

Alberta Conservation Association
2020/21 Project Summary Report

Project Name: MULTISAR – Milk River

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leader: Brad Downey

Primary ACA staff on project: Kelsey Cartwright, Brad Downey, Paul Jones, Julie Landry-DeBoer, Amanda MacDonald, Adam Moltzahn, Allie Olson, and Phil Rose

Partnerships

Alberta Beef Producers

Alberta Environment and Parks

Canadian Cattlemen's Association

Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef

Cows and Fish – Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society

Government of Canada

Landholders

Milk River Watershed Council Canada

Prairie Conservation Forum

Key Findings

- We collaborated with ranchers to maintain current relationships and completed one new Habitat Conservation Strategy on 3,352 acres.
- We confirmed partner funding in January 2021 from Environment and Climate Change Canada via the Canadian Cattlemen's Association for three years ending March 2023.

- We installed fence line reflectors on a mile of fence and purchased two portable electric fencing units for properties in the greater sage grouse range to help facilitate cattle distribution and reduce need for additional permanent fencing.

Abstract

We focus on multi-species conservation at the landscape level that promotes stewardship through voluntary participation of landholders on both Crown and private lands. In 2020, we worked collaboratively with multiple partners to maintain, increase, and improve habitat for species at risk within the greater sage grouse range of Alberta. This partnership involves habitat assessments, development of voluntary habitat conservation plans, and subsequent implementation and monitoring of on-the-ground enhancements. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and late funding confirmation, we focused our efforts on only one property consisting of 3,832 acres and postponed reassessments in the area until spring 2021. We completed 22 detailed range transects, 31 range health assessments, 17 tame pasture health assessments, 94 visual assessments, and 20 riparian assessments and recorded 783 wildlife observations. In 2020, we purchased two portable electric fencing units for habitat management on two ranches. These portable electric fencing units are being used to prevent the need for further permanent fencing and to provide more options for producers when it comes to managing their cattle distribution and avoiding sensitive areas for wildlife. We also assessed the bird community at our native grassland restoration sites within the greater sage grouse area and compared them to control sites on true native grasslands and cropland. Bird communities on our oldest native grass restoration site (Reseed 1) are now closely aligned to what is expected on a true native grass site compared to what would have been there in cropland.

Introduction

We focus on multi-species conservation at the landscape level that promotes stewardship through voluntary participation of landholders on both Crown and private lands. In 2020, new funding arrangements led us to shift our focus to the southeast corner of Alberta, concentrating on critical greater sage grouse habitat and adjacent lands. We work collaboratively with multiple partners to maintain, increase, and improve habitat for species at risk within the greater sage grouse range of Alberta. This partnership involves habitat assessments, development of voluntary Habitat

Conservation Strategies (HCS), and subsequent implementation and monitoring of on-the-ground enhancements. Our primary goal is to collaboratively develop plans to benefit greater sage grouse as well as other grassland-associated species that fall within the greater sage grouse range in Alberta. These plans are then implemented through habitat enhancement activities that benefit both the ranching operation and wildlife.

An HCS is a five-year extendable, voluntary plan that identifies beneficial management practices and habitat improvement recommendations to encourage sustainable ranching operations. First, an initial 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 these plans after first completing in-depth habitat, wildlife, and fish surveys, along with vegetation inventories and range and riparian health assessments. We evaluate these results with the needs of species at risk and balance the plan with the needs and objectives of the ranching operation. Mutually agreed-upon solutions are adopted and integrated into the strategy, and with priorities listed along with a monitoring plan to assess progress. Progress is reassessed every five years, with adjustments incorporated into a living management plan for the operation. A landowner questionnaire is also completed to identify what is or isn't working from their perspective, and to document landowner views across years. This questionnaire helps us readjust the plan going forward and can show change over time with landowner beliefs on species at risk. Another five-year stewardship agreement may be signed for continued implementation of the strategy.

Methods

We completed point count surveys on ranches to measure the occupancy of birds (Landry-DeBoer and Downey 2010). We surveyed riparian areas on these ranches by walking along the edge of the waterbodies listening and observing for amphibians (Kendell 2002). We also set up bat meters and song meters in key areas to identify bats and record birds and amphibians that may have been missed during point counts.

We completed range and riparian health assessments (Adams et al. 2005) and incorporated these results along with those from the wildlife inventories into an HCS specific to each landowner.

We also monitored native grass restoration projects completed in previous years. These data will help determine if restoration projects are having the desired effect on wildlife habitat and are progressing toward what is expected in a true native grassland (Jones and Landry-DeBoer 2012).

Results

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and late funding confirmation, we focused our efforts on only one property consisting of 3,352 acres and postponed reassessments in the area until spring 2021. We completed 22 detailed range transects, 31 range health assessments, 17 tame pasture health assessments, 94 visual assessments, and 20 riparian assessments and recorded 783 wildlife observations. In 2020, we purchased two portable electric fencing units for habitat management on two ranches. These portable electric fencing units are being used to prevent the need for further permanent fencing and to provide more options for producers when it come to managing their cattle distribution and avoiding sensitive areas for wildlife.

With different COVID-19 restrictions in place throughout the year, we maintained relationships with landholders through phone calls, emails, and outdoor meetings when possible. We managed to monitor native grassland restoration projects previously implemented in the greater sage grouse range. Bird communities on our oldest native grass restoration site (Reseed 1), reseeded in 2008, are now closely aligned with what is expected on a true native grass site and much different from what would likely have been there in cropland (Figure 1). Reseed two was completed three years later in 2011 and it will be interesting to see how the bird community changes over the next few years as currently there are similar species present but in higher abundance.

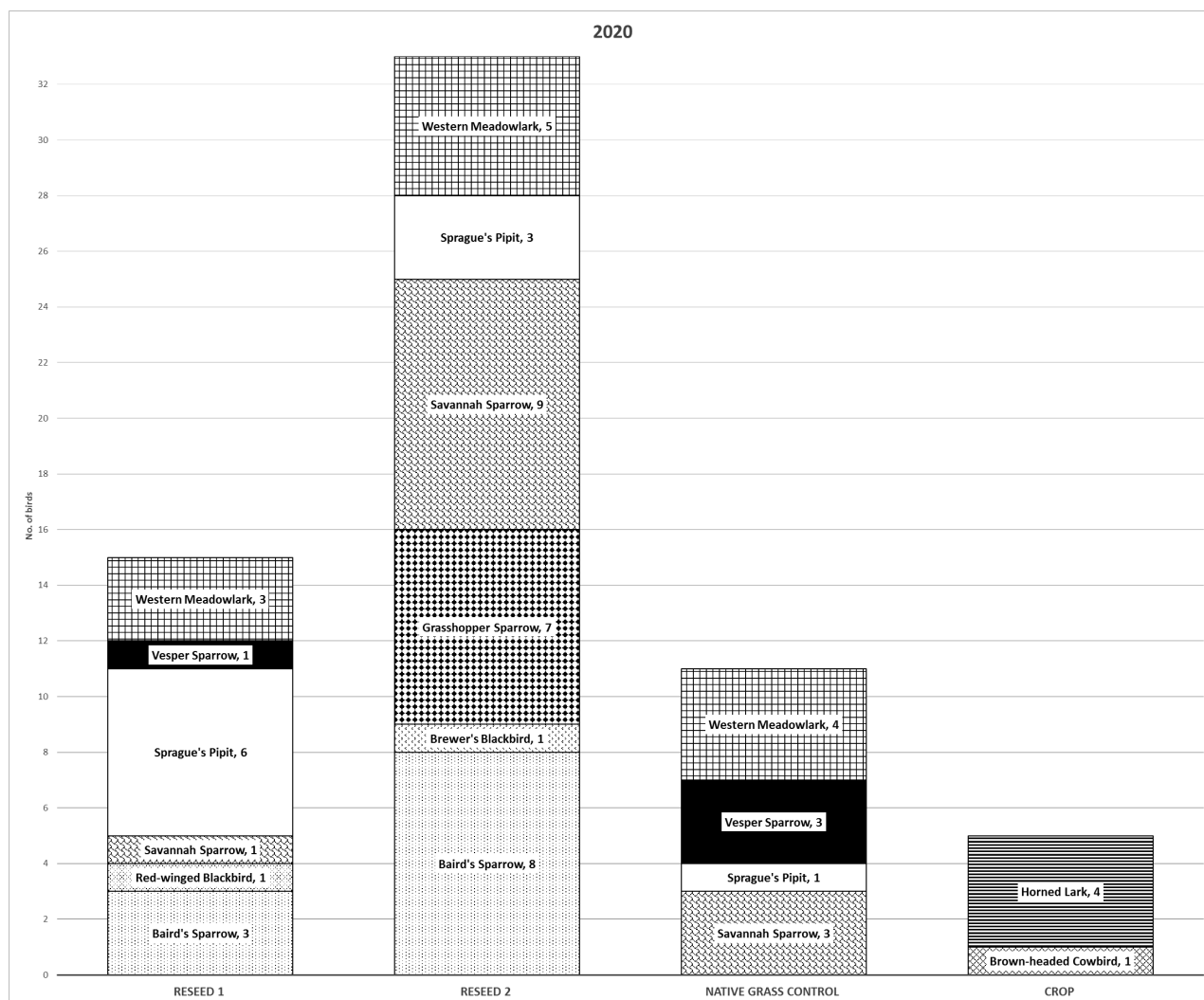


Figure 1. Comparison between bird communities on native grass restoration sites (Reseed 1, 2008; Reseed 2, 2011), native grassland, and cropland from point counts.

Conclusions

Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landowners have allowed us to collaborate with producers on habitat enhancements. We are also pleased to see positive results from our long-term efforts with converting cropland back to grassland and the additional habitat created for grassland birds and other species. These improvements not only benefit habitat for species at risk, but also provides essential resources for upland game birds and ungulates that are highly valued by recreational users who access these ranches.

Communications

- Assisted in the Online the Women's Grazing School: Julie Landry-DeBoer, July 2020.
- "Resurgence" article ACA's *Conservation Magazine Fall/Winter 2020* on Silver Sage Conservation Site and Greater Sage Grouse Brad Downey and Tyler Johns, September 2020.

Literature Cited

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- Kendell, K. 2002. Survey protocol for the northern leopard frog. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 43, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 30 pp.
- Landry-DeBoer, J.P., and B.A. Downey. 2010. Habitat Conservation Strategies. Pages 12 – 23. In: F. Blouin, B.L. Downey, B.A. Downey, S.L. Frank, D.J. Jarina, P.F. Jones, J.P. Landry-DeBoer, and K.S. Rumbolt. MULTISAR: A Multi-Species Conservation Strategy for Species at Risk 2009 – 2010 Report. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish

and Wildlife Division, Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 135, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 71 pp.

Photos



Native grass restoration. Photo: Brad Downey



Volunteer Ryder Downey helping with early morning bird surveys. Photo: Brad Downey



ACA staff member, Adam Moltzahn, installing acoustic recording device for bats: Photo:-Brad Moltzahn



Fence line reflectors to reduce wildlife collisions. Photo: Adam Moltzahn