

**Alberta Conservation Association**  
**2019/20 Project Summary Report**

**Project Name:** Species Habitat Assessments and Ranching Partnerships

**Wildlife Program Manager:** Doug Manzer

**Project Leader:** Brad Downey

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**Partnerships**

Alberta Environment and Parks

ALUS Canada

Canadian Agricultural Partnerships

Canadian Cattlemen's Association

Ducks Unlimited Canada

Landholders

**Key Findings**

- We conducted baseline assessments and habitat planning on 15,540 acres of private land and 160 acres of lease land.
- We partnered with ALUS Canada on one property and with Ducks Unlimited Canada on another property on a trial basis.
- We initiated our first enhancement project, which involves modifying an existing perimeter fence line around a property to make it wildlife friendly.

## **Abstract**

The Species Habitat Assessments and Ranching Partnerships (SHARP) project is a voluntary collaborative project designed to aid in improving the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat available on the landscape. ACA's objective here is to make wildlife conservation straightforward and cost-effective for producers through education and cost-sharing agreements for habitat enhancements. We develop habitat strategies after first completing in-depth range and riparian health assessments. Through these assessments, we evaluate range and riparian health, and look for areas that could be improved. We balance these with the needs of target species and the long-term objectives of the landholder and come up with mutually agreed-upon solutions that benefit both wildlife and the producer's operations. As enhancements are made, we develop a monitoring plan to assess their progress and effectiveness. Our first two ranches (total 15,700 acres) were located in the North Saskatchewan Watershed and we look forward to expanding there and into the Peace River Watershed in 2020. Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landowners are the key to effective on-the-ground conservation efforts being undertaken through initiatives like the SHARP project.

## **Introduction**

The Species Habitat Assessments and Ranching Partnerships (SHARP) project is a voluntary collaborative project designed to aid in improving the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat available upon the landscape. Alberta Conservation Association's (ACA's) objective here is to make conservation straightforward and cost-effective for producers through education and cost-sharing agreements for habitat enhancements. The project can also provide producers with a plan and resources that can assist them in meeting the goals identified for the natural resource components of the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef Production Standards. The project employs an adaptive approach whereby data collected on each participating property will be used to evaluate the success of any habitat enhancements that are implemented, as well as guide future management recommendations. SHARP consist of three primary components: 1) Habitat Conservation (e.g., species and habitat inventories, habitat conservation strategies, and habitat enhancements); 2) Education, Outreach, and Awareness (e.g., development and distribution of

Beneficial Management Practices, brochures and guides, etc.); and 3) Monitoring (e.g., effectiveness of enhancements and changes in grazing practices in achieving our goals).

A Habitat Conservation Strategy (HCS) is a detailed voluntary plan that identifies beneficial management practices and habitat improvement recommendations to encourage sustainable ranching operations. First, a letter of intent is signed that outlines the roles of both ACA and the landowner, and clarifies that the landowner allows reasonable public access for recreation on their ranch. We then develop a HCS after first completing in-depth range and riparian health assessments. We evaluate these results with the needs of targeted species like sharp-tailed grouse, ruffed grouse, or species groups like amphibians and waterfowl, and balance the plan with the needs and objectives of the ranching operation. Mutually agreed-upon solutions are adopted and integrated into the HCS, along with a wildlife- and range-monitoring plan to assess progress and effectiveness of recommendations. After reviewing the HCS and signing a five-year stewardship agreement, we assist the producer with implementing the agreed to enhancements and grazing strategies by providing advice and/or resources. Progress is re-assessed every five years, with adjustments incorporated into the existing HCS for the operation. A landowner questionnaire is also completed to identify what is or is not working from their perspective, which helps us adjust the plan going forward. Another five-year stewardship agreement may be signed for continued implementation of the HCS.

## **Methods**

In 2019/20, we completed range, forest, and riparian assessments on two properties. Vegetation assessments followed the standard protocol developed by Alberta Public Lands (Adams et al. 2005), and riparian health assessments followed the protocols outlined by the Riparian Health Authority (Cows and Fish 2018a, 2018b). We also completed wildlife surveys that included bird point counts, waterfowl, ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, amphibian, and pollinator surveys. Wildlife inventories followed standard methods for select species (ASRD 2010). Wildlife observations were entered into the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Management Information System and vegetation data for crown land were entered into the Ecological Site Information System database.

## **Results**

In 2019/20, we inventoried two properties totaling 15,700 acres (15,560 acres of private land and 160 acres of lease land). Wildlife surveys resulted in two observations of sharp-tailed grouse, 57 occurrences of ruffed grouse with 35 drumming logs identified, 170 indicated breeding pairs of waterfowl, rare species like Sprague's pipit, and 71 species of bees. We completed 132 range assessments, 56 riparian health assessment and developed two HCSs identifying potential habitat improvements that could benefit wildlife and the ranching operations.

We initiated the first enhancement project, which involves modifying an existing perimeter fence line around a property to make it wildlife friendly. This will result in the bottom and top barbed wire strands being replaced with smooth wire. The bottom smooth wire will be installed 18" above the ground and the top smooth wire 42" above the ground. Other potential ideas for the properties included water developments, portable water, fencing, wetland development, shrub control, and bat condos. We will assist producers with implementing agreed to enhancements in 2020/21.

## **Conclusions**

Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landowners are the key to effective on-the-ground conservation efforts. Using a collaborative, voluntary approach allows all members of a team to provide ideas and discuss options. This allows for greater interactions and potential uptake by producers who can see win-win situations where both their operations and wildlife habitat can benefit. Using what we have learned during the first year, we hope to continue to build new partnerships in central and northern Alberta through the SHARP project, fostering mutually beneficial relationships with the agriculture community and improve wildlife habitat on this land base.

## **Communications**

- Presented at the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef AGM on the SHARP Project in Montreal. September 18, 2019, Brad Downey.
- Presented at the Intermountain Society of Range Management meeting in Olds: November 1, 2019, Brad Downey.
- Set up up a booth at the Farming with Nature workshop in Millet: January 27, 2020, Amanda Rezansoff.
- Presentation at the Alberta Native Plant Council AGM on the SHARP Project in Peace River: March 28, 2020, Natasha Mackintosh.

## **Literature Cited**

- Adams, B.W., G. Ehlert, C. Stone, M. Alexander, D. Lawrence, M. Willoughby, D. Moisey, C. Hinz, A. Burkinshaw, and J. Carlson. 2005. Rangeland health assessment for grassland, forest, and tame pasture. Public Lands Division, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Pub. No. T/044, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 128 pp.
- Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. 2010. Sensitive species inventory guidelines. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 69 pp. Available online: <http://srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeManagement/documents/SensitiveSpeciesInventoryGuidelines-Aug2010.pdf>.
- Cows and Fish. 2018a. Alberta Lotic Assessment for Streams and Small Rivers (survey) User Manuals. Online: <http://cowsandfish.org/riparian/health.html> . Accessed February 12, 2019.
- Cows and Fish. 2018b. Alberta Lentic Wetland Health Assessment (Survey) User Manuals. Online: <http://cowsandfish.org/riparian/health.html> . Accessed February 12, 2019.

**Photos:**



ACA staff member, Kris Kendell, conducting wetland assessment. Photo: Amanda Rezansoff





ACA staff member, Sue Peters, setting up pollinator trap to assess species diversity and occurrence. Photo: Lance Engley