

Alberta Conservation Association 2020/21 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Habitat Legacy Partnership

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Landowners

Key Findings

- We continued maintenance on more than 20,000 shrubs that were planted to create escape cover and winter habitat for pheasants, grey partridge, and other wildlife species.
- We spoke with landowners partnering in this project to ensure ongoing reasonable public access is being granted on habitat project lands.

Abstract

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. The Habitat Legacy Partnership works collaboratively with farmers, ranchers, and conservation groups to improve habitat and hunting opportunity for upland game birds. We meet with private landowners to better understand their farming operations and discuss habitat needs. 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. In 2020, we continued maintenance on more than 20,000 shrubs, including many berry-bearing species, to provide a reliable food source and create winter cover for upland game birds. Through the Habitat Legacy Partnership project, we are gaining recognition as being a partner for private landowners to collaborate with for habitat development.

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, and conservation groups 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.

Methods

We meet with landowners to better understand their farming operations and discuss habitat needs. 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 2020, we continued maintenance on more than 20,000 shrubs, including many berry-bearing species, to provide a reliable food source and create winter cover for upland game birds. Our timeline photo-points have documented the survival and relative growth on these shelterbelts over the years where we have 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.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and regulations, all novice hunts were cancelled, and no novice hunts were attended in the 2020/21 fiscal year. With restrictions in place, we transitioned landowner, stakeholder, and public interactions to online meetings and phone conversations to reduce risk.

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 six years in developing partnerships with key members of the agricultural community to elevate the value of upland game bird habitat in the southern region. We are also gaining recognition as a key partner to collaborate with for improving habitat features important for upland game birds across the region. We will continue to engage landowners in both developing habitat on their land and ensuring reasonable public access for the public to enjoy these sites.

Communications

- Delivered *Pheasants Through the Seasons* booklets and habitat plans with our logo on them to landowners.
- Contacted numerous Fish & Game Club to discuss habitat enhancements and partnership opportunities.
- Distributed landowner contact signs requested for hunting season.

Photos



Picture of the shelterbelts enhancements that are planted at the Bullock Property to provide food, escape cover, and thermal protection for wildlife. Photo: Jalen Hulit



Vance Finley with his Habitat Legacy Partnership sign. Photo: Samuel Vriend



Vance Finley overlooking habitat enhancements with ACA staff Layne Seward, Jalen Hulit, and Colten Gurr. Photo: Samuel Vriend