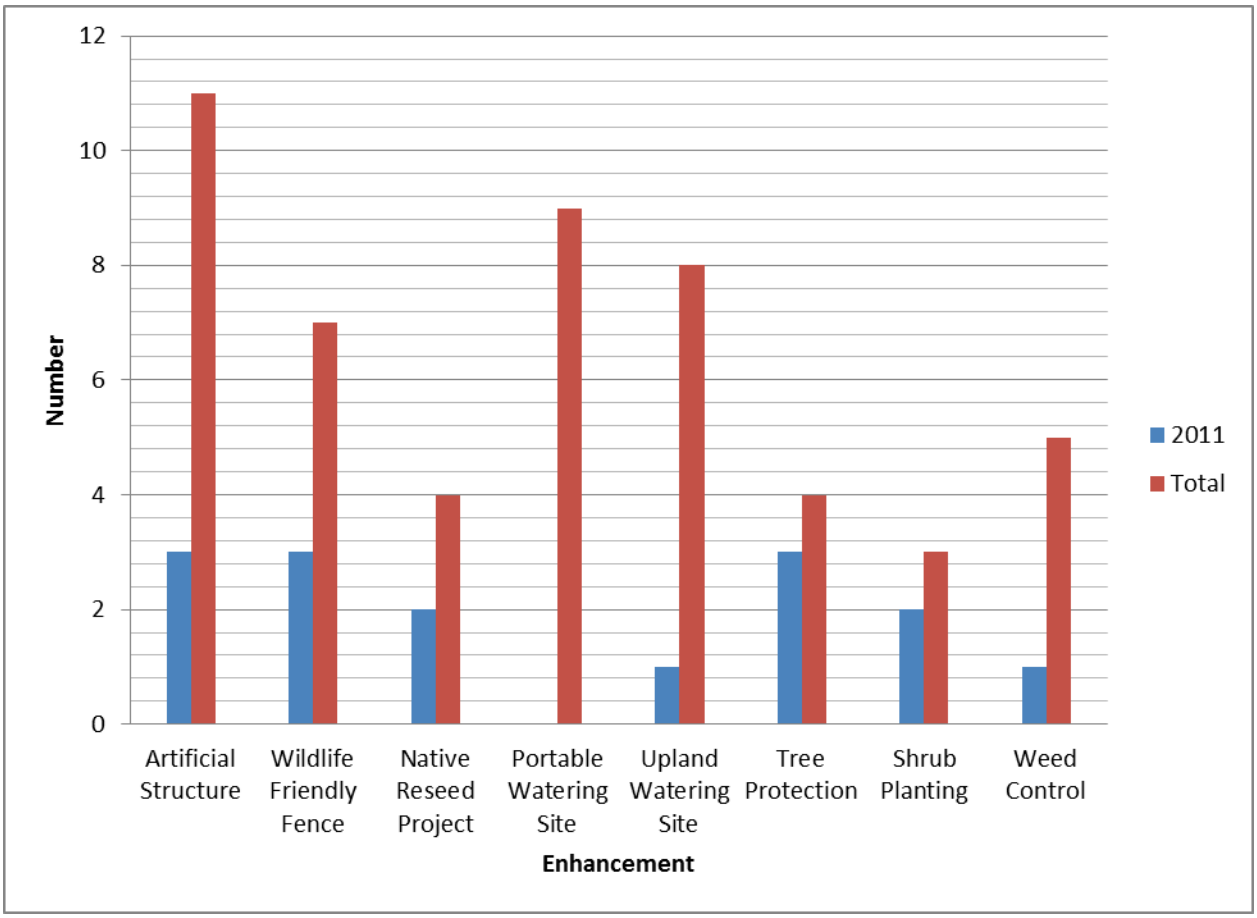

Figure 1. Number of specific habitat enhancements implemented by MULTISAR since 2005.

Our evaluation of enhancements implemented over the past few years demonstrates that we are having positive impacts on targeted habitat and wildlife. Our monitoring of seven enhancements in 2011 revealed that ferruginous hawks were using one of the two nest platforms we installed in 2007, while the other was being used as a perching site for Swainson's hawks. Three upland watering sites developed to encourage targeted cattle grazing in an area to improve ground squirrel numbers, and thus nesting sites for burrowing owls, were indeed colonized by Richardson's ground squirrels (*Urocitellus richardsonii*). Richardson's ground squirrels are now present at all three sites compared to only one in 2009. We also documented Sprague's pipits drinking out of the watering trough at another upland watering site that we developed in 2010 to reduce pressure on the riparian zone and increase grazing on the uplands.

Conclusions

MULTISAR is a collaborative effort between landowners, conservation organizations, government and industry, and is succeeding at this level through co-operative teamwork with all partners working towards a common goal of habitat and species conservation. Success has not

just been seen through direct improvements, but also through awareness of species at risk in landholder's day-to-day activities on their land. Landholders see the MULTISAR program as non-threatening and new relationships are being formed because of this awareness, and through promotion of the program in the local community. MULTISAR landholders are more aware of the needs of wildlife and how to incorporate wildlife needs into their operations, such as identifying sites for ferruginous hawk nests and collaborating with Alberta Fish and Game Association's pronghorn-friendly fencing project. Through open communication and team-based wildlife habitat planning, MULTISAR will continue to implement components of species at risk recovery plans, provide information and education, implement habitat enhancements, monitor and evaluate the program, and strive to build long-term relationships with landholders, government, non-government organizations and industry.

Communications

ACA:

- Presentation to the Prairie Conservation Forum, members update on MULTISAR, Brad Downey, Okotoks, Alberta, January 19, 2012.
- Two presentations at Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park, Brad Downey and Julie Landry-Deboer, July and August 2011.
- Presentation to the Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society: *MULTISAR: 10 Years of collaboration*, Julie Landry-DeBoer, Medicine Hat, Alberta, March 2012.
- Presentation at the Native Prairie Reclamation and Restoration Workshop: *Home on the Range: Species at Risk and the Native Grasslands*, Brad Downey, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, February 8, 2012.
- MULTISAR website: www.multisar.ca
- Produced *Grassland Gazette* newsletter, fall issue.
- Produced *Artificial Nest Platforms for Ferruginous Hawks* brochure.
- Assisted at the Women's Grazing School, Julie Landry-Deboer, June 2011.
- Completed internal MULTSAR data report with recommendations for future program evaluation and monitoring, March 2012.
- Participated in the Society of Range Management Conference: MULTISAR Display, Brad Downey, October 28, 2011.
- Presentation on grassland birds at Youth Range Days, Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park, Julie Landry-Deboer, July 20, 2011.
- MULTISAR presentation during the ACA Board Tour, Brad Downey, September 6, 2011.
- MULTISAR display at the Milk River Watershed Council Canada Annual Meeting, Julie Landry-Deboer, Milk River, Alberta, April 6, 2011.

Partners:

- *MULTISAR: A Multi-Species Conservation Strategy For Species at Risk in the Grassland Natural Region of Alberta 2011/12*. MULTISAR, March 2012.
- Article in the *Western Producer* on MULTISAR and wildlife-friendly fence lines, August 25, 2011.

- MULTISAR presentation for the Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society – Wildlife in the Wind Speakers Series, Francois Blouin, Lethbridge, Alberta, November 18, 2011.
- MULTISAR presentation at Riparian Days in Pincher Creek, Darryl Jarina and Francois Blouin, September 20, 2011.
- MULTISAR presentation to Airdrie Landholder Group, Kristen Rumbolt, June, 18, 2011.
- Species at risk presentation to W.P. Wagner School, Francois Blouin, Edmonton, Alberta, May 4, 2011.

Literature Cited

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Photos:

Planting silver sagebrush plugs on Silver Sage Conservation Site. (Photo: Julie Landry-DeBoer)

Native grass restoration project. (Photo: Lee Moltzahn)

MULTISAR partners talking with landholder about his 2011 native grass reseed project. (Photo: Julie Landry-Deboer)

Early morning along the Milk River. (Photo: Adam Moltzahn)