

Wisconsin turns to Minnesota for new blood to restore grouse

April 14 2017, by Steve Karnowski

The entertaining springtime ritual of male sharp-tailed grouse twirling, nodding and strutting their stuff on the prairie to impress the ladies isn't as common a sight in Wisconsin as it used to be. So biologists are bringing in new blood from Minnesota to provide an isolated flock with a shot at survival.

Starting next week, wildlife biologists plan to capture as many as 60 of the birds on their booming grounds in far northwestern Minnesota and get them checked out by a veterinarian in Duluth. If they pass muster, the birds will be released into the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest of northern Wisconsin in hopes that they'll inject some fresh genetics.

"They look like windup toys, like little airplanes," said Brian Winter, program director for stewardship at The Nature Conservancy's Bluestem Prairie preserve near Glyndon. "They hold their wings out and make these grasshopper-like buzzing sounds, like they're out of control. They zoom around on the dancing ground in order to impress the female grouse for the right to mate."

The birds' new home will be the 22,000-acre Moquah Pine Barrens in Bayfield County, a rare habitat that the U.S. Forest Service has been working to restore in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, other state and federal agencies, and local Chippewa tribes. Pine barrens contain a unique mix of grasses, trees and other plants on sandy soils that depend on periodic fires to keep other species out. Thanks to prescribed burns and other efforts to turn back the encroaching forest since 2009,

the area once again offers the kind of grassland that sharptails need to thrive over the long term, forest spokesman Greyling Brandt said.

Forest officials are now in the second year of a three-year plan to bring in enough birds to provide the necessary genetic diversity for a sustainable population, he said. They relocated 29 from Minnesota last year.

"Sharp-tailed grouse used to have a much broader distribution. They're a bird that requires grass and brush, and that kind of habitat has been disappearing over time," explained Jonathan Eerkes, tallgrass aspen parklands land steward with the conservancy in Karlstad. "In Wisconsin they've really gone to the effort of restoring a large area of grass, but it seems it was too little, too late for their sharptail population to really respond to that. So they need new genetics to help prevent inbreeding."

Sharp-tailed grouse are a close relative of prairie chickens. Their main range extends from the plains states into Canada. Fortunately, the sharptail population in Kittson County in the far northwestern corner of Minnesota is healthy enough to support the donation of a few dozen good grouse to Wisconsin.

Now is the time of year when sharp-tailed grouse of both sexes return to their traditional breeding grounds, known as leks, where they've done their mating dances for countless generations. And that's where the biologists plan to capture them. They've scouted out leks in the 15,000-acre Wallace C. Dayton Conservation and Wildlife Area and on nearby private land where they'll try to lure the birds into traps, but they'll take no more than a few from each site.

Eerkes acknowledged that sharptails are sensitive and difficult to transport, and that being handled will be stressful for them. But he said the landscape has become too fragmented for the birds to repopulate

their former range in Wisconsin without human intervention.

"It's really the only way to do it," he said. "If we had connected habitats we could let nature do it, but that's not an option here. So we can expect that a number of birds aren't going to make it. But a certain percentage will. And that little bit of genetics will make a lot of difference."

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