

Wisconsin Sharptail Grouse Status 2009

By Sharon Gericke Fandel

Abstract

The total number of dancing males on the 9 managed tracts in Wisconsin decreased slightly from 183 in 2008 to 175 this year, indicating a 4% decrease in the sharptail population since last year. The overall population has been gradually declining since 1999 (Figure 2), with cyclical increases in the late 1990s and more recently. Survey efforts on unmanaged lands, conducted by the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society and other volunteers, also indicated a decrease in sharptail numbers in 2009, with a total of 197 birds found this spring compared to 268 last year, a decrease of 26% from 2008 to 2009. Surveys on private lands in Rusk County, including portions of DMUs 19, 24 and 25, found a total of 56 dancing males a decrease of 12.5% compared to 2008.

Methods

Sharp-tailed grouse populations on managed properties were monitored by counting displaying males on dancing grounds. Dancing grounds were approached afoot or by vehicle and observations were made from blinds placed on dancing grounds. Male birds were identified with the aid of field glasses. A complete census of these displaying grounds was attempted on those properties designated as sharptail management tracts (Figure 1).

Sharp-tailed grouse surveys on unmanaged lands were concentrated within a portion of northwestern Wisconsin, primarily in deer management units 2 and 9 (Figure 1). Surveys on private lands generally involved selecting one or more blocks of the best available habitat and then conducting listening routes along roads transecting those blocks. Dancing grounds found within habitat blocks were approached and birds were flushed. The total number of birds flushed from each site was counted, with no attempt being made to distinguish sexes.

In 2008 additional survey efforts were started on non-managed lands within the North Central Forest, Northwest Sands, and Superior Coastal Plains Ecological Landscapes as well as private lands in portions of Rusk County. This effort was designed to update the current distribution of sharp-tailed grouse dancing grounds and in some cases estimate the total number of males on newly identified dancing grounds. This expanded survey effort will continue in 2010 with additional emphasis on suitable habitat in the Central Sand Plains Ecological Landscape and the Spread Eagle Barrens State Natural Area vicinity.

Surveys are a cooperative effort between DNR, USFS, GLIFWC, Northland College, members of the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, and volunteers.

Results

The 2009 dancing ground survey indicated slight decreases in sharptail numbers on about half of the managed sites including: Crex Meadows W.A., Namekagon Barrens W.A., and Pershing W.A (Table 1). Dike Seventeen W.A. and Kimberly Clark W.A., observed the same number of sharptails as in 2008, and Douglas County W.A., Moquah Barrens W.M.A., and Riley Lake W.M.A. saw an increase in the number of dancing males. One survey, in the Wood County W.A., was not completed this year.

Replicates of these traditionally surveyed areas are the most dependable index to changes in the sharptail grouse population.

Survey efforts on unmanaged lands resulted in a count of 197 birds in deer management units 2 and 9. This count was 26% lower than obtained during 2008, despite expanded survey efforts in 2009. Unit 2 decreased the most, from 241 birds in 2008 to 178 birds in 2009 while unit 9 decreased by 8 birds for a total of 19.

Eight new dancing grounds with a total of 64 males were located on Rusk County private lands in 2008. Dancing males on those grounds declined 12.5% in 2009 when 56 males were observed. Survey effort will be expanded on non-managed properties in 2010 to further assess the current sharp-tailed grouse distribution in Wisconsin.

Additional survey effort was focused on potentially suitable habitat surrounding the Dike 17 Wildlife Area in Jackson County this year. That effort led to one dancing male located on a historic dancing ground in 2009. Additional birds were heard during survey efforts, but birds could not be located for dancing ground confirmation. Additional survey effort is needed in Jackson and Wood counties in 2010.

Table 1. Sharptail Population Trends on Managed Lands from 1991-2009.

Number of Dancing Males on Sharptail Grouse Management Areas from 1991-2009																			
Property	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Crex Meadows W.A.	126	47	53	57	86	110	117	132	111	112	73	61	61	53	49	38	45	40	24
Douglas County W.A.	5	4	2	8	12	9	9	18	20	16	11	12	20	21	14	15	28	28	41
Kimberly Clark W.A.	56	32	20	20	28	20	15	25	40	39	5	9	4	n/a	0	3	9	10	10
Moquah Barrens W.M.A.	6	9	6	7	21	14	17	34	40	36	19	35	29	14	7	6	6	3	6
Namekagon Barrens W.A.	28	25	16	25	39	44	54	65	43	24	9	21	42	25	19	42	51	47	36
Pershing W.A.	37	34	24	16	26	30	43	34	22	**	19	13	3	16	11	16	28	27	20
Riley Lake W.M.A.	25	8	5	7	18	17	19	19	27	27	17	12	17	16	12	16	25	27	37
Wood County W.A.	54	13	11	16	19	18	10	17	18	6	0	8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dike Seventeen	16	10	9	9	8	7	3	18	3	6	0	2	2	3	2	1	2	1	1
Total	353	182	146	165	257	269	287	362	325	284	159	173	178	148	114	137	194	183	175

*Not a complete count of dancing males.

**A few dancing males were present.

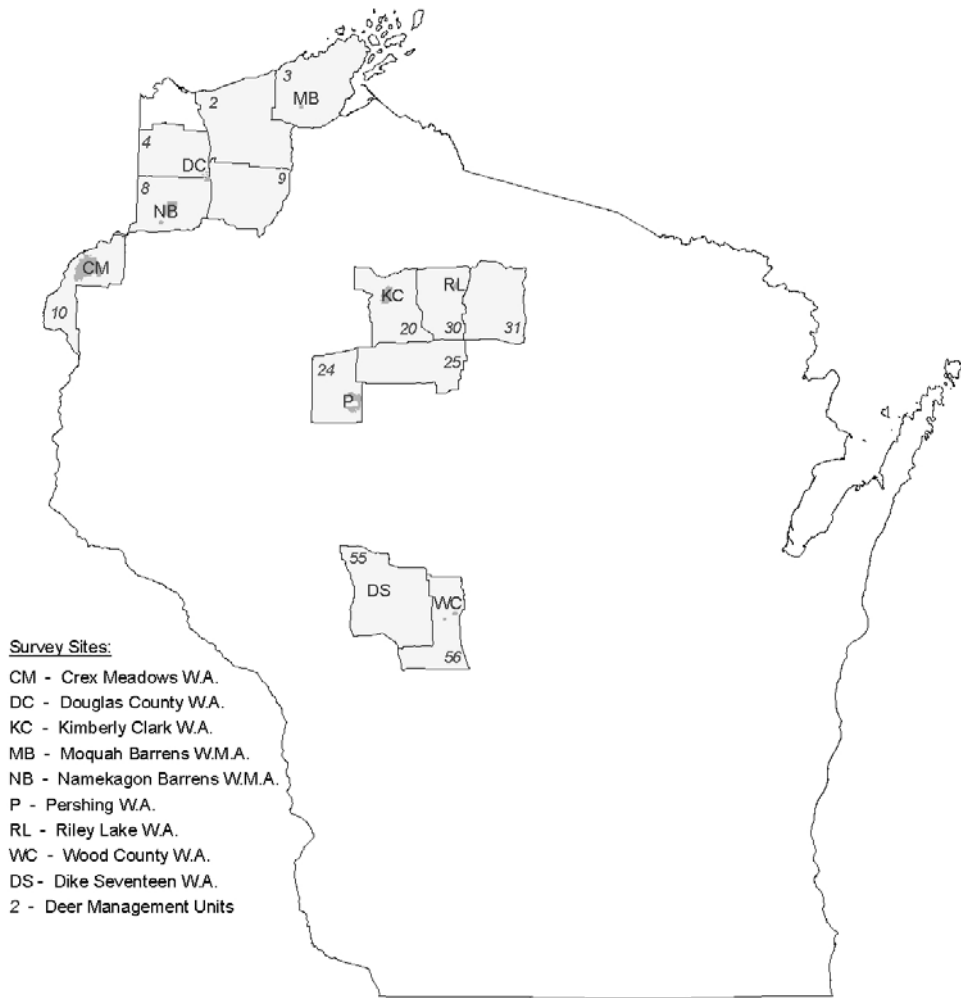


Figure 1. 2009 Sharptail survey area.

Number of Dancing Males on Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Areas from 1991-2009

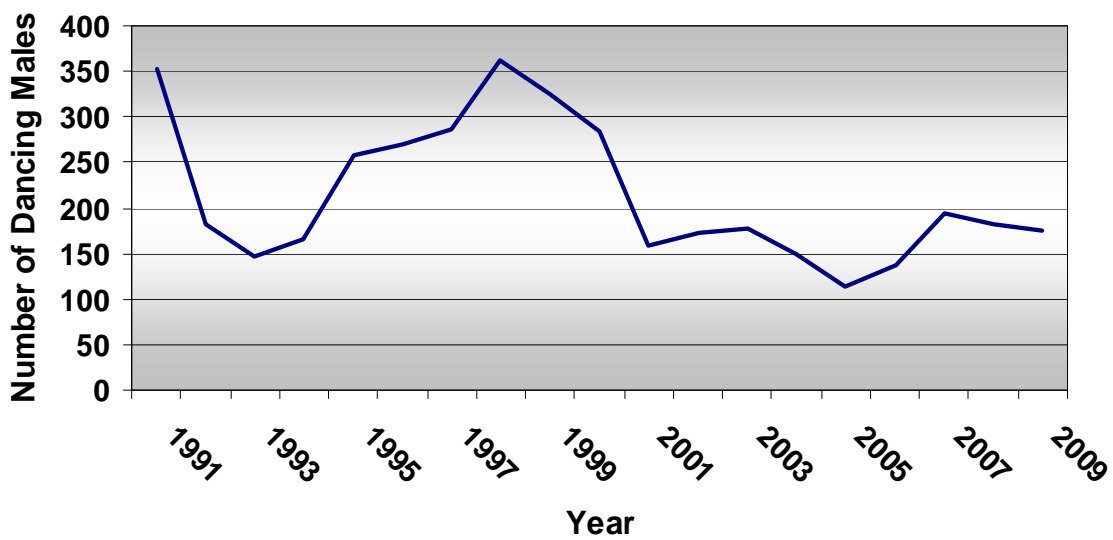


Figure 2. Number of Dancing Males on Sharptail Grouse Management Areas from 1991-2009.