Working to achieve goals of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan means the return of grasslands—and grassland wildlife—to the Grand Prairie Natural Division.

Grand Prairie Grasslands

A strong, grassroots effort is under way in Illinois to improve and sustain grassland species such as the ring-necked pheasant.

Story By Kathy Andrews
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For thousands of years, grasslands were a prominent feature on the Illinois landscape. Yet drastic changes to our Illinois grasslands during the past 150 years have all but eliminated some wildlife species dependent on this critically important prairie habitat.

Just within the past four decades, massive declines in grassland bird numbers have reduced some populations by more than 99 percent. As scientists work to document the extent of the losses and provide management strategies, restoration efforts are under way to improve and conserve our Prairie State's vanishing prairie habitat.

Native grasslands once covered about two-thirds of the Prairie State. With settlement, significant acreage was lost to row crops and introduced, cool-season grasses planted to create pastures, hay fields and residential lawns. In the early 1900s, nearly 6.1 million acres of pasture existed in Illinois. Although different from the original habitat, these areas supported a wide range of grassland-dependent species: from cottontail rabbits and badgers to ring-necked pheasants, bobwhite, upland sandpipers, disckcissels, Henslow's sparrows and loggerhead shrikes.

Today, only 770,000 acres of hay fields remain in Illinois, a 90 percent decline that has brought changes in the species of birds using these habitats. In the 1950s, meadowlarks, dickcissels, grasshopper sparrows and bobolinks made up 40 percent of the birds found in hay fields. In 2006, the Illinois Natural History Survey found that those same four species—combined—amounted to only 4 percent of the birds present. Today, meadowlarks have been knocked from their former No. 1 seat by European starlings. Brown-headed cowbirds and common grackles have soared to second and third places.

Development of grassland habitats provides additional recreational opportunities for Illinois sportsmen.

The severity of these trends is coming to light as a result of extensive field work by a team of biologists led by Jeff Walk. A research biologist with The Nature Conservancy, Walk is replicating a study conducted in the 1950s by INHS biologists Richard and Jean Graber.

"If someone had suggested that the Illinois upland sandpiper population had declined by a mere 99 percent, from an estimated 250,000 in the 1950s, I would label their estimate wildly optimistic," Walk explained of the preliminary results of the grassland bird study. The 2007 tally for the species was zero among 695 transects throughout the state.

Birds in greatest need of conservation were identified in 2005 in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (visit www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/Wildliferesources/theplan). Of the 74 bird species listed, 31 percent are associated with grassland habitats.

And, according to John Cole, Department of Natural Resources grassland program manager, the decline of grassland species also has taken its toll on the sportsmen.

"The annual average pheasant harvest throughout the late 1950s and 1960s was 750,000," Cole explained. "The 150,000 pheasants bagged during the 2005-2006 season represents a staggering 80 percent decline." Rabbit harvest dropped 92 percent—from nearly 4 million to 300,000—over the same period.

Researchers, hunters, birders and landowners all agree: habitat restoration is key to reversing this downward spiral. A new initiative is working to create wildlife-friendly grasslands within the intensively agricultural Grand Prairie Natural Division of central Illinois.

The Habitat Wheel Initiative, a grassroots partnership between the DNR, Pheasants Forever chapter volunteers, landowners, Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Natural Resource Conservation Services, Farm Service Agency and others, is a landscape-scale method for improving and sustaining populations of pheasants, bobwhite and other wildlife.

Tom Schwartz, Illinois conservation director for Pheasants Forever, has been involved with the Habitat Wheel Initiative since it was created in 2003.

"All of these organizations have joined forces to work toward one goal of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan—increasing grassland habitat," Schwartz said. "In just a few years we have been able to establish four habitat hubs and have helped landowners learn how to maximize benefits of the Conservation Reserve Program. A new federal conservation program, CP38, will have even greater impact on the land because it can be tailored to what Illinois—and even the Grand Prairie—needs.

Illinois' four habitat hubs (520-acre Thelma Nardin Estate property in McLean County; 313-acre Cranfill prop-

Development of grassland areas benefits a diversity of wildlife, including Henslow's sparrows (below) and dickcissels (right).

(Photos courtesy Jay Zimmerman.)

erty in Montgomery County; 635-acre Sibley property in Ford County; and, 118-acre WhiteField property in Marshall County) are anchored with a large grassland core where hunting is allowed. Hunting also is permitted on the DNR Pheasant Habitat Areas, which, ideally, will be hubs in the Wheel Initiative (see sidebar).

Radiating from the hub like spokes on a wheel are vegetated roadsides, field borders, filter strips and windbreaks that create travel lanes for wildlife movement and distribution. Partner organizations identify land conservation program incentives available to adjacent landowners.

"Many of these areas had been intensively farmed," explained Dan Newhouse, one of DNR's district wildlife biologists working on the project. "We're working as a team to develop these habitat areas from the ground up. After an assessment of the area, a restoration plan is developed that includes a variety of cover types. This is the same process biologists undertake when private landowners seek input on improving their land for wildlife."

In some instances, existing old field, wetland and riparian habitats, fence lines and mature or early growth woodland exist, and the plan sets goals to enhance those features.

But the critical factor is to manage or develop grassland habitat. A mix of cool-season (smooth brome grass, Virginia and Canada wild rye, alfalfa and red clover) and warm-season (switchgrass, big bluestem, Indian grass, little bluestem and prairie forbs) species is necessary to provide the diversity of nesting, winter and escape cover required by grassland wildlife.

In the last 100 years, Illinois has seen a 90 percent decline in grassland habitats. The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan includes strategies to reverse this trend.

The old adage "Nothing succeeds like succession" weighs heavy on the minds of biologists and volunteers.

"After investing time and money to develop these grassland habitats, walking away would mean we'd be losing everything to encroaching trees and shrubs," Newhouse remarked. "We are committed to maintaining these critical habitats through prescribed fire, mowing and replanting."

Maintaining open grasslands requires curbing encroaching trees and shrubs through prescribed fire and mowing.

Hunting DNR Habitat Areas

1. A free site permit is obtained through a lottery drawing held annually each fall. For information on how to apply, consult the current "Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations," or visit www.dnr.state.il.us/admin/systems/index.htm#upland.
2. Applicants may submit only one application per site.
3. Only one hunting party, consisting of the permit holder and no more than three companions, will be allowed each day.
4. All hunting must be with a shotgun or bow and arrow only.
5. Hunters must wear a cap and upper outer garment of solid blaze orange (at least 400 square inches).
6. Each permit holder must complete and return a hunter harvest survey report annually. Failure to submit the report will result in loss of hunting privileges on pheasant habitat areas for the following year.

In many instances, local volunteers lend a hand in developing and maintaining these areas.

"As a whole, species associated with grasslands have declined at a greater rate than any other habitat group," DNR Natural Resource Coordinator Wade Louis said. "By leveraging state and federal programs with the work of dedicated sportsman's groups and landowners, grassland habitat restoration programs have received tremendous momentum."

The habitats have been built and wildlife are returning.

A wildlife success story is unfolding on the Grand Prairie.

Pheasant Habitat Areas

For detailed information and maps of Pheasant Habitat Areas, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/index.htm

Region 1

1. Bradford PHA
Location: Take Illinois Route 93 west out of Bradford 3.6 miles to 1300 E. Go south 0.5 miles to the north unit and an additional mile to get to the south parcel.
County: Stark
Huntable Acres: 103
For Information: Hennepin Canal Parkway at (815) 454-2328

2. Dublin Highlands PHA
Location: 3 miles east of Route 73 at the intersection of Dublin and Heitter Road
County: Stephenson
Huntable Acres: 122
For Information: Lake Le-Aqua-Na SP at (815) 369-4282

3. Manito PHA
Location: 2 miles north of Manito at the intersection of Manito Road and Spring Lake Road
County: Tazewell
Huntable Acres: 78
For Information: Spring Lake SFWA at (309) 968-7135

4. Maytown PHA
Location: Take Route 26 south from Dixon to Maytown Road and go 3 miles east on Maytown Road to Carter Road, then 0.75 miles south on Carter Road
County: Lee
Huntable Acres: 160
For Information: Green River SWA at (815) 379-2324

5. Sand Prairie PHA
Location: 4.5 miles north and 1 mile west of Walnut on the Whiteside County line
County: Lee
Huntable Acres: 316
For Information: Green River SWA at (815) 379-2324

6. Steward PHA
Location: From Route 30 in Shabbona, take Shabbona Road approximately 4 miles north to McGirr Road then turn left (west) on McGirr Road and go approximately 4 miles
County: Lee
Huntable Acres: 80
For Information: Shabbona Lake SRA at (815) 824-2106

7. Victoria PHA
Location: 1 mile east of Victoria on Illinois Route 167
County: Knox
Huntable Acres: 241
For Information: Snakden Hollow SFWA (309) 879-2607

Region 3

8. Clifton PHA
Location: 1 mile north and 1.5 miles east of Clifton on County Road 3000 North
County: Iroquois
Huntable Acres: 79
For Information: Iroquois County CA at (815) 435-2218

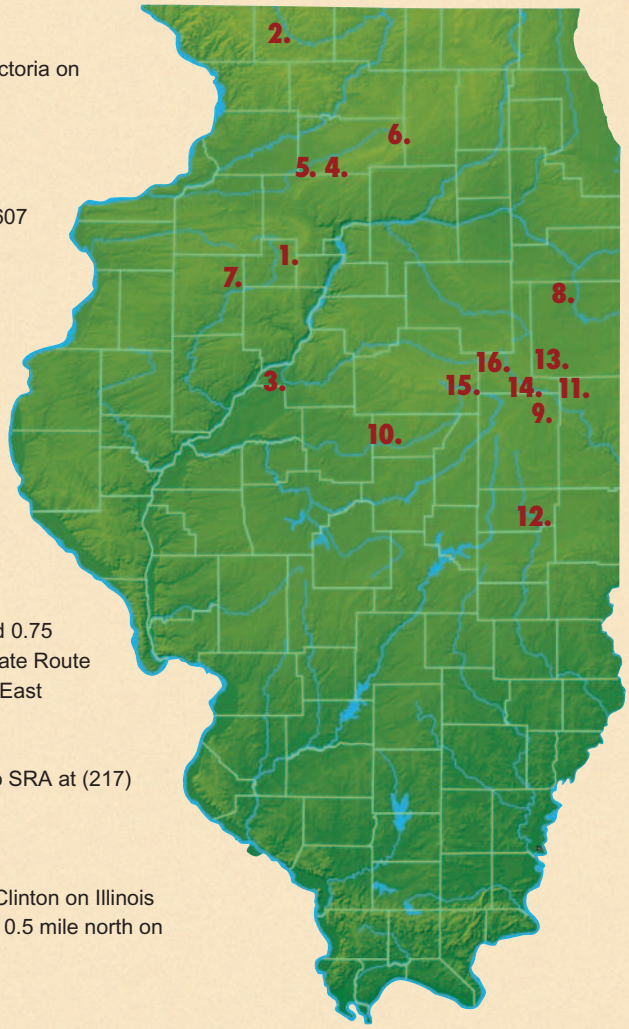
9. Gifford PHA
Location: 2 miles west and 0.75 miles north of Gifford off State Route 136 on County Road 2100 East
County: Champaign
Huntable Acres: 100
For Information: Kickapoo SRA at (217) 442-4915

10. Hallsville PHA
Location: 6 miles west of Clinton on Illinois Route 10 to Hallsville, then 0.5 mile north on County Road 225 East
County: DeWitt
Huntable acres: 82.9
For Information: Clinton Lake SRA at (217) 935-8722

11. Herschel Workman PHA
Location: one area 1 mile west of Rankin, and the second area 1 mile east and 1 mile south of Rankin
County: Vermilion
Huntable Acres: 141
For Information: Kickapoo SRA at (217) 442-4915

12. Hindsboro PHA
Location: 3 miles east and 0.75 miles north of Hindsboro off Illinois Route 133
County: Douglas
Huntable Acres: 88
For Information: Walnut Point SP at (217) 346-3336

13. Loda PHA
Location: 1 mile north and 1.5 miles east of Loda on County Road 300 North
County: Iroquois
Huntable Acres: 160
For Information: Iroquois County CA at (815) 435-2218



14. Perdueville PHA
Location: 5 miles west of Paxton or 8 miles east of Gibson City on Illinois Route 9, then 3.5 miles south on County Road 1300 East approximately 0.5 miles north of Champaign County Line Road 00 North
County: Ford
Huntable Acres: 120
For Information: Moraine View SP at (309) 724-8032

15. Saybrook PHA
Location: 2 miles north and 1.5 miles west of Saybrook on County Road 3700 East
County: McLean
Huntable Acres: 86
For Information: Moraine View SP at (309) 724-8032

16. Sibley PHA
Location: 1 mile south of Sibley on State Route 47
County: Ford
Huntable Acres: 630
For information: Moraine View SP at (309) 724-8032