

Alberta Conservation Association 2015/16 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Habitat Legacy Partnership

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks
Landowners
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
Magrath Rod and Gun Club
Municipal District of Warner
Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Lethbridge Chapters
Southern Alberta Walleye Trail

Key Findings

- We planted more than 3,800 shrubs to create escape cover and winter habitat for pheasants, grey partridge and other wildlife species.
- To improve habitat connectivity, water quality and hunting access, we collaborated with partners to initiate the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project.
- We worked with partners and landowners to install 25 km of fence line to separate riparian habitat from encroaching agricultural activity and open this zone for hunting.
- We seeded 130 ac of permanent cover targeted for upland gamebirds.
- We controlled weeds and continued maintenance 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. Farming practices around the world have changed significantly over the past 50 years, with an ever increasing economic pressure to maximize yield. Some of these practices have altered the resources important to pheasants, grey partridge and sharp-tailed grouse, making their populations less stable. Each of these species uses different strategies to interact with the landscape, although sharp-tailed grouse is the least compatible with cultivated areas. Pheasants and grey partridge have struggled as well, but these species are more capable of

carving out a life around the field edges and coulees on a farm. The Habitat Legacy Partnership works collaboratively with farmers, ranchers, conservation groups, irrigation districts and municipal districts to improve habitat and hunting opportunity for upland gamebirds.

Most of the southern landscape is private land. We develop strong working partnerships within the agriculture community and recognize that farmers and ranchers play a key role in the future sustainability of upland gamebirds in this system. Engaging with and listening to these stakeholders is a fundamental guiding principle that strengthens the grassroots nature of this work. We look forward to working with landowners to improve habitat through a network of key zones to improve the odds for the long-term sustainability of gamebirds on this landscape.

We partnered with Alberta Environment and Parks, Lethbridge Fish & Game Association, Municipal District of Warner, Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Lethbridge chapters, Magrath Rod and Gun Club, and Southern Alberta Walleye Trail 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.

Methods

We meet with landowners to better understand their farming operation and discuss habitat needs of upland birds. We work together to identify and map out habitat enhancements that can be dovetailed into their long-term farm plan. We also engage the public in a variety of ways to raise the profile of upland birds and highlight strategies to benefit pheasants and grey partridge on a working landscape. We accomplish this through presentations at landowner advisory workshops, stakeholder meetings, novice shoots, public presentations and the distribution of information booklets.

As part of our long-term adaptive plan, we evaluate the long-term impacts 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 may also be affected. We monitor shrub growth and mortality to determine the shrub species and planting techniques that are most beneficial 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.

Results

In 2015, we planted approximately 3,800 shrubs, including many berry-bearing species, to provide a reliable food source and create winter cover for upland gamebirds. We also continued maintenance on more than 17 km of shrub rows planted over the past four years. Our timeline photo-points have documented the survival and relative growth on these shelterbelts where we have used a variety of planting techniques. Observed shrub survival has been greater than 80%. Using woven fabric mulch to conserve moisture and reduce weed competition has been the most effective method to ensure resiliency of the planted shrubs.

Working with our partners, we installed 25 km of fence around Ridge Reservoir and its canal to separate riparian habitat from encroaching agriculture. This new fence line also distinguishes this

zone from private property, vastly increasing the area now open for public hunting. Re-establishing the riparian habitat surrounding the canal and reservoir will allow for the creation of habitat buffers that also improve water quality in the canals and reservoirs. As part of this initiative, 130 ac of cultivated land was seeded back to a permanent habitat seed mixture that 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 and increase upland bird densities over the long term. This is particularly challenging on a landscape where most of land is privately owned and has largely been converted to cropland, often resulting in natural features being removed or isolated. We have made considerable headway over the past five years in developing partnerships with key members of the agricultural community to increase recognition of 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 *Alberta's Ring-necked Pheasant 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.
- Sent a summary article on this year's habitat enhancements to Pheasants Forever Calgary, which then distributed this information in an e-newsletter and mailed hard copies to its members.
- Attended numerous Fish & Game club meetings and Pheasants Forever meetings to discuss habitat enhancements and partnership opportunities.

Photos



Permanent cover is seeded along the riparian areas of the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project. Photo: Kyle Prince



Shrubs are planted along the riparian buffer areas along Ridge Reservoir. Photo: Kyle Prince



Shelterbelts are maintained at the Bullock Property habitat plantings. Photo: Kyle Prince