

BRIMMING WITH EVEN MORE POTENTIAL

Supporters say Montana's popular Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program could be delivering even more wildlife habitat, hunting access, and durable relationships between landowners and FWP. **By Andrew McKean**

Of the approximately 700,000 acres of Montana fields and forests enrolled in Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP), the modest 10 acres in northeastern Montana that Emery Brelje plants every year represents far more than its size indicates.

It's a plot on the Sheridan County farm his grandfather bought in 1914, and while the rest of the home place is leased to neighbors for wheat production, Brelje and his brother dutifully plant the little field with the same grain drill their grandfather used, pulled by a tractor that was nearly new in 1960.

The Brelje brothers sow a bird-friendly seed mix provided by FWP, and they get an annual payment through the UGBEP for providing upland bird habitat and allowing hunters on their property. For Emery, who now lives in Glasgow but returns to the home place every bird season, the more durable compensation is seeing abundant wildlife on the farm where he grew up.

"When I was a kid, we used to have to travel 10 miles or more to find sharp-tailed

Andrew McKean, who lives on a ranch near Glasgow, is the hunting editor of Outdoor Life.

grouse," he says, "but now they're just about everywhere, and it makes me smile when I see barley in a sharptail's crop, because I know they've been feeding in our plot."

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Brelje has a highly personal reason for participating in the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program—a passion for the land and its wildlife shared by most cooperators in the 37-year-old program.

The UGBEP got its start in the 1980s after an especially hard winter in extreme northeastern Montana, with deep snow drifting into pheasant-sheltering tree rows and covering spent grain in fields, native grass seed, and brush berries. Countless pheasants, gray (Hungarian) partridge, and even hardy native sharptails died that winter. Landowners looked to the state to plant pen-reared pheasants and help improve upland habitat so birds might survive subsequent tough winters on a landscape whose sheltering native grasslands and cattail marshes were increasingly being converted to grain production.

The 1987 Montana Legislature responded by creating the UGBEP, which allowed landowners to feed winter-weakened pheasants and other game birds and release pen-



TEAM PLAYERS Emery Brelje, who with his brother owns property in Sheridan County, visits with Ken Plourde, an FWP wildlife habitat biologist with the department's Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. The Breljes have worked with Plourde since 2017 to improve food and cover on their land, which is enrolled in the habitat program.

ANDREW MCKEAN

raised pheasants to supplement anemic populations. But the program soon shifted to investing in habitat.

"The thinking evolved that resilient habitat is the driver not only of Montana's upland bird populations, but a whole mosaic of other wildlife, like songbirds, small mammals, raptors, and deer," says Debbie Hohler, who leads the UGBEP from FWP's Helena headquarters. "The program's tools and ways of either creating or improving existing habitat have changed with the times, but the goal is pretty defined: Good projects are investments in the future."

Early habitat work included planting more wind-blocking tree rows, conserving grassy tangles of dense nesting cover, and establishing winter food plots like those on the Brelje place. Over time the program expanded from Montana's grain-and-ringneck belt to ranch country. Grazing systems were developed jointly by FWP and ranchers to rotate cattle through a series of pastures, benefiting not only native rangeland but also sage-grouse and other wildlife that depend on it.

Over its four decades, the UGBEP has enlarged and extended federal Conserva-

tion Reserve Program (CRP) grassland enrollments, paid hay producers to leave some forage unmowed and unbaled to provide cover for wild turkey and pheasant poults, and even rejuvenated aspen groves to benefit forest-dwelling ruffed grouse.

What all these successful projects share is strong and durable cooperation between FWP field staff and Montana landowners.

"To my mind, every project that's well put together and has a good cooperator and improves our grasslands is a worthy project," says Representative Tom France, a state legislator

from Missoula who sits on the 12-member UGBEP citizens advisory council that helps steer priorities and oversees the program. France is also an avid upland hunter. "The program has done a lot of great habitat work, but I think its social benefits are just as valuable. It's been one of the best programs FWP has ever had to strengthen bonds between landowners, FWP, and hunters."

BASED ON A PROMISE

The program works by using upland hunters' license fees to fund habitat work that pro-

duces more birds for future hunting seasons. Since its early days, \$2 has been earmarked from each resident upland bird license and another \$23 from each nonresident license for the program.

If the program's benefit cycle is based on a promise—that license dollars will produce future birds that will produce more license-buying hunters—then its capacity is based on a similar construct. The more that FWP biologists can meet and talk to landowners, the more projects can be established, which often produces more advocates for the program and increased landowner interest and participation.

In its early days, upland projects were often an afterthought of FWP's area wildlife biologists, who also managed mule deer and pronghorn populations and often didn't have time to enter into long conversations and sometimes complicated agreements with landowners about grasslands. The program was slow to grow until the Montana Legislature—urged on by Julie French, a lawmaker from bird-rich Scobey—gave it authority to hire field biologists whose main job is to work with farmers and ranchers to identify, design, and fund habitat projects.

FWP currently has three UGBEP biologists in Regions 4, 6, and 7, covering essentially all of central and eastern Montana.

Meanwhile, the program's budget has slowly grown.

Last year, resident and nonresident licenses contributed \$865,816 to the pro-



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DEEPER CONNECTION

Trent Kleppen describes himself as “a dirt bag bird hunter.”

The Sheridan County native, who grew up chasing pheasants and sharptails on land that was rapidly being converted from prairie grass to wheat, became an early UGBEP advocate because, he says, “that's where the birds were.”

Kleppen now chairs the program's advisory council, and says its benefits extend well beyond the transactional elements of paying landowners to produce bird-friendly habitat that attracts hunters.

“There's something more that motivates most cooperators,” he says. “It's a deeper connection to place and to the land, and a genuine desire to both improve it and share it.”

Brelje, the Sheridan County UGBEP cooperator, gets a bit emotional when he describes his motivation.

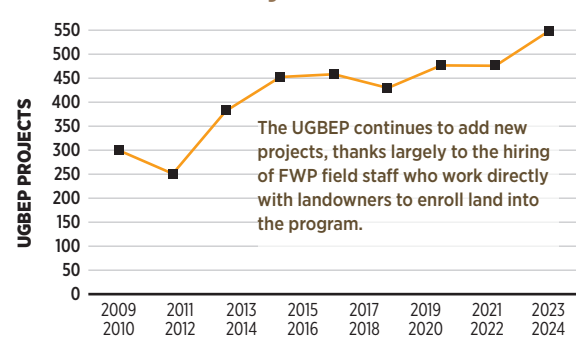
“I guess I'm sentimental,” he says. “I like hearing the pheasants squawk in the morning or having a covey of Huns flush up and scare me. There'd probably be some birds around regardless, but I'd like to think we help. We'd likely plant our little food plot without being in the program, but FWP provides the seed mix, which is not inexpensive, and it's nice to be a part of something bigger.”

Brelje's primary contact is FWP's Ken Plourde, a UGBEP biologist based in Flaxville, a little prairie town between Plentywood and Scobey on what locals call the “real” Hi-Line—Montana Highway 5—which parallels the Saskatchewan border across

gram. Additional revenue comes from a federal Natural Resources Conservation Service Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant, other federal Farm Bill titles, and monetary and in-kind assistance from conservation groups like Pheasants Forever and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

The element that keeps hunters involved as the third partner in these habitat agreements is access. Every UGBEP project has some public hunting component that's detailed in an annual booklet FWP produces and distributes widely. The “UGBEP Project Access Guide,” also available online, provides the location of habitat projects and type and amount of free public access available to hunters. The publication has grown from just a few pages to a thick booklet that upland hunters anticipate every August. In the field, properties are identified by signs that welcome hunters.

Active UGBEP Projects 2009-2024



Average habitat acreage: **355,000** per biennium



Average access acreage: **650,000** per biennium

Right: A hunter sends his dog into thick cover to root out a rooster or two at a UGBEP habitat enhancement project northeast of Conrad.



BENEFITS OF ENHANCED UPLANDS Clockwise from top: Harvesting a rooster from a CRP field in northeastern Montana. As Congress has reduced funding for the federal Conservation Reserve Program in Montana, FWP has worked on filling the upland game bird habitat gaps with state programs; a French Brittany points a covey of gray (Hungarian) partridge; a Lab brings back a mouthful of rooster; a hunter takes a snap shot at a pheasant weaving through a stand of cottonwoods.

northern Sheridan and Daniels counties.

Plourde's job is to meet with landowners across FWP's Region 6, discuss the merits and requirements of the program, and administer habitat contracts. One of the foundational aspects of the program is that landowners contribute the on-the-ground work, whether planting seed, tilling, or even not plowing and planting some of their less-productive ag land to preserve bird habitat.

Plourde says the program is constantly evolving, following wider trends in agriculture, place-specific habitat needs, and individual landowners' production priorities. Northeastern Montana producers are increasingly interested in improving soil health, and practices such as cover-cropping, pollinator plantings (seeding wildflowers that attract bees and butterflies), and

no-till planting can improve conditions for commodity grains as well as upland birds. The UGBEP initially focused mainly on establishing and maintaining CRP and other grasslands. Recently, the program has provided financial incentives for farmers to do “stripper-heading,” which harvests only the wheat grain heads and leaves tall stubble to hold snow and provide security cover for upland birds. “It's a win both for the birds and for next year's wheat crop,” says Plourde.

GREAT POTENTIAL

From his view on the UGBEP council and in the Montana Legislature, France sees the program as an investment that pays habitat and relationship dividends.

“I think its real strength is in providing a basis for a conversation between FWP staff

and producers that then becomes a partnership,” he says. “I'm interested in making sure the program has the capacity to incorporate conservation practices on working land as the needs of producers change and grow with the times.”

France, a Democrat, says he and other lawmakers representing both political parties would like to see the program continue to grow and innovate. “It's still relatively small in scale when you consider that most UGBEP projects are measured in a few hundred or a few thousand acres across areas of Montana that cover millions of acres,” France says. “It's limited by funding and field staff. The program has a current biennial budget of \$2.5 million. I'd like to see how many projects we could do if we doubled that and hired more people like Ken Plourde to work with landowners.”

SOURCE: MONTANA FWP