

Life after CRP

FWP now offers several new habitat lease options to help cure eastern Montana's upland bird-hunting blues.

— By Dave Books —

BUSTED A mature rooster flushes from ideal winter cover—a cattail stand surrounded by thick trees and shrubs. Pheasants also need nearby grasslands for nesting in spring. The alarming loss of federal Conservation Reserve Program acreage in recent years has caused bird numbers across eastern Montana to markedly decline.

PHOTO BY GARY KRAMER

During its first two decades, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) created spectacular opportunities for upland bird hunting in eastern Montana. Here's an entry from my hunting journal, October 16, 1993: *Joe E. and I hunted a CRP field near Westby, out near the North Dakota line. My Brittany, Groucho, and Joe's Brittany, Rana, performed their usual magic...we limited on pheasants by 9 a.m.*

My journal entries from those glory years are sprinkled with references to my favorite CRP coverts: Westby, Ona's, Boxcar, Silo, Homestead, and many others. Often we'd have our rooster limit by noon and then had to figure out how to spend the rest of the day, either hunting ducks or chasing Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse.

Most of those fields of waist-high grass in northern Montana have disappeared, converted back to agricultural use. Gone with them are the record pheasant numbers and easy three-bird limits. Gone also are many of the sharp-tailed grouse, songbirds, waterfowl, deer, and other wildlife that lived or nested in those vast grassland seas.

Signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in late 1985, the Conservation Reserve Program is a federal initiative that pays farmers to idle marginal cropland and control erosion by restoring grassland. It's been a boon to wildlife, not to mention upland bird hunting. By 1990, more than 30 million acres of CRP had been enrolled nationwide, much of it in the northern Great Plains. In 2007, the year that enrollment peaked nationwide at 36.8 million acres, Montana had nearly 3.5 million acres of CRP, almost 10 percent of the nation's total.

Three decades after its creation, CRP still exists. But enrolled acres nationwide are down by half from a decade ago. Also, Congress has shifted funding away from the northern Great Plains to the lower Midwest, South, and Eastern Seaboard states. As a result, Montana's CRP enrollment has dwindled to about 1.3 million acres—still a lot of land, but down 2.2 million acres from the

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peak, a decline of more than 60 percent. And acreage will continue to decline as existing CRP contracts expire.

There's no way to sugarcoat that vast loss of habitat. Montana's pheasant harvest has declined by about one-third from the peak CRP years. Pheasant hunter numbers are down 25 percent from what they were during that time.

It's likely many of us will never again see grasslands like those of the early 2000s in our lifetimes. But that doesn't mean it's time to retire the shotgun. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and other agencies and organizations saw this decline coming and have

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developed a plan for retaining vital upland habitat and making it available to hunters. Think of it as "Upland Birds Post-CRP."

While it won't make up for losing 2 million acres of grassland, it definitely offers hope for those of us who love to wander across central and eastern Montana behind a hunting dog. Rick Northrup, chief of FWP's Wildlife Habitat Bureau, recently explained to me how this new approach works.

QUALITY VERSUS QUANTITY

A decade ago, as CRP acreage began to decline, Northrup and his fellow biologists knew they had to begin thinking about protecting upland habitat in new ways. "CRP had made our lives pretty easy," he says. "All that grass was the gift that kept on giving, year after year."

"Upland habitat" consists mostly of dry grasses and shrubs slightly higher in elevation than rivers and marshes.

While CRP is great for upland wildlife—mainly prairie birds but also mule and white-tailed deer and other open-space mammals—it has some drawbacks. For hunters, one is that the federal program does not require public access. Though many landowners allow hunters onto their CRP grasslands—and many CRP fields are part of FWP's Block Management Program—it's common to see roosters flying only into CRP fields marked with "No Hunting" signs.

Another drawback is that CRP grasslands often become too dense for ground-nesting birds to use or hunters to wade through. Without periodic grazing or other treatments to clear out old, thick vegetation, CRP acres can become impenetrable.

The loss of CRP results in an opportunity to create upland habitat lease options that help landowners, target higher quality habitat, and include hunter access. "The idea is to pay landowners who have marginal crop or riparian areas that could be great for wildlife to idle those tracts and provide public hunting access," Northrup says. "It's a good deal for the ag producer because those are not highly productive farmlands. It's a good deal for the upland hunter and wildlife because it's prime habitat."

Think quality versus quantity.

Taking this approach, FWP has created several new upland habitat conservation options using existing programs and grants. Cooperators include landowners, state and federal agencies, and conservation groups like Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Details of the various options can become complicated. Many of us long for the days when we could simply "hunt the CRP." But those times are gone. Hunters who want to take advantage of these new options now need to understand new names and concepts:

Habitat Management Leases: These are small tracts (typically up to 160 acres) of high-quality upland habitat not planted with crops and open to public game bird hunting. They may include a variety of out-of-the-way spots that landowners aren't farming or no longer wish to farm, such as low-productivity cropland, wetlands, creek bottoms, and shelterbelts around abandoned homesteads. Lessees

NOT MUCH NESTING

Punctuated by grain bins, an island of trees is all that remains after a vast CRP field near Lewistown was plowed and converted to wheat. New FWP habitat lease options aim to replace some CRP losses with higher-quality habitat and better public access.

DAVID DALY



receive payments based on cover types enrolled in three- to ten-year leases.

Conservation Leases: These larger tracts (typically 320 acres or more) of grazing land allow some public access for game bird hunting and bird watching. They can be former CRP lands or existing grasslands that support a variety of birds, including waterfowl and upland game. For a one-time payment (based on acreage), landowners can continue to graze but agree not to remove existing native grasslands or sagebrush or drain wetlands for 30 years.

Open Fields: These are existing CRP lands (up to 320 acres) where FWP makes additional payments to landowners who agree to retain the land in CRP, work with the department to manage it for game birds, and provide public walk-in game bird hunting. The program uses matching federal revenue and Montana upland game bird hunting license dollars to fund a per-acre payment on top of the landowner's existing CRP rental payment. Vegetation may be manipulated by haying, grazing, or other means once every five years—which is both good for the landowner and also improves the health of the grasslands.

Depending on the lease type, Northrup says, FWP may provide technical assistance

on rotational grazing or share costs for improvements, such as installing or fixing fences or controlling weeds. “The bottom line is that we have upland game bird license dollars to fund different ways of benefitting landowners, hunters, and wildlife,” he says. “We very much want to hear from landowners who might want to participate in these new habitat options.”

A CREEK RUNS THROUGH IT

At Northrup's suggestion, I got in touch with Melissa Foster, a wildlife biologist in FWP's Miles City office. Foster put together a habitat management lease in Dawson County that Northrup hopes will be a model for other leases. The lease involves 86 acres of quality grassland habitat adjoining more than a mile of creek bottom.

“Nesting cover is the limiting factor for upland birds in this area,” Foster says. “Food is abundant thanks to nearby agricultural fields, and the winter cover around here is adequate. This tract was in CRP at one time and still has a robust mixture of various wheatgrasses and native forbs. It's an isolated piece for the landowner, so he decided he'd idle it.”

The landowner, who already participates in FWP's Block Management Program,

agreed to a year-to-year contract for three years. “The contract keeps the creek bottom from being constantly grazed,” says Foster. “Eventually the grassland will need grazing or other disturbance to maintain plant vigor. But for the time being, this area will provide great nesting habitat and a nice chunk of cover for upland bird hunters.”

As icing on the cake, the landowner included adjoining property in the deal so that hunters can access a full quarter-section (160 acres) of his land. “It's a win-win for everyone,” Foster says.

Multiply that by hundreds of contracts and you start to see how FWP is helping cure the upland hunting blues, says Debbie Hohler, who coordinates FWP's Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP). The program uses upland bird hunter license dollars to pay for the various lease options. Hohler says FWP has 460 active contracts that conserve and enhance almost 355,000 acres of upland habitat. Because participants in the various options often open additional acres of their property to public access, the contracts end up producing hunting opportunities on nearly 645,000 acres.

Charlie Noland, a semi-retired veterinarian from Worden, serves on Montana's



HABITAT AND HUNTING OPTIONS Left: A seemingly bare field in winter will turn green and lush in spring and provide nesting habitat. During the cold months, upland birds hang out in the dense woody cover seen in the distance. Top: Sharp-tailed grouse also benefit from various habitat lease options. Right: A hunter and his dog probe winter cover for pheasants on a conservation lease near Conrad.



12-member Upland Game Bird Enhancement Advisory Council. He also owns land where he has established shelterbelts and pioneered the use of pollinator plant species and dense nesting cover to enhance upland bird habitat. Using UGBEP funds, FWP paid for a portion of a wildlife-friendly CRP seed mix Noland planted. “We've seen a big increase in bird populations on our land, and we've been able to provide public access to 600 acres,” he says.

The leases and upland habitat improvements like Noland's help local economies, too. “Upland bird and waterfowl hunting add about \$50 million dollars to Montana's economy annually,” Hohler says. “Montana has become a mecca for bird hunters. Small towns, especially in the central and eastern parts of the state, get an economic boost from the annual influx of hunters. Bird hunters spend money on food, lodging, gas, and entertainment, so local businesses roll out the welcome signs.”

So does FWP. The department publishes an annual access guide to help hunters find UGBEP projects. Printed in late summer each year, the guide lists all the projects, their acreages, permission requirements, and locations (keyed to maps in the guide). “Between the information in the guide and on-the-ground signage around the projects, hunters can easily find and identify the boundaries of each area,” Hohler says.

A RAMBLE ON THE PRAIRIE

On a cold day last November, I decided to check out some of these areas myself and

drove north from Helena to the small town of Conrad. There I met Jake Doggett, habitat specialist for FWP's north-central region. We spent much of the afternoon in my truck, doing a windshield tour of habitat leases and Open Fields projects while Doggett explained the nuances of the agreements.

Doggett is an avid bird hunter, and his enthusiasm for his job is contagious. “Our goal is to build a strong mosaic with enough leases to provide meaningful habitat and spread hunting pressure across the landscape,” he says. “Hunters sometimes look at a lease and wonder why a wheat field or other cropland is tied into it, but pheasants and other upland birds need food along with nesting cover and winter cover.”

I asked him how many FWP biologists work primarily on habitat projects around the state. “We have three full-time habitat specialists in the field, in addition to the Helena staff,” says Doggett. “But habitat is a primary concern for all FWP wildlife biologists statewide.”

Late in the afternoon, Doggett suggested I “take my shotgun for a walk” in a snow-berry-choked coulee winding through an FWP habitat lease. My Brittany, Tess, who had spent the day snoozing in her travel crate, was thrilled to go.

Not far from the truck, two rooster pheasants flushed far ahead of Tess, taking several hens with them. A bit later, just as Tess drew to a point, a small covey of Hungarian partridge jumped well ahead of her, a bit too far for a shot. Spooky birds are typical of late-season conditions, and these hardy

survivors had seen plenty of hunters and learned their lessons well.

As we continued up the coulee, I noticed pheasant and sharp-tailed grouse tracks in the skiff of week-old snow, and interlacing deer tracks everywhere. Later I saw four mule deer moving out ahead, along with a snow-white jackrabbit that resembled a bolt of lightning as it zigzagged up a snowless, south-facing slope.

As Tess and I circled back toward the truck, she froze on point at the head of a small draw that branched off from the main coulee. When I stepped in front of her, a hen pheasant exploded from the grass, sending my heart into near-tachycardia. Though we didn't find a shootable rooster on our short hunt, Tess didn't seem to mind. She was just happy racing around the countryside, stretching her legs, and getting an occasional whiff of pheasant.

For my part, I was grateful to the landowner and to FWP for providing the chance to wander across this piece of grassland paradise. Bird hunting is mostly about the freedom to walk until your legs ache, and I knew that Tess and I would return to this place next fall for another try at its pheasants and partridge—a sure cure for Montana's post-CRP blues. 🐾

Interested landowners can learn more about habitat lease options by contacting Debbie Hohler at (406) 444-5674; dhohler@mt.gov.

Hunters can find the 2018 FWP Upland Game Bird Access Guide at FWP offices or online at fwp.mt.gov.

LEFT TO RIGHT: THOM BRIDGE; STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER; THOM BRIDGE