

**Alberta Conservation Association
2018/19 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: MULTISAR – Taber

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Government of Canada

Landholders

Municipal District of Taber

Key Findings

- We met with producers and grazing reserve managers and hosted a site tour to discuss enhancement options for sharp-tailed grouse and prairie rattlesnakes.
- We installed fence reflectors along 2 km of new wildlife friendly fence to deter collisions from sharp-tailed grouse. This fence also keeps vehicles out of sensitive coulee and riparian areas that are important corridors for rattlesnakes (Grazing Reserve #1).
- We reprinted the “Reptiles of Alberta” pamphlet for distribution.
- We surveyed two properties for sharp-tailed grouse leks with one possible lek found (seven grouse). We surveyed for prairie rattlesnakes but did not find any, but one landowner observed one rattlesnake on the property and reported it to us.

- We purchased and planted native shrubs at the East Hays Conservation Site to provide habitat and food resources important for wintering sharp-tail grouse (Saskatoon, wolf willow, and snowberry).
- We partnered with two grazing reserves to install offsite watering systems designed to redirect cattle away from riparian zones.

Introduction

Habitat loss is a key contributor to species population declines within Alberta. Economic expansion can have unintended impacts on wildlife and the habitat resources that are vital to their long-term success. Our goal is to work with land managers to identify and implement best management practices and enhancements that benefit wildlife and ensure their sustainability on a multiuse landscape.

We work collaboratively with landholders to identify and implement stewardship actions for prairie rattlesnakes and sharp-tailed grouse that result in tangible and measurable conservation benefits, including the retention of native landscapes. Through active engagement with the landholders, we help determine what enhancements will be beneficial to improve or prevent loss of wildlife habitat, while balancing the needs of cattle operations. Enhancements are monitored to track if they are having the desired effects. Building long-term relationships with landholders and their families cultivates mutual trust and sets a path for improving habitat within the agricultural landbase.

We work in the Municipal District (MD) of Taber, situated in the dry mixedgrass natural subregion. Land use is a mix of agriculture and native rangeland, while the Oldman River and the Bow River flow into the South Saskatchewan River at the MD's east boundary. Native grasslands within the MD are under constant pressure of being converted to agricultural crops such as potatoes, sugar beets, and corn.

We are targeting landowners with native grasslands and riparian zones that have resources important for sharp-tailed grouse and prairie rattlesnake. Through a search of Alberta's Fisheries

and Wildlife Management Information System, we found many key areas in the MD including 17 known historic sharp-tailed grouse leks and five historic prairie rattlesnake dens (hibernacula).

Methods

We identified three grazing reserves within the MD that had historic records of sharp-tailed grouse and or rattle snakes to focus our efforts. We looked at historic FWMIS entries to identify core areas for potential enhancement activities and followed these up with site assessments to look for key areas that would benefit snakes and/or grouse with enhancements. We discussed options with range managers and identified BMPs and enhancements that also complemented the long-term objectives of the grazing reserves. We used standard survey protocols to search for sharp-tailed grouse leks and for rattlesnakes at two properties.

We will monitor any enhancements implemented following the MULTISAR enhancement monitoring protocol (Downey et al. 2011). We also work closely with ACA's Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program to identify potential enhancement opportunities for gamebirds and to develop Best Management Practices for sharp-tailed grouse and rattlesnake with targeted landowners in the MD. We distributed the "At Home on the Range" landowner stewardship guide, as well as the sharp-tailed grouse and reptile pamphlets to producers as we discussed species at risk conservation through in-person meetings and presentations.

Results

We worked again with Grazing Reserve #1 by installing fence reflectors along 2 km of their new wildlife-friendly fence built last year, to reduce potential wildlife collision such as sharp-tailed grouse. Recreation access is an important activity on this grazing reserve and to assist with public use we supplied "Use Respect" signs to ensure visitors are aware of the access requirements established by the land managers. Our surveys for sharp-tailed grouse revealed one potential lekking area on Grazing Reserve #1 (seven individuals sighted). We plan to revisit this site in 2019 to determine if the lek is re-occurring between years. We didn't find prairie

rattlesnakes with our preliminary searches, although one rattlesnake was sighted by the land manager Grazing Reserve #1, and we plan to search this area for potential snake hibernacula in 2019. We did find wandering garter snakes (see photo) at Grazing Reserve #1.

We purchased a watering unit for Grazing Reserve #2 at the end of last fiscal and it was installed in the summer of 2018 to reduce cattle activity near riparian areas and other areas deemed important for nesting habitat for sharp-tailed grouse. We also purchased a watering unit for Grazing Reserve #3 to again redistribute cattle distribution on a pasture that has four sharp-tail grouse leks within just a few kilometers. Riparian zones are an important resource for both rattlesnakes and grouse.

We planted several species of shrub on the East Hays Conservation Site to provide habitat and food resources important for wintering sharp-tail grouse (300 Saskatoon, 350 wolf willow, and 300 snowberry). We also reprinted the “Reptiles of Alberta” pamphlet for distribution in the MD, and held meetings and presentations with two landholder groups.

Conclusions

Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landholders has allowed us to collaborate with producers and implement enhancements. These improvements not only will benefit sharp-tailed grouse and prairie rattlesnake, but other species such as other upland game birds, ungulates and grassland birds. With the Taber expansion of MULTISAR, new relationships are being formed that have led to enhancements in key areas on three grazing reserves to date. Through collaboration with agriculture groups and communities, that we foster a mutually beneficial relationship between the agriculture sector and the wildlife that uses the land.

Communications

Presentations at grazing associations.

Literature Cited

- Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP). 2017. Wild Species Status Search. Available online: <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/species-at-risk/wild-species-status-search.aspx> (Updated April 2017)
- Downey, B.A., P.F. Jones, and C.A. Koenig. 2011. MULTISAR Evaluation and Monitoring Protocol. Pages 32-47 in Rumbolt, K.S., F. Blouin, B.A. Downey, B.L. Downey, C.A. Koenig, D.J. Jarina, P.F. Jones, J.P. Landry-DeBoer, and E.R. Wesley. 2011. MULTISAR: A Multi-species Conservation Strategy for Species at Risk 2010-2011 Report. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 141, Edmonton, AB. 84pp.
- Government of Alberta (GOA). 2013. Sensitive Species Inventory Guidelines. Online: <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wildlife-management/documents/SensitiveSpeciesInventoryGuidelines-Apr18-2013.pdf>

Photos



Wandering garter snake found during surveys for prairie rattlesnake. Photo: Phil Rose