

WELCOME TO UPPER SOURIS NWR

With the coming of warm air and prairie crocuses of spring also comes the annual courtship display of many birds. One of the most unique and easiest to observe and take photos of is the “dancing” of the sharp-tailed grouse of Upper Souris Refuge. With tails erect, wings spread, and air sacs on their necks inflated, the slowly twisting and turning grouse beat a courtship rhythm on the cold bare hilltops like nothing else in nature. This phenomenon of nature is very unique to the grouse and can be observed easily on the dancing grounds.



These grounds, also known as “leks,” are usually situated on grassy hilltops and are normally used year after year – possibly decades, unless they are excessively disturbed. Each spring the males return to traditional leks and start to dance. The main purpose of the lek is to provide an area for the males to display their dancing abilities to females. The “strongest” and “fittest” males dance near the center of the lek. Each male has his own little territory on the lek and should

invasions of territories occur, fights will often develop.

Shortly after the males start dancing, the females will appear and usually seem uninterested and bored with the routine. After several days or weeks of dancing and courtship, nesting will occur.

Biologists debate the reason for this display by the males. No one questions the fact that the activity is an advertisement to the opposite sex. No hen could remain unaware of this courtship act.

Other theories regard the display as a release of surplus energy, or that the males are trying to attract predators away from the females. The dancing male is usually quite vulnerable to predators and the remains of birds are occasionally found on the grounds.

Plains Indians called the grouse “sihska”. They were so impressed by the antics of the grouse that they often imitated the dancing birds in their tribal ceremonies.

The grouse lek is one of the most important parts of sharp-tail life. Reduction of suitable lek locations has caused a decline of sharp-tailed grouse in some areas. Lek densities provide an index to populations of this remarkable bird, and indirectly reflect changes in habitat quality.



VISITOR OPPORTUNITIES

Visitors to Upper Souris Refuge have a unique chance to observe and photograph these birds by simply making reservations for one of the blinds that have been set up near the leks. Several guidelines should be observed when using the blinds.

First of all, try to arrive as early as possible. Usually the birds are on the lek by dawn or early evening. Should the birds be there and flush when you arrive, enter the blind and wait. They have a very strong tie to the lek and will normally return in a short time.

Secondly, be as quiet as possible. Even though the birds tend to lose some of their wild way, they are still aware of danger. Excessive noise in the blind may spook or move them away from the lek.

Each blind will accommodate up to four people. However, if a lot of equipment for taking photos is to be used, there will be room for no more than two or three people.

Reservations can be made by calling refuge headquarters between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday at 701-468-5467. Reservation requests can also be made by emailing uppersouris@fws.gov or by writing to:

Upper Souris NWR
17705 212th Ave NW
Foxholm, ND 58718

Please include name, address, phone number, and blind number on email and written requests.

GROUSE BLINDS

Blind #1:

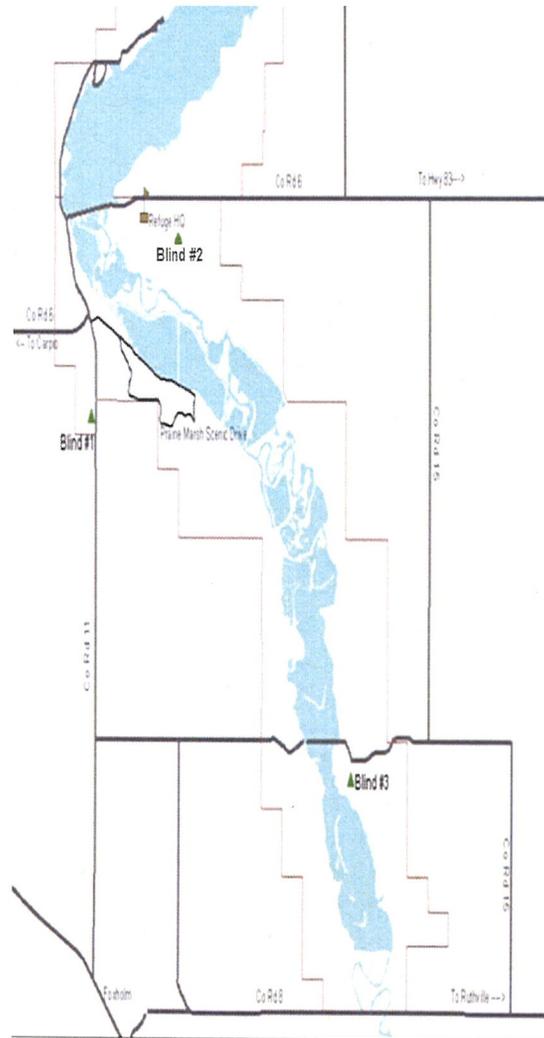
From Refuge Headquarters, go west on County Road 6, over the dam, follow road South. Continue onto County Road 11 a little over ½ mile. You will see blind from the road. Park on the shoulder of the road or in the ditch.

Blind #2:

From Refuge Headquarters, go approximately ¼ mile east on County Road 6. Park at pipe gate with orange sign that says Grouse Blind. Walk approximately ¼ mile south and west of gate. Blind is set up along an east west fence.

Blind #3 (Silver Bridge):

From Refuge Headquarters, go approximately 3 ½ miles east on County Road 6 to County Road 15 (this is about 8 miles west of highway 83). Go 4 miles south and 1 mile west on Co. Rd 15. Park at the gate with the red sign on it. Do not block the gate. Walk southeast on the prairie trail and look for the blind on top of the hill.



Sharp-tailed Grouse

on

Upper Souris National Wildlife Refuge

