

AFWA Migratory Shore & Upland Game Bird Working Group Report

Meeting of March 25, 2010

Dave Graham, Chair

Hilton Milwaukee City Center

Milwaukee, WI

The Working Group meeting convened from 8:00 a.m. to 9:25 a.m. with 30 participants in attendance, of which 11 were current Working Group members. Dave Scott (OH) chaired the meeting on behalf of Chairman Dave Graham who was unable to attend the North American Conference this week.

Scheduled Discussion Items

- **Mourning Dove Task Force** – John Schulz (MO) reported the Mourning Dove Task Force (MDTF) met October 28-29, 2009 at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, MD. The group focused primarily on developing an explicit harvest strategy to replace the interim strategy implemented in 2009; other topics included a discussion on the future of the Call-Count Survey (CCS), implementation of an operational banding program, wing collections, details of the annual regulations process with the interim harvest strategies, and the national dove hunter attitude survey about nontoxic-shot issues. A new harvest strategy is likely to be both derived and adaptive. It would be derived because the annual regulatory choice would be based on the current resource status, explicit management objectives, alternative management (or regulatory) options, and predictive models of system dynamics. The strategy would be adaptive because 2 alternative models of system dynamics would compete over time with the relative predictive power of each model updated annually. These models would reflect alternative views (or hypotheses) about the effects of harvest mortality on population dynamics (i.e., additive vs. compensatory harvest mortality). Consistent with the National Plan, the primary objective will likely be to maximize sustainable harvest, which requires a stable population; constraints will be explored to meet multiple competing objectives such as maximizing harvest, maintaining stable regulations, and maintaining a specific population size.

The group also reviewed the history of the roadside Call-Count Survey (CCS), details related to analysis of annual trends, and future possibilities. Currently, CCS data provide 2 of 4 data streams used in developing composite trends for the interim harvest strategy for establishing annual hunting regulations (i.e., doves heard and doves seen).

Since 2003, more than 200,000 doves have been banded with approximately 11,000 bands reported to the Bird Banding Laboratory. A mourning dove banding needs assessment was completed in 2009. These banding goals are helpful when USFWS–DMBM seeks assistance from National Wildlife Refuges around the country where such assistance could play a significant role in helping meet state banding goals. Web-based training materials are being developed to assist refuges, and plans are being developed to conduct training workshops for northeastern states during spring 2010.

The national parts-collection survey for mourning dove wings has become operational with a permanent slot in the annual Service budget. A freezer will be constructed in 2010 at the permanent wing-bee home in Kansas City, Missouri. Collection of dove wings from check-stations and wing-barrels will no longer be necessary with full implementation of the mail survey. A final report was submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to support moving

forward with an operational parts-collection survey; however, these data have not yet been prepared for publication.

Finally, Dan Witter (D.J. Case & Associates) provided an update on the national survey being developed regarding nontoxic shot use for dove hunting. The survey will be developed using a model-based approach where a set of variables from *a priori* models will be used to generate the survey questions. The model-based approach will assist with obtaining approval from the OMB (i.e., each question can be clearly linked to each variable in each model). Survey input was acquired from the dove technical committees during winter technical meetings. Ammunition manufacturers and related industry representatives were also engaged recently in this process to provide additional input and perspectives.

- **Mourning Dove Attitude Survey on Nontoxic Shot Regulations** – Phil Seng (D.J. Case & Associates) provided an update on this topic and efforts to solicit input from flyway technical committees. At the 2009 North American Conference in Arlington, VA, the 4 Flyway Councils approved of the concept of a national dove hunter survey to assess the awareness and attitudes of dove hunters regarding lead poisoning and potential actions that might be taken in relation to it. However, misunderstandings about the survey development process surfaced between March and September 2009. Primary among these misunderstandings were concerns that (a) the survey methodology was not going to receive broad review and input from the management community prior to implementation and (b) survey questions might be written based on the assumption that regulations restricting the use of lead ammunition were inevitable. To address these misunderstandings, AFWA was asked by the states to contract with D.J. Case & Associates to collect input on the survey from the management community and to assist with development of the survey instrument. It was also suggested at the September 2009 AFWA meeting that Steve Williams, President of the Wildlife Management Institute, serve as a liaison between the management community and the ammunition manufacturing industry, to keep them informed of the process.

Since October 2009, D.J. Case & Associates has solicited input on the survey objectives, models, and variables from the Mourning Dove Task Force, as well as from technical committees representing the 3 dove management units (EMU, CMU & WMU). Input has been incorporated into revised objectives, models and variables. At the North American in March 2010, D.J. Case & Associates also updated the various Flyway Councils and representatives of the ammunition manufacturing industry on progress to date.

By June 18, 2010, D.J. Case & Associates will solicit additional input on the survey models and variables from all stakeholders and will present final survey objectives, models and the survey instrument at the July Flyway Council meetings. From there, the survey will be submitted to OMB, which must approve the survey before it can be distributed due to the use of federal funds. There were several questions and a discussion on funding, with particular interest if adequate funds remained or had been committed to complete the survey once approved, and related options to secure those funds and inform flyway councils of the need and/or options. There appears to be a shortfall of about \$25,000 at this time but D.J. Case & Associates will provide more details and potential options in their final report to the flyway councils this summer.

- **Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Support Task Force** – Ralph Morgenweck (FWS) provided an update. During the March 2006 meeting of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Working Group (Working Group), the Working Group established a Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Support Task Force (Task Force)

to assist it. The Task Force is composed of 9 representatives of State, Federal and Non-governmental organizations. The Task Force was directed to do the following:

1. Update the research and management needs of the 16 species of migratory shore and upland game birds (MSUGB).
2. Prepare recommendations for priority funding needs.
3. Develop a strategy for funding priority research and management needs.
4. Stay current on emerging MSUGB issues and maintain active liaison with the USFWS, NGOs, Flyway Councils, States, and other governmental entities.
5. Support and assist the AFWA-MSUGB Working Group in matters relating to these species and work closely with all appropriate organizations to identify problems and opportunities.

The Task Force has completed the update of the list of research and management needs without establishing priorities for the needed work. The database has been available since the spring of 2007. The Task Force also placed the 16 species into 5 groups because it was determined that a separate funding strategy for each species was not possible. The 5 species groups are:

- American coot, common moorhen, purple gallinule, Wilson's snipe, clapper rail, king rail, sora and Virginia rails
- Sandhill crane
- American woodcock
- Mourning and white-winged doves
- Band-tailed pigeon, white-tipped dove, Zenaida dove, and scaly-naped pigeon

The Task Force convened a series of workshops to develop strategies that contain recommendations for *priority* information needed to reduce the uncertainties underlying management decisions for these species, and improve the long-term financial status for management and research. One purpose of the strategies is to estimate the costs of reducing management uncertainties for each strategy for a species group. Secondly, the completed strategies will be used to guide the acquisition and expenditure of funds and to provide a valuable tool to attract additional funds from partners interested in MSUGB.

The first strategy, on mourning and white-winged doves, was completed in June 2008, and subsequently printed. Copies have been made available to the Working Group at previous meetings. The second strategy covered the king, clapper, sora, and Virginia rails as well as Wilson's snipe. It was completed in May 2009, and copies were made available to the Working Group previously. The third strategy, on sandhill cranes, was completed in October 2009, and subsequently printed. The workshop on the American woodcock was held in August 2009 and the strategy was completed in March 2010. It will be sent to the Fish and Wildlife Service for printing in the next few weeks.

Two additional strategies will be developed. One for the species group made up of the band-tailed pigeon, white-tipped dove, Zenaida dove, and scaly-naped pigeon. The second group is made up of the American coot, common moorhen, and purple gallinule. Although the second group originally contained the hunted rails and snipe as well, the Task Force split the species group because there were too many to handle adequately at a single workshop. The final 2 strategies will be developed without convening a workshop. In order to save resources, these strategies will be developed by 2 groups of species and management experts who will convene by conference call and email. D.J. Case and Associates will be retained to facilitate the interactions of the 2 groups and prepare the strategies. The strategy for the American coot,

common moorhen and purple gallinule is currently being written following a series of web conferences to develop the content. All strategies are available on the Division of Migratory Bird Management's web page. These documents have already proven useful for establishing priorities, seeking additional funds to enhance webless species programs, and communicating these needs to a variety of audiences.

- **National Marshbird Monitoring Program & the National Wetlands Inventory** – Tom Cooper (FWS) presented a report on this topic on behalf of Mark Seamans (FWS), who was unable to attend. Secretive marshbirds (i.e., rails, bitterns, limpkin, coot, gallinules, and pied-billed grebe) are poorly accounted for by existing monitoring programs. Thus, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and partners initiated a pilot study in 2008 to assess a potential monitoring program. Program objectives are to estimate (a) status and trends of each species, (b) habitat associations, and (c) the effect of conservation actions on marshbirds. Meeting the first objective will also help inform harvest decisions for game species. The past decade has seen development of a sampling design and associated protocol to survey marshbirds. Individual birds are recorded during a point count survey that consists of a 5-minute passive listening period and a playback period. The spatial design is a 2-stage cluster sample whereby primary sampling units are randomly selected from a hexagon grid that covers North America and 4-10 secondary sampling units (i.e., point-count locations) are selected in marshes within each primary sampling unit. Each point is surveyed 1-3 times annually. In 2008, the entire state of Wisconsin was surveyed. In 2009, Idaho, Kentucky, the District of Columbia, and eastern New York were sampled in addition to Wisconsin. Florida and Michigan should be added in 2010, with additional states planned for 2011 and 2012. Based on preliminary results from Wisconsin, the protocol and sampling design appear to be sufficient to estimate status and trends for Sora and perhaps Virginia rails. More work is needed to resolve issues related to private land and interior marsh access, accuracy of spatial databases, surveys for other species (e.g., yellow and clapper rails), and stratification to address management issues. The pilot phase will continue through 2012, after which additional states will be added annually to obtain full coverage in the U.S.

A recommendation was passed by the Migratory Shore & Upland Game Bird Working Group related to the importance of updating the National Wetlands Inventory (NWI) due to the need for better wetlands data for marshbird surveys. Rails, coots and gallinules are habitat specialists, requiring marshes for all or part of their life history cycle. Thus, the availability of accurate, geospatial wetland data is critical for successful conservation of these species and their habitats. The NWI developed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is one of the best sources of spatially explicit wetland information. Although other wetland databases are available, none provide the spatial resolution or detailed classification system of the NWI. Unfortunately, much of the NWI coverage is now greater than 20 years old and is in need of updating.

The Migratory Shore & Upland Game Bird Support Task Force recommended that the National Marshbird Monitoring Program as the top priority for meeting information needs for rails, coots and gallinules. One of the primary goals of this monitoring program is to estimate the status and trends of rails, coots, and gallinules in the U.S. to inform annual regulatory decisions regarding harvest. This type of population information is currently lacking for these marsh species. Wetland maps that are available electronically are necessary for implementation of the National Marshbird Monitoring Program. These maps are used to define the sampling frame (i.e., delineation of wetlands) for placement of survey locations. Thus, it is essential to have accurate maps for an efficient survey. NWI maps have been used extensively thus far during the pilot phase of the National Marshbird Monitoring Program. Given this need for reliable and up-to-date spatial information, we recommend that proposals for improving NWI data, especially in

states implementing secretive marsh bird surveys, be considered for partial support through the Webless Migratory Game Bird Research and Management Program, particularly where these program funds can be combined with those from other partners to expedite updating wetlands information of value for monitoring webless species.

- **Division of Migratory Bird Management Update** – Bob Blohm (FWS) provided an update on several items of interest to the Working Group. The importance of the work of the Migratory Shore & Upland Game Bird Support Task Force was noted. Currently, the Webless Migratory Game Bird Research and Management Program receives annual funding of about \$700,000. Strategies for webless species will be used to guide allocation of these funds and are useful for interactions with Congress and OMB because they provide clearly defined priorities and necessary actions that can be addressed through enhanced funding. The Division of Migratory Bird Management anticipates posting the vacancy created by last year's retirement of David Dolton in the next few weeks. The position is expected to be located in Denver. After the position is filled, there will be a redistribution of webless program responsibilities among the several staff associated with this program. Finally, it was noted that all flyways have responded to a request to designate members to serve on the revised system for reviewing proposals for funding under the Webless Migratory Game Bird Research and Management Program and the RFP for that program is under development at this time and should be released in May 2010.

- **Woodcock Task Force** – Tom Cooper (FWS) provided an update – the Woodcock Task Force met this week at the North American. Topic covered included an update on Regional Woodcock Initiatives, the final report for a Woodcock Communications Strategy, outcomes from the American Woodcock Priority Information Needs Workshop, efforts to select Priority Management Areas in the Upper Great Lakes as part of the Woodcock and Young Forest Initiative, and formation of a Monitoring Technical Advisory Committee.

Scot Williamson (WMI) updated the task force on the 3 existing woodcock initiatives (Northern Forest Woodcock Initiative – Bird Conservation Region (BCR) 14, Appalachian Woodcock Initiative – BCR 28, and Upper Great Lakes Woodcock and Young Forest Initiative – BCR 12 & 23). Contractors continue working in each initiative to develop demonstration areas where best management practices (BMPs) specific to each initiative are implemented. In addition, Pat Ruble (WMI) reported on a spatially explicit model recently developed by the Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes Region Joint Venture (JV) for the Upper Great Lakes Woodcock and Young Forest Initiative. The model developed by the JV combined soil, forest, and woodcock abundance data to identify areas on the landscape with the highest habitat management potential for woodcock. After development of the model, WMI and FWS staff met with local land managers from MI, MN, and WI to identify priority management areas in each state based on model output along with local knowledge. Moving forward, WMI is currently working with The Nature Conservancy to create a similar model for the Northern Forest and Appalachian Initiatives. WMI is currently working on starting a new initiative in BCR 30 (New England/Mid-Atlantic Coast). Information about the woodcock initiatives including electronic copies of the BCR-specific BMPs is available on the web at www.timberdoodle.org.

WMI received funding from the Webless Migratory Game Bird Research program several years ago to develop a communication strategy to help implement the American Woodcock Conservation Plan. WMI contracted with D.J. Case & Associates to develop the strategy based on landowner input from BCRs 14 and 28. The objective of the project was to “*investigate communication strategies to integrate private landowner's habitat management interests and capacities into programs designed to implement the American Woodcock Conservation Plan through identification of critical audiences, testing of key messages and documentation of*

optimal delivery mechanisms.” The project team used the following steps to develop the strategy: 1) completed a literature review/annotated bibliography; 2) conducted semi-structured interviews with natural resource professionals; 3) held focus group meetings with private forest landowners; and 4) examined U.S. Forest Service National Woodland Owners Survey data. The purpose of convening the focus groups was to test the appeal of specific messages, images, tag lines, and print ads that encourage young forest management by landowners. Generally, messages such as “*a diversity of wildlife requires a diversity of habitats*” were best received by the focus groups. Land managers should find the strategy a helpful tool for using proper messages that encourage private forest landowners to manage their land for wildlife requiring young forest habitat. A full copy of the communication strategy is available on the www.timberdoodle.org web site. After a presentation on the communication strategy, the group further discussed the need for: 1) developing additional communication strategies for other regions of the woodcock breeding range (i.e., MN, WI, and MI) where landowner attitudes may be different than in the Northeastern US; 2) developing a communication strategy targeting non-forest landowners especially those that shape forest management policy; and 3) reaching out to other partners interested in maintaining/creating young forest habitat on the landscape.

In August 2009, the Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Support Task Force convened a workshop of woodcock experts in order to identify the priority information needs for American woodcock. Input at the workshop was used to develop a funding strategy, which will be used to increase financial support for management and research activities over the next 5 to 10 years and guide selection of projects through the Webless Migratory Game Bird Research and Management Program. The strategy contains recommendations for obtaining priority information needed to improve habitat and harvest management decisions for migratory populations of American woodcock, focusing on evaluating and improving knowledge of monitoring efforts, vital rates, and habitat needs during the annual cycle of these birds. The 4 priorities identified at the workshop were: 1) develop a demographic-based model for assessing American woodcock population response to harvest and habitat management; 2) develop communication strategies to increase support for policies and practices that benefit American woodcock and other wildlife of young forests; 3) improve understanding of migration, breeding, and wintering habitat quality for American woodcock; and 4) improve the Singing-ground Survey. Specific actions and estimated costs are listed under each priority in the strategy.

With the woodcock initiatives gaining momentum, members of the task force felt that we need to look at developing a coordinated monitoring plan to assess if we are getting the desired population response to management actions. A committee was formed (Wayne Thogmartin/Dan McAuley – USGS, Amber Roth – WMI, and Tom Cooper – FWS). The committee will recruit additional members and report back to the task force. During initial discussions, the group identified the need to develop a white paper to guide monitoring activities across the woodcock initiatives.

- **Other Business** – A letter to the 4 Flyway Council Chairman was sent in December 2009 detailing changes to the Webless Migratory Game Bird Research and Management Program and requesting representatives from each flyway to assist with implementation of a new system to review, select and fund priority webless proposals.

Vernon Bevill (TX) briefly updated the group on progress in Texas to complete their lethality testing research project. All fieldwork was completed as planned in fall 2009 and analyses are underway. Additional testing with leftover ammunition at a skeet range is planned for summer 2010. More detailed results are expected to be available to share with the Working Group at the AFWA Annual Meeting in September 2010.

Finally, Dave Scott (OH) will likely serve as the Working Group's representative to the U.S. NABCI Steering Committee beginning in summer 2010.

Submitted by: Dave Scott on behalf of Dave Graham
March 26, 2010

Attachment: Recommendation on supporting NWI revisions