

Alberta Conservation Association 2017/18 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Connectivity Project

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leader: Layne Seward

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Partnerships

Circle E Grazing
St. Mary River Irrigation District (SMRID)
Taber Irrigation District (TID)

Key Findings

- We hosted a workshop in Taber to discuss opportunities for working together with a broad group of stakeholders to benefit wildlife (municipality, town council, chamber of commerce, irrigation districts, and other conservation groups).
- We cost-shared the construction of a dugout with Circle E Grazing to defer grazing from a surrounding riparian area essential to wildlife.
- We assisted Taber Irrigation District with developing a plan and gaining approval for a fence to improve riparian habitat.
- We developed a report for Taber Irrigation District to help guide them with best management practices for wildlife habitat on their land base.

Introduction

Loss of habitat and habitat fragmentation is one of the greatest underlying threats to many of our wildlife species in southern Alberta. To mitigate the effects of habitat loss and fragmentation a broad range of stakeholders are needed to re-establishing functional habitat connectivity across a large land base. Establishing strong relationships with partner groups including municipalities, town councils, chambers of commerce, irrigation districts, and other conservation groups is essential in aiding with the development of these large-scale projects. The connectivity project aims at capitalizing on the relationships that Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) has built with these various groups through other projects like MULTISAR, the Taber Pheasant Festival, and Milk River Ridge Water Quality Stewardship Initiative. Working collaboratively with other program areas within ACA, we offer landowners, grazing reserves, and irrigation districts a multitude of options to meet their operational needs as well as benefit wildlife and re-establish connectivity across the southern landscape.

Methods

We meet with municipalities, irrigations districts, and grazing reserves to better understand their operations and discuss habitat needs of various wildlife. We work together to identify and map habitat enhancements that can be dovetailed into their operations that will benefit not only wildlife but also improve other parameters such as water quality, vegetative stands for grazing, access to water for grazing, social licensing, and recreational access. After initial plans have been developed with the landholder, we approach other conservation groups for assistance in term of letters of support, funding, and manpower needs. Once finalized plans have been developed we begin implementing the multi-year habitat enhancement plan on the landscape.

We engage the public in a variety of ways to profile the projects and partners. Public engagement activities include presentations at workshops, stakeholder meetings, signage, public presentations, distribution of information booklets, site tours, and social media.

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 2017, which is the initial year of this project, we hosted an information session in Taber for the grazing reserves, irrigation districts, conservation group members, and elected officials for the Municipal District and Town of Taber. As a result of this meeting and past relationships forged in the area, we initiated enhancement work with two irrigation districts and two grazing reserves in 2017.

We partnered with Circle E Grazing Association to cost share the development of a dugout to mitigate the effects of cattle grazing on a nearby riparian area that is heavily used by wildlife. We provided best management practices to Taber Irrigation District to assist them with habitat planning around their irrigation lands. We also assisted Taber Irrigation District with gaining approval for a fence to improve rotational grazing around a riparian area. We have been meeting and are currently working on a multi-year habitat plan with St. Mary River Irrigation District to implement habitat enhancements on their land.

Conclusions

Habitat connectivity is crucial for ensuring the longevity for wildlife. Pathways that connect habitat across the landscape greatly reduce the risk of small populations winking out. Grey partridge and pheasants can thrive in southern Alberta's farmed landscape but they are vulnerable to periodic weather events that can decimate local numbers. We have made considerable headway developing partnerships with key members of the agricultural community and landholders over the past five – six years. We are also gaining recognition as a partner that works with landholders to meet their needs while improving habitat important for upland game birds and wildlife across the region.

Communications

- Attended numerous Fish & Game Club meetings and Pheasants Forever meetings to discuss habitat enhancements and partnership opportunities.
- Hosted and presented a stakeholder workshop in Taber

Photos



Riparian area along Fincastle Lake that will be fenced off from cattle grazing.
Photo: Mike Uchikura