



TAKING FLIGHT

New biologists and more public attention are recharging the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program.

BY DAVE CARTY

The hedgerow in the distance beckoned like a dark green oasis in a sea of white. Like everywhere else in Montana last winter, the rolling wheat fields around Conrad, 45 miles north of Great Falls, had received more than their share of snow. We were now tramping through 6 new inches of the stuff, Diane Boyd's compact little German wire-haired pointer, Hazel, romping ahead of us. We ducked into a line of pine trees flanked by dense rows of golden willow, caragana, Russian olive, and wild plum. Minutes later, Hazel slammed into a point. I could see her 100 yards ahead, nearly hidden by the chest-high wheatgrass between the trees. We tried to close the distance quickly, but the hen rocketed out when we were still 80 yards away and sailed over the prairie. Did I mention these pheasants were spooky?

In fact, neither Boyd—a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks upland game bird biologist in Conrad—nor I got a shot that day. Our dogs simply couldn't hold the educated, gun-shy birds. Every rooster blew out far ahead of us—including many we never saw.

If I had any doubts about the sheer number of pheasants that shelterbelt held, they were quickly erased. A few yards before the end of the hedgerow, I slipped into an open area between the pines and an adjacent wheat field. Packed into the snow were literally hundreds of pheasant tracks—so many it was impossible to see where one left off and the next began. The birds had been there, of that I was certain. But we'd have to do a better job of

approaching them next time.

Premium winter habitat like that—along with prime nesting cover and brood strips—is becoming more abundant throughout much of central and eastern Montana thanks to FWP's newly energized Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP). Upland birds have traditionally taken a backseat in the state's wildlife management priorities. No more. The growing public interest in pheasant hunting—and the economic boon to local communities from that and other bird hunting—is raising the profile of upland species. While the UGBEP has been around for more than two decades, only recently have additional funding, new biologists, and a citizen-led strategic plan combined to kick the program into high gear.

Given last year's brutal winter in much of Montana's upland bird range and the rapid conversion of Conservation Reserve Program grasslands into crop fields, the program's new shot in the arm didn't come a moment too soon.

Established in 1987, the UGBEP exists to improve upland game bird populations and hunting opportunities. The program—funded by upland bird hunter license dollars—focuses mainly on creating and enhancing upland bird habitat, especially on private land. Project costs are covered by the UGBEP, as well as funding and in-kind contributions from federal agencies and private conservation groups. Participating landowners contribute labor, though little or no out-of-pocket expenses, and agree to allow some public hunting.

Despite adequate funding, the program for years lacked direction and

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commitment from FWP. Because area biologists already had their hands full managing deer, pronghorn, waterfowl, and other wildlife, they had little time left over for upland bird projects. By the 2000s, the program had built up a reserve of funds but had relatively few new projects underway. “One big problem was the lack of a strategic plan to provide over-arching guidance,” former state legislator Julie French of Scobey says. “Another was that the department hadn’t made it a priority to use the program’s dollars to their utmost value.”

That concerned former state senator Ed Smith of Dagmar, who authored the original bill creating the UGBEP. He approached French, then in the legislature, and asked if she would push through an audit of the program. She agreed, and the audit led to legislation in 2009 mandating that FWP establish a 12-person UGBEP advisory council representing all Montana regions and composed of landowners, hunters, outfitters, legislators, and biologists, among others. The council was charged with drafting a strategic plan for conserving upland game birds in each region. FWP officials welcomed the audit and the council’s recommendations. “The legislative interest has definitely revitalized upland game bird con-

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“All of this interest has definitely revitalized upland game bird conservation and management.”

servation and management in Montana,” says Ken McDonald, chief of the department’s Wildlife Bureau.

The 2009 legislation also authorized FWP to hire new upland game bird biologists. The biologists work on projects that improve habitat for pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, and other upland game birds on public land and, in cooperation with landowners, private property. Projects include:

- planting and improving shelterbelts;
- creating and enhancing dense nesting cover;
- planting “brood strips”—irrigated areas near nesting sites that produce abundant insects for newly hatched chicks;
- establishing small plots of wheat, barley, and other grains that provide winter food;
- managing livestock grazing; and
- setting up permanent conservation ease-



ments, in which landowners are paid to forgo future land development that degrades upland bird habitat.

Though pheasants are the UGBEP’s main focus, the program also benefits other upland birds popular with hunters. A project near Red Lodge involves clear-cutting small stands of aspen to regenerate growth to benefit ruffed grouse. Another, in Rosebud County, combines federal and UGBEP funds to pay landowners who own critical sagebrush habitat not to burn, plow, or use herbicides on the native vegetation, which is essential for sage-grouse. The program also pays to trap wild turkeys in population strongholds and release the birds to new sites containing suitable habitat.

Benefitting the landscape even further, the habitat enhancements also conserve water, reduce erosion, and help native wildlife such as grassland songbirds.

One of the new upland bird biologists is Ashley Beyer, whose region around Miles City is largely cattle country. She mainly works with landowners to set up and modify grazing systems that benefit both cattle and upland birds. Under what is known as rest-rotation grazing, pastures are divided into units. Each year some units are fenced off from cattle to allow grasses and forbs to grow for a full season without being grazed. Beyer says rested pastures produce dense bird nesting habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, Hungarian partridge, and ground-nesting songbirds.

Beyer notes that much of her work complements grazing systems and other upland bird projects set up several years ago by Howard Burt, FWP wildlife biologist in Glendive. “What we’re doing now is adding water tanks and altering the fencing to spread out grazing pressure and get it a little more even,” she says.

The projects also help livestock and a landowner’s bottom line. “By adding water tanks, for instance, cattle are able to use parts

JANUARY REFUGE Dense woody cover is essential for Hungarian partridge, pheasants, and other upland game birds to survive Montana’s harsh winters. Even with plenty of nesting cover and food, upland bird populations can die out without adequate winter habitat.



DEDICATED TO BIRDS Two new upland game bird biologists and a new wildlife biologist in Plentywood focus on improving habitat on public land and, in cooperation with landowners, private property. Above: Biologist Ashley Beyer, Miles City, inspects a shelterbelt planting. Below: Biologist Diane Boyd, Conrad, displays roosters she and a friend shot with the help of her German wirehair, Hazel, on public land enhanced with UGBEP habitat projects.

of the pasture they weren’t using, allowing other areas to rest,” Beyer says. “And because we cost-share 50 percent of the water projects, it’s a nice way for folks to get help on activities that also support their ranching operation.”

Drew Henry, the new FWP area wildlife biologist in Plentywood, has upland game bird responsibilities similar to those of Beyer and Boyd. One unique project in his area is an agreement between FWP and Sheridan County, under which the county provides an employee who works part-time on private land habitat projects. County officials say they recognize the economic value of upland birds, especially pheasants, to communities such as Plentywood and Dagmar. By freeing up a worker to help plant food plots and work on other game bird habitat projects in cooperation with the UGBEP, the county aims to improve bird numbers, attract more hunters, and further benefit the local economy.

Henry’s role in the agreement is to work with landowners to set up habitat projects

and then with the county worker to ensure their completion. The biologist says the Sheridan County agreement and other successful UGBEP projects are improving relations between FWP and ranchers and farmers. “The one-on-one nature of doing projects with landowners is great,” he says. “There’s a lot of direct two-way communication and education. We’re able to explain how the program functions, and they tell us more about their needs and concerns. This program is not for everybody, but we’re seeing a lot of interest in this area.”

Boyd, the Conrad biologist, says as word of the program spreads, she anticipates more calls from landowners wanting to participate. “Most Montanans, even bird hunters, have never heard of the Upland



Game Bird Enhancement Program,” she says. “One of our goals is to change that.”

So that the UGBEP stays true to legislative intentions, spends money wisely, and evaluates the success and failure

CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE: NEAL & MI MISHLER; STEVE ALLISON; DIANE BOYD/FWP

of various projects, the 2009 legislature required that the UGBEP advisory council produce a strategic plan. It was no easy task.

Montana is home to nine upland bird species, each with its own habitat needs. FWP manages the birds in its seven administrative regions, each with its own geography, climate, and opportunities for upland game bird management. Council members met regularly over a period of 18 months to develop the plan, which they released in early 2011. The document—available online at the FWP website (see box at right)—is the most comprehensive survey of Montana’s upland birds and their management ever produced. For each region, the plan lists possible partnering opportunities as well as habitat protection and improvement projects. It also summarizes each region’s game bird species, public hunting opportunities, and habitat types.

The plan reflects the enormous differences in the seven regions and the widely varying information available about each species, explains Joe Perry, a farmer in Brady and chair of the advisory council. “For instance, in many parts of northwestern Montana the main upland birds are mountain grouse. But there’s not much biological data about what you can do to improve mountain grouse habitat, so there’s not all that much in the plan on that,” he says. “On the other hand, we know a lot about pheasant and sharptail habitat, and a

PLAN AND GUIDE AVAILABLE

The newly released strategic plan outlines a vision and plots a course of action for the UGBEP. Read it at fwp.mt.gov. Search for “UGBEP Advisory Council” and scroll down to the plan.

For a copy of FWP’s annual public access guide to UGBEP project locations and pheasant release sites, go to fwp.mt.gov, click on “Hunting,” and select “Upland Game Birds.”



fair amount about sage-grouse habitat. So the plan contains more detail on those species in the central and eastern regions. And of course, the bird of choice for most upland bird hunters is the pheasant, so pheasants get a disproportionate share of the focus.” Perry adds that pheasant habitat projects also benefit Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse.

The new strategic plan acknowledges the importance of FWP teaming up with other agencies and private conservation groups. “Good relationships result in more money and labor for upland bird conservation projects than we could ever do on our own,” says Debbie Hohler,

UGBEP coordinator. She and the upland game bird biologists work with and receive funding and other assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the

Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Private sector partners include Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and Pheasants Forever.

Craig Roberts, president of Pheasants Forever’s Central Montana Chapter, has been a member of the group since 1993. His chapter has worked on dozens of projects, including the organization’s rooster-rich Coffee Creek and Wolf Creek wildlife areas near Denton. Roberts draws from a squad of dedicated volunteers. “We have 15 directors and four officers, so there are 19 of us who are pretty dependable for project work,” he says. On any given project, Roberts can round up at least a half-dozen volunteers to plant trees, install irrigation systems, and establish grasses and forbs.

Birds aren’t the only ones profiting from the projects. By working with Pheasants Forever and other groups and agencies, the UGBEP has been able to free up large amounts of private land to public access. As of July 2011, the program had 366 active contracts that open 320,000 acres to public upland game bird hunting. In another partnership project, the UGBEP is using a grant from the federal Open Fields Program to pay landowners with qualifying small grassland plots, winter cover, wetlands, and other quality upland bird habitat to open their gates to public game bird hunting and wildlife watching.

“People ask me if this is a habitat program, a farm program, or an access program,” Hohler says. “It’s all three. Birds, landowners, and hunters all benefit.”

BIRDS THRIVING HERE Signs signify that a landowner is a UGBEP partner and indicate conditions for public hunting access, such as walk-in only.



LARRY KRUCKENBERG



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PHEASANT, DONALD JONES.COM; SAGE-GROUSE, KEVIN ARCHER, WILD TURKEYS, DONALD JONES.COM; SHARP-TAILED GROUSE, TIM CHRISTIE

Despite the UGBEP’s achievements, Montana’s upland game birds may soon be in for some tough times. Consecutive hard winters and cold, wet springs have set populations back. Even more worrisome: High grain prices and cuts in federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) payments have convinced many landowners to convert their CRP acres—composed of bird-friendly grasses—to crops. “There’s a huge amount of CRP land coming out of the program during the next three years—hundreds of thousands of

acres in our region alone,” Boyd says. “One of the more important things we can do right now is encourage landowners to re-enroll in the CRP program and not plow those grasslands under.”

Hohler points out that UGBEP projects can’t make up for the enormous CRP losses any more than they can compensate for bad weather. “But we can still do a lot,” she says. “The main thing is for us to ensure that projects are done strategically on sites where they accomplish the most possible for upland birds and bird hunters.”

MANY BIRDS TO BOOST As the state’s most popular upland game bird, pheasants get the most attention from the UGBEP and its biologists. But the program also helps expand the range of wild turkeys; funds mountain grouse habitat work; and improves habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, and sage-grouse in grasslands and sagebrush steppes.