



Habitat Success  
from  
Minnesota's Forests

2021

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# Habitat Success From Minnesota's Forests

## Jon Steigerwaldt

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If you're reading this and reside in the great state of Minnesota, it's likely you are passionate about the conservation of Minnesota forests. Due to continued support from Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society (RGS & AWS) donors like you, together we can increase conservation impacts on these forests for a wide range of forest wildlife. To support grouse populations, we need high quality habitat, which comes from responsible forest management. Currently our Regional Forest Conservation Director and his network are involved in several important conservation programs to increase and improve wildlife habitat across Minnesota. These are just some of the projects we have underway.

### Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council - Roving Habitat Crew Sponsorship

In 2019, RGS & AWS joined the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society in sponsoring and supporting a successful \$2.4 million Roving Habitat Crew application to the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC). Testifying before the LSOHC on September 4, 2019 RGS Forest Conservation Director Jon Steigerwaldt advocated that this project is one he wished would be implemented across his four-state territory. The goal of the project is to address many of the forested and non-forested habitats that are vital for ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, and American woodcock. However, the area where this work will occur (i.e., Laurentian Mixed Forest Province) is home to over 170 species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) which could also benefit from the habitat enhancements. According to Steigerwaldt, the 3-year grant supports roving crews of habitat-focused DNR employees that will work on timber management, shrub-land management, invasive species management, and prescribed burning across 3,250 acres.



### Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) – Moose Habitat Collaborative Phase IV

In 2020, RGS & AWS joined the MN Moose Habitat Collaborative and together with a wide range of partners, put together a landscape level habitat project on the north shore that will aim to restore over 30,000 acres of critical forest habitats. This includes ruffed grouse, American Woodcock, and moose habitat. This grant was recommended for \$1,809,000 in Outdoor Heritage Funding (OHF) by the LSOHC, approved through MN legislative action and Governor's signature in June 2021, ends June 30, 2024.

## Minnesota Conservation Partners Legacy (CPL) Grant Program

In June of 2021, RGS successfully completed two large CPL grants that totaled \$423,638.92, impacted forest habitats on 2,379 acres, 444 sites. Currently, RGS & AWS is managing four additional CPL grants which total \$121,100 that is expected to impact ~390 acres, be completed in 2022. These seven grants bring nearly \$550,000 in landscape-level habitat and forest management impact to northern Minnesota forests. Approximately 2,770 acres will be or have been improved via alder shearing, commercial and non-commercial timber harvests, brush management, forest regeneration, thermal cover enhancement, and wildlife openings. These grants are creating habitat and hunting opportunities across the Northland, including: Aitkin, Beltrami, Koochiching, and Cass counties; the Grand Rapids Area and Two Harbors; and the Little Marais Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Littlefork River WMA, Carlos Avery WMA, Roseau River WMA, Whitewater WMA, and the Meadow Brook WMA to name a few. There are plans to continue this grant opportunity into the future to capitalize on these focused habitat grants that can have big impacts.



## Hunter Walking Trail – Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) Grant

Along with these state grant opportunities, RGS & AWS sponsored a \$300,000 Hunter Walking Trail grant that was recommended by LCCMR for Environment and Natural Resources Trust fund (ENRTF) funding, approved through MN legislative action and Governor's signature in June 2021, ends June 30, 2024. This LCCMR grant proposes to: (1) restore/enhance 200 trail heads and 80 miles of existing trails, (2) add about 20 miles of new trails, and (3) update trail maps for land managers and users. A resource assessment of all public land hunter walking trails (~1,000 miles) is also being undertaken to more fully understand the current status and needs of these trails, and to drive priority sites for this grant. Hunter walking trails are a great way for you to access different public lands, often through WMAs or Ruffed Grouse Management Areas (RGMA).

## Chippewa National Forest Stewardship Project – Blackduck Ranger Districts

RGS & AWS has also entered a \$111,141 stewardship agreement with the Chippewa National Forest to collaborate on a hunter walking trail complex near Cass Lake. Once completed, the project will have improved approximately 200 acres on the National Forest with 83 acres of direct timber harvests, maintained (i.e., mow/brush) about 96 miles of trails, and replaced over 10 gates. As part of the agreement, RGS reinvests the revenue into the local community where the timber comes off, improving wildlife habitat and tourism through hunting opportunities. All through active management.

To date, 49 miles of hunter walking trails have been mowed, with 47 miles of trail mowing and the replacement of 10 gates under contract to be completed in 2021. Additionally, the 83 acre timber sale is under contract to be completed in the winter of 2021-2022.

## Chippewa National Forest Stewardship Expansion – Deer River and Walker Ranger District

In addition to our current active Stewardship Agreement on the Blackduck Ranger District., RGS & AWS is currently in talks about signing additional agreements on the Deer River and Walker Ranger Districts. Once signed, these agreements have the ability to grow our active timber management program on Forest Service lands and enable RGS & AWS to reinvest an estimated \$250,000 back into the forest through the agreement, but can be increased with more member support. RGS & AWS anticipates 3 additional agreements to be signed by early 2022.

### Bottom Line

The bottom line is that RGS & AWS is making a measurable impact in Minnesota forests. From chapter-based projects, to corporate partnerships, to large landscape level grants; RGS & AWS is investing in Minnesota habitat. All told, these programs amount to nearly \$5.5 million in forest management and habitat improvement, which is only part of the RGS & AWS mission that your continued membership and donations support. While RGS & AWS is a relatively small organization, that doesn't stop us from accomplishing big things on the landscape. With your continued support, we will keep working with partners to improve habitat and retain ruffed grouse and woodcock in the north country. As noted, Minnesota is a great state for public land partnerships and related grant opportunities.

