

**Alberta Conservation Association
2021/2022 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: MULTISAR – Milk River

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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

Environment and Climate Change Canada

HUVAN Construction

Landholders

Milk River Watershed Council Canada

Prairie Conservation Forum

Key Findings

- We collaborated with ranchers to maintain current relationships, completed a Habitat Conservation Strategy on a newly acquired Alberta Conservation Association property (166 acres), and reassessed one property containing 42,700 acres.
- We partnered with three landholders and reseeded 120 acres back to native grass, purchased a portable fencing unit to help alleviate pressure on sensitive riparian areas, deepened four dugouts to hold water longer and reduce need for cattle to use natural

waterbodies, installed a bat condo, and collaborated with two producers on solar water pumps.

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 2021, 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. We focused our efforts reassessing one large property consisting of 42,700 acres and one newly acquired ACA property along Manyberries Creek (166 acres). We completed five detailed range transects, 72 range health assessments, 16 tame pasture health assessments, 11 riparian assessments; and recorded 1,028 wildlife observations. In 2021, we purchased one portable electric fencing unit for habitat management by alleviating cattle pressure on sensitive areas. 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. We seeded 120 acres adjacent to greater sage grouse critical habitat back to native grasses. We also installed a bat condo for the endangered little brown myotis.

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 2021, our focus continued to be on 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 Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) and the landowner and clarifies that the landowner allows reasonable public access for recreation on their ranch. Then, we develop these plans after first completing in-depth wildlife, fish, and habitat surveys, along with vegetation inventories and range and riparian health assessments. We evaluate these results with the needs of species at risk (SAR) and balance the plan with the needs and objectives of the ranching operation. Mutually agreed-upon solutions are adopted and integrated into the strategy, 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 is not 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 SAR. 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 looking for amphibians (Kendell 2002). We also set up bat meters and song meters in key areas to identify bats and record birds and amphibians, respectively, 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

We focused our efforts on reassessing one large property consisting of 42,700 acres and one newly acquired ACA property along Manyberries Creek of 166 acres. We completed five detailed range transects, 72 range health assessments, 16 tame pasture health assessments, 11 riparian assessments; and recorded 1,028 wildlife observations. In 2021, we purchased one portable electric fencing unit to help alleviate cattle pressure on sensitive areas. 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.

We seeded 120 acres adjacent to greater sage grouse critical habitat back to native grasses.

We also installed a bat condo for the endangered little brown myotis. Other projects include deepening four dugouts to allow better retention of water for longer periods and assisting with two solar pumps for cattle management and reducing pressure on greater sage grouse habitat.

With COVID-19 restrictions still in place throughout the year, we maintained relationships with landholders through phone calls, emails, and outdoor meetings when possible. We continued to manage and monitor native grassland restoration projects previously implemented in the greater sage grouse range. Figure 1—(A) reseed from 2021 and (B) reseed from 2011—provides a great example of the change in wildlife habitat that can occur over 10 years as these sites are adjacent to one another.



Figure 1. Native grass restoration site: (A) 2021 new reseed and (B) 2011 older reseed adjacent to the 2021 reseed.

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 SAR like greater sage grouse and other grassland birds, but also provides essential resources and habitat for upland game birds and ungulates that are highly valued by recreational users who access these properties.

Communications

Not applicable

Literature Cited

- Adams, B.W., G. Ehlert, C. Stone, M. Alexander, D. Lawrence, M. Willoughby, D. Moisey, C. Hincz, and A. Burkinshaw. 2005. *Rangeland Health Assessment for Grassland, Forest, & Tame Pasture*. Revised. Public Lands and Forest Division, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Pub. No. T/044. Edmonton, AB. 128 pp.
- Jones, P., and J. Landry-DeBoer. 2012. MULTISAR's Monitoring, Enhancement, and Evaluation Program. Alberta Conservation Association Internal Report, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.
- Kendell, K. 2002. *Survey Protocol for the Northern Leopard Frog*. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish & Wildlife Division, Resource Status and Assessment Branch. Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 43, Edmonton, AB. 30 pp.
- Landry-DeBoer, J.P., and B.A. Downey. 2010. "Habitat Conservation Strategies." Pages 12 – 23. In: Blouin, F., B.L. Downey, B.A. Downey, S.L. Frank, D.J. Jarina, P.F. Jones, J.P. Landry-DeBoer, and K.S. Rumbolt. 2010. *MULTISAR: A Multi-Species Conservation Strategy for Species at Risk In the Grassland Natural Region of Alberta*. 2009 – 2010 Report. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish & Wildlife Division. Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 135. Edmonton, AB. 71 pp.

Photos



Photo 1. Portable fencing, which reduces the need for permanent structures.

Photo: Adam Moltzahn



Photo 2. Bat condo for little brown myotis. Photo: Adam Moltzahn



Photo 3. Newly acquired ACA property along Manyberries Creek. Photo: Brad Downey