



Habitat Success
from
Wisconsin's Forests

2021

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If you are a Wisconsinite reading this, you are most likely passionate about 5 things: the Green Bay Packers, squeaky cheese curds, bratwurst, brandy old fashioned, and the strong regional tradition of conservation ethic. As conservationists yourselves, you are part of the state's long tradition of conservation ethic, lifestyle, and industry and in the company of such Wisconsin conservation leaders as Aldo Leopold, John T. Curtis, David Clark Everest, Wallace B Grange, the Hamerstroms, and Stanton W. Mead. As well as helping the Ruffed Grouse Society/American Woodcock Society as we've continue to forge our own conservation legacy past 60 years. To continue to support grouse populations, we need high quality habitat, which comes from responsible forest stewardship. Currently our Wisconsin conservation team is involved in several important conservation programs to increase and improve wildlife habitat across the state. These are just some of the projects we have underway.

Forest Wildlife Specialist – Private Lands Program

Because most forested land in Wisconsin (57%) is privately owned by individual landowners like farmers, home owners, hunting clubs, and investors, a private lands program is critical to well managed wildlife populations in the state. There are the additional benefits of well managed private lands being habitat for ruffed grouse to disperse from, be safe stop-overs for migrating woodcock, and being areas relatively free of the government "red tape" that can hinder the movement of the conservation needle on a landscape. That's why, in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), RGS & AWS employs Forest Wildlife Specialist (FWS) staff in WI that work primarily with private land owners. Our first of these specialist staff started in late 2016 in Spooner WI serving northwest WI. A second position being added in Lena WI is 2018 that served northeast WI. Both positions being made possible with \$372,000 in funding from NRCS and the WI DNR.



Annually, RGS & AWS's two FWS's advise over 700 landowners, conduct site visits with over 225 land owners, initiate 130 projects in 11 counties that cover over 1,100 acres, conduct 8 land owner workshops, write 15 stewardship plans, and help Wisconsin landowners tap into over \$556,000 of Federal funding through Farm Bill for forest conservation work. And RGS & AWS is just getting started with this important work. With one of our FWS accepting a permanent job with NRCS out of Lena WI, an opportunity was created to move one of the FWS's positions to Antigo WI.

Currently, RGS & AWS has a \$1,000,000 grant application to NRCS to not only fund the FWS program to 2026, but add a 3rd position out of Whitehall WI by the end of 2021, as well as add an additional intern as a 4th program employee.

Discrete Public Lands Projects

Currently, RGS & AWS has 29 small scale habitat projects open with the DNR, Forest Service, and county forestry departments in WI. These projects are made possible through the generosity of members, specific donors, foundations, and other organizations RGS & AWS has partnered with, like Whitetails Unlimited. When completed these projects will impact 893 acres of habitat and 13.6 miles of hunter walking trails in WI. These projects include projects like: 88 acres of oak forest establishment in Douglas Co, 12 acres of invasive species spraying in Lacrosse Co, 20 acres of alder sheering in Marathon Co, or 15 miles of hunter walking trail maintenance in Rusk Co.

For years, these types of projects have been at the core of RGS & AWS's mission. And with our partners and members, we've managed to accomplish some great work together. However, with the unveiling of RGS & AWS's new conservation model, these projects will take less of a role moving forward. As the discrete, small-scale nature of individual projects doesn't lend well to greater landscape level considerations or management concerns, the conservation team will be looking to leverage larger grants, funding sources, and opportunities to grow the impact of future work beyond their current impact.



Coverts Workshop

Beginning in 1994, the Wisconsin Coverts Project held at UW-Madison's remote Kemp Natural Resources Field Station in Woodruff. Initially made possible through generous consecutive 3-year grants from RGS, this free landowner workshop has run uninterrupted until in person meetings were cancelled due to COVID-19. Despite not being able to meet in 2020, 770 Coverts participants (representing 647 properties) have attended a total of 30 workshops to date. Participants own or are responsible for managing 528,511 acres (including 165,000 acres of industrial forest, 60,000 acres owned by the U.S. Army, and 80,000 acres owned by Board of Commissioners of Public Lands) in Wisconsin (and the Midwest).

During the free 4-day workshop, participants are immersed in a learning environment. Receiving classroom lectures from wildlife faculty, natural resources professionals, and the conservation director of the RGS & AWS. The 3rd day of the workshop involves visiting recent timber harvests on state properties to highlight the importance of active forest management for wildlife. The 4th day is the highlight for many participants as they tour the property of local grouse guide, Terry Ides who for decades has managed his property specifically for ruffed grouse and ruffed grouse hunting.

Today, the Coverts workshop continues with funding and support from the Wisconsin Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Implementation Committee, the Anne and Jason Spaeth family, Braun Woodlands, Division of Extension at UW-Madison, Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology at UW-Madison, and the Ruffed Grouse/American Woodcock Society. The 2021 Coverts Workshop is scheduled for August 12-15th. More can be found at: <https://forestandwildlifeecology.wisc.edu/coverts/>

RGS & AWS currently has a \$15,000 Grant in front of the WI SFI Implementation Committee to support the workshop through 2023.

Ruffed Grouse Symposium

On February 25, 2020, Wisconsin hosted an Upper Midwest Ruffed Grouse Symposium. This event was geared towards professional wildlife biologists, foresters, and researchers managing ruffed grouse in the Upper Midwest.

In total, 120 professionals from eight different states attended the symposium. The day was well rounded with talks on current research, management efforts, and planning. Discussions also focused on learning about factors impacting ruffed grouse such as disease, policy, forest product market trends and climate.

Discussing landscape level habitat management as well as research needs, professionals sought to get on the same page before identifying the next steps towards managing ruffed grouse across the region. RGS President and CEO Ben Jones opened the symposium by delivering a keynote speech where he discussed habitat and population trends and the need for a transformative landscape level approach to managing habitat at scale. RGS Conservation and Legislative Officer Brent Rudolph also spoke about the need for further collaboration on habitat and policy issues.



Wood Yard – Wisconsin Rapids Paper Mill

<https://ruffedgrousesociety.org/ruffed-grouse-symposium-rgs/#more-5223949>

Pursuing Shared Stewardship on Chequamegon National Forest

2021 saw talks progressed with Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and WI DNR staff, to pursue a Stewardship Agreement and/or assist the state spend retained Good Neighbor Authority project dollars on the national forest. Though very preliminary, projects ideas are being proposed at this time that could be handled through these sources or with the help of grants such as Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funds or the Landscape Restoration Fund (LSR).

In addition to helping to create beneficial habitat for woodcock and ruffed grouse, projects have been proposed that would attract pollinators and other insects for forest birds like ruffed grouse to feed on, creation of sharp-tail grouse habitat, tree planting, and beneficial habitat for the Clam Lake woodland elk heard in northern WI. All projects that would help diversify the landscape and create beneficial habitat for a wide range of species.

Policy Front

Wisconsin recently completed its first ever Ruffed Grouse Management Plan. The impetus and need for this plan was set forward after the states Natural Resources Board voted on an emergency rule to shorten the 2018 ruffed grouse season. Support for this plan was extensive with 15 members from 13 different government and non-government organizations making up the planning committee. RGS & AWS Forest Conservation Director Jon Steigerwaldt played an important part of the team, actively drafting portions of the plan that helped form the final draft. The plan includes objectives to continue the monitoring of mosquito-borne disease impacts on the ruffed grouse population and modify season structure. Additional objectives include creating guidance documents for professional foresters/loggers on how to create and optimize ruffed grouse habitat as well as pursuing additional partnership positions like the two NRCS positions RGS already oversees, providing outreach to private landowners, and forming research questions.



Ruffed Grouse by Timothy C. Flanigan

The plan can be found at: <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/documents/rgrouseplan.pdf>

Due to COVID-19 budget shortfalls and hiring difficulties, WI DNR was and continues to be plagued with vacancies for habitat critical positions. In response to this, RGS & AWS Forest Conservation Director Jon Steigerwaldt urged the WI DNR secretary to make every effort possible to fill positions to take full advantage of grant opportunities in an April 7, 2021 letter.

Wisconsin's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program provides valuable funding to conserve wildlife habitat and natural areas, expand opportunities for outdoor recreation, and protect water quality and fisheries. Over the past three decades, the Knowles-Nelson program has invested more than [\\$825 million in nearly 7,000 projects](#) across the state. Though diverse forms of outdoor recreation are supported by these projects that involve purchasing lands or easements and sustaining infrastructure, a [program review](#) found 94% of lands purchased with Knowles-Nelson grants since 2007 are open to hunting. However, since 2007, funding for the program has been cut from a high of \$86 million per year down to its current level of \$33 million per year. Furthermore, in a break from the tradition of reauthorizing the program 10 years at a time, the Wisconsin Legislature only funded the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program through 2021 in the last state budget. Because individual projects can take several years from start to finish, RGS & AWS urged members to reach out to their legislatures, calling on them to act on Governor Tony Evers inclusion of a 10-year reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program in his 2021 budget proposal, with funding at \$70 million per year.

<https://ruffedgrousesociety.org/wisconsin-members-your-voice-is-needed/#more-5287134>



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