



Habitat Success
from
Minnesota's Forests

2022

Habitat Success From Minnesota's Forests

Jon Steigerwaldt

Forest Conservation Director: Great Lakes/Upper Midwest

7/7/22

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, 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 growing Conservation staff are implementing and further developing multiple important conservation projects/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 & AWS 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 that will be completed this year, 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 – 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 on state, county, federal, and tribal lands. This includes habitat for ruffed grouse, American woodcock, spruce grouse, snowshoe hare, and moose. 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. To date, 1,700 acres of deer browse protection has been installed and 360 acres of tree release have been completed, along with 100,000 trees being sowed this spring to be planted in 2023. Additionally, the Collaborative has helped the Superior National Forest Procure equipment needed for multiple prescribed burns related to this project. The size and nature of this grant has allowed RGS & AWS to hire our first State Forest Conservation Coordinator, Scott Johnson. This grant project ends on June 30, 2024, at which time RGS & AWS plan to pursue the 5th phase of this project.

Minnesota Conservation Partners Legacy (CPL) Grant Program

Since 2017, RGS & AWS have entered into seven Conservation Partners Legacy (CPL) grants totaling nearly \$550,000. By the end of June 2022, RGS & AWS successfully completed six of the seven CPL grants, that impacted forest habitats on over 2,600 acres, 446 sites. Currently, RGS & AWS are managing one remaining CPL grants, which total \$45,700 and seeks to accomplish 70 acres of habitat work on the Janett Johnson Wildlife Management Area (WMA) outside of Cambridge MN.

These seven grants bring landscape-level habitat and forest management impact to northern Minnesota forests with approximately 2,770 acres in habitat treatments that 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 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 to pursue this grant opportunity into the future to capitalize on these focused habitat grants that can add up to big impacts.



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

Along with these state grant opportunities, RGS & AWS secured 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). Work is scheduled to begin the summer of 2022.

Chippewa National Forest Stewardship Project – Blackduck Ranger Districts

In 2020, RGS & AWS entered into a \$111,141 Stewardship Agreement with the Chippewa National Forest to collaborate on a hunter walking trail complexes near Cass Lake. As a core feature of this agreement, RGS reinvests the revenue into the local community where the timber comes of off, improving wildlife habitat and tourism through hunting opportunities. All through active management. This past winter, the 83 acres of timber harvest tied to this stewardship agreement was completed. Revenue from this sale has been and will be further invested into hunter walking trails on the Chippewa National Forest.

Combined with a \$10,000 challenge cost share agreement, to date this stewardship agreement has: marked and/or placed 133 acres of timber under contract to be harvested, installed 10 new gates at improved hunter walking trail trailheads, and mowed 97 miles of trails on 10 different hunter walking trails on the Chippewa National Forest. The total timber sale value and subsequent project investment through our Early Succession Habitat Improvement Project is \$84,674. When combined with non-cash match from RGS/AWS and Forest Service in the form of staff time for this SPA agreement and added to our 2019 stand-alone Challenge Cost Share Agreement accomplishing similar work on the Chippewa, the total Forest Stewardship investment in the Bemidji-Grand Rapids area is \$131,891. And still growing...

Chippewa National Forest Stewardship Expansion – Deer River Ranger District

In addition to our Stewardship Agreement on the Blackduck Ranger District, RGS & AWS recently finalized an additional \$81,874.14 stewardship agreement on the Deer River Ranger District of the Chippewa National Forest. This agreement has a shovel ready 78 acre timber sale at the Johnson Lake Hunter Walking Trail that will be offered for sale later this year and allow RGS & AWS to grow our active timber management program on Forest Service lands. Through this project, RGS & AWS will be able to reinvest the revenue from the timber harvest into 8 new hunter walking trail gates, the maintenance of waterfowl production area dikes (mowing and maintaining infrastructure), 30 acres of non-forested opening maintenance for American woodcock, and 11 acres of pollinator habitat restoration. This stewardship agreement is just gaining momentum as RGS and AWS staff are currently working with Forest Service staff on an addition to this agreement that would add hundreds of acres of additional timber sale work to the Chippewa National Forest.

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council - Protection/Enhancement of Public Land Forest Habitats Through Strategic Acquisition of Private Land Inholdings

Looking Forward, RGS & AWS have a \$3,091,000 proposal in front of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council to fund the strategic acquisition of small private land inholdings within blocks of public land, like Wildlife Management Areas, state lands, or school trust lands, then turn those acquisitions over to the proper public land owner, once the properties received habitat improvements. This means that before lands are handed to the public, they will be “turn-key ready” for management, with site specific forest and habitat work like: forest inventory, property surveying and signage, tree planting, alder mowing, ect. These strategic acquisitions aim to make it easier to manage larger blocks of public lands by removing the barriers to management presented by inholdings, as well as improve access to existing public lands. If funded, this proposal would protect and enhance 2,260 acres and work would begin in 2023.

Bottom Line

The bottom line is that RGS & AWS are 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 over **\$8,353,000** in forest management and habitat improvement, which is only part of the RGS & AWS mission that your continued membership and support.

