

Alberta Conservation Association 2016/17 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Habitat Legacy Partnership

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leader: Layne Seward

Primary ACA staff on project:

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks
County of Warner
David Bissett
Irrican Power
Landowners
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
Magrath Rod and Gun Club
Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Lethbridge chapters
Raymond Irrigation District
Southern Alberta Bowhunters Association
St. Mary River Irrigation District
Taber Irrigation District

Key Findings

- We planted more than 6,000 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 continue work on the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project.
- We worked with partners and landowners to install over 30 km of fence line to separate riparian habitat from encroaching agricultural activity and open up more than 600 acres for hunting.
- With partners, we funded the construction of a 2.5 ha wetland that will serve as habitat for wildlife and a nutrient settling pond aimed at improving water quality.
- We controlled weeds and continued maintenance on more than 17 km of shrub rows planted over the past five years.

Introduction

Upland game birds 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 for pheasants, grey partridge and sharp-tailed grouse, making their outcomes less stable. These three species have different strategies to use the landscape, but sharp-tailed grouse is the least compatible with areas dedicated to cultivation. 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 game birds.

Most of the southern landscape is in private hands. We develop strong working partnerships within the agricultural community and recognize that farmers and ranchers play a key role in the future sustainability of upland game birds in this system. Engaging with and listening to these stakeholders is a fundamental guiding principle that strengthens the grassroots nature of this work. As this project continues, we aim to work with landowners to improve habitat through a network of key zones, which should support the long-term sustainability of game birds on this landscape.

In collaboration with Alberta Environment and Parks, David Bissett, Irrican Power, landowners, Lethbridge Fish & Game Association, Magrath Rod and Gun Club, County of Warner, Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Lethbridge chapters, Raymond Irrigation District, Southern Alberta Bowhunters Association, St. Mary River Irrigation District and Taber Irrigation District, we initiated the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project, which is intended to improve wildlife habitat, connectivity, water quality and hunter access.

Methods

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

As part of our long-term adaptive plan we evaluate the long-term impacts of enhancement actions on upland game 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 2016, we planted more than 6,000 shrubs, including many berry-bearing species, to provide a reliable food source and create winter cover for upland game birds. 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've used a variety of planting techniques. Observed shrub survival has been greater than 80%. The most effective planting method to ensure resiliency of the planted shrubs has been to use woven fabric mulch to conserve moisture and reduce weed competition.

Working with our partners, we installed more than 30 km of fencing 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 (to more than 600 acres) the area now accessible to the public. With our partner groups, we were able to fund the construction of a 2.5 ha wetland that will provide habitat for numerous wildlife species and serve as a nutrient settling pond, aimed at improving the water quality of Ridge Reservoir, which so many people depend on.

Conclusions

The availability of key habitat components is critical to sustain and increase upland game bird densities over the long term. This is particularly challenging in a landscape where the vast majority of land is privately owned and mostly converted to cropland, and where natural habitat features have often been removed or isolated. We have made considerable headway 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 toward improving habitat features important for upland game 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.
- Attended numerous Fish & Game Club meetings and Pheasants Forever meetings to discuss habitat enhancements and partnership opportunities.

Literature Cited

None

Photos



Construction of the wetland on the west end of Ridge Reservoir for the Milk River Ridge Reservoir Water Quality Stewardship Initiative project. Photo: Sam Wirzba



Planting shrubs along the riparian buffer areas along Ridge Reservoir. Photo: Mike Uchikura



Permanent cover planted along the buffers of Ridge Reservoir to act as wildlife habitat and a nutrient filter. Photo: Mike Uchikura