

SMALL GAME REVIEW “ISSUES AND CONCERNS”

PRELIMINARY INPUT FROM THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS AND HUNTERS
OCTOBER 2009

General and Preliminary O.F.A.H. Comments/Suggestions

Purpose

The purpose is to update and revise the small game hunting regulations and policies, under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, with the view to:

- reflect changes in populations and/or harvest pressure to ensure sustainability;
- address significant knowledge gaps where there is a conservation concern;
- optimize the ecological, social, economic and recreational benefits that accrue through sustainable hunting of small game birds and mammals;
- refine management directions and establish broad targets/objectives; and
- manage and prevent human-wildlife conflicts.

Scope of Review

The review should include the conservation and management of provincial game birds, small game mammals, and furbearers that are also hunted (e.g. red fox, raccoon). At this time, small game species with current management plans/policy (i.e. wild turkey, wolves) need not be a focus within this review.

The harvest management of migratory birds is primarily a federal mandate, but the review should consider recommendations for the improved management of migratory birds where there is a clear provincial interest and mandate to do so (e.g. woodcock, sandhill cranes).

The harvest of snapping turtles and bullfrogs is regulated under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, but are not considered “small game” for the purpose of this review.

Falconry should be recognized as a small and growing method of small game hunting within Ontario; however, it should be mentioned that its regulation is reviewed regularly through the Provincial Falconry Advisory Committee, so it will not be included within this general review.

Naturalized Species

Within the scope of review should be naturalized small game species which were historically introduced, and which make their niches within the agricultural landscape valued as a resource, and produce no negative impacts on native ecosystems (e.g. grey [Hungarian] partridge, European hare, ring-necked pheasant).

Hunting Seasons/Limits/Regulations

Regulations vary widely for Ontario small game hunting seasons, and have not been updated for decades. The review should consider whether eight different hunting seasons for ruffed grouse and spruce grouse, eight different seasons for rabbits and hares, or twelve different seasons for ring-necked pheasants is necessary or beneficial for conservation.

The small game hunting regulations should be simplified and standardized where doing so does not compromise the conservation and optimal sustainable use of the W.M.U. populations.

Similarly, hunting regulations should be reviewed to better reflect the current distribution of species and hunting opportunities (e.g. is it in any way helpful to still have open seasons for Hungarian partridge in northern and/or central Ontario)?

Daily and Possession Limits

Daily and possession limits for some species need to be reviewed and updated (see species-specific recommendations).

Small Game Population and Harvest Assessment

Where there are knowledge gaps about the presence, relative abundance, or health of small game bird or mammal populations that are an impediment to management, conservation and/or future sustainable use, these applied research needs should be identified and prioritized within the review.

Where there are priority knowledge gaps that can be filled through voluntary hunter/landowner/public surveys, these should be identified within the review.

The O.F.A.H. encourages the M.N.R. to engage and involve small game hunters more in small game surveys wherever the data/samples collected would have direct and meaningful value for applied wildlife management.

Habitat Conservation/Assessment/Enhancement

The O.F.A.H. knows that a lot of valuable community knowledge resides within its small game hunting membership. That knowledge should be sought and tapped, in addition to scientific knowledge, to help address conservation concerns, especially as they relate to the possible causes of upland game and nongame species decline, changing species distribution, etc.

Habitat enhancement for a variety of wildlife species, including small game, is of great interest to many hunters, and many are willing to contribute financially and physically to meaningful habitat projects. It would be helpful, through the review, for the M.N.R. to identify the benefit of prioritizing specific-species habitat protection/enhancement needs/projects that could be served through public involvement (e.g. C.F.W.I.P.) and partnerships programs (communication/education/stewardship).

Provincial Small Game Hunter Survey

There is too little information collected or made available on participation rates and interests of Ontario small game hunters, and the social, recreational, and economic importance of the activity. The review should, minimally, include results from the most recent provincial small game hunting survey, and commit to ongoing periodic surveys. The O.F.A.H. would appreciate the opportunity to provide input into the drafting of future provincial small game hunting surveys.

Education and Communication

The M.N.R. should investigate potential partnerships with the O.F.A.H. for engaging its small game hunting members in the provincial review, and beyond, on such topics as:

- any future proposed changes to small game hunting regulations;
- communicating information about the value of hunting small game;
- communication to encourage involvement in surveys, etc.;
- education about the use of sporting dogs in hunting;
- habitat protection and enhancement techniques/extension;
- promoting multiple values of small game hunting;
- encouraging youth participation/mentoring in small game hunting; and
- changes in municipal small game licensing requirements.

Promoting Participation in Small Game Hunting

Small game hunting has traditionally been the entry point for many young hunters. Today in Ontario, there are many underutilized small game hunting opportunities (and many young hunters start hunting deer rather than small game).

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- Engage the hunting community to create new means of promoting participation in small game hunting.

Hunting Dogs – Training and Trialing Areas

Organized sporting dog trials provide many benefits, including preservation and improvement of hunting breeds and standards; positive promotion of hunting, in general; they are important socially to participants and local tourism; and they often raise funds for conservation projects and awareness of conservation issues.

Provincial game preserves, wildlife areas, and Crown parcels can, and do, provide important areas for organized hunting dog trials. We would encourage M.N.R.'s Wildlife Section to include within the review policy development to provide security to field trial organizers and direction to local area managers to ensure that events present no negative impact on areas or natural heritage values contained in them (and otherwise encourage and support these events).

Release of Pen-reared Game Birds

The O.F.A.H. supports the positive role private game bird hunting preserves play in providing high-quality hunting opportunities for hunters and their hunting dogs. There is no question that these should continue to be permitted and regulated by the M.N.R.; however, where the release of captive-bred game birds, such as wild turkey, bobwhite, ring-necked pheasant could negatively impact the health and/or genetic integrity of extant self-sustaining populations of wild birds of the same species, this should be addressed in policy and possible additional regulation.

SPECIES-SPECIFIC ISSUES/CONCERNS/SUGGESTIONS

Ruffed and Spruce Grouse – Northeastern Ontario

The O.F.A.H. recommends extending the closing of the ruffed grouse (and spruce grouse) hunting season in northeastern Ontario to December 31 (from December 15) to make the closing date consistent with the rest of northern and southern Ontario.

We believe this will provide welcome additional hunting opportunities in the northeast, while having no negative impact on grouse populations or sustainability.

Ruffed Grouse – Southwestern Ontario

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario suggests some minor ruffed grouse range contraction in Lambton and Chatham-Kent area of southwestern Ontario, the Niagara – St. Catharine's area, and the Greater Toronto area.

Also, there appears to be increasing numbers of survey squares in southwestern Ontario in which grouse were not found in the recent census where there had been breeding birds 20 years before.

O.F.A.H. Recommendations (preliminary):

- Determine and communicate, in partnership with the O.F.A.H., the cause of ruffed grouse range contraction in the Greater Toronto area and southwestern Ontario;
- Review regulations in these areas with the view to restore and sustain populations (only if present harvest is a conservation concern);
- Involve hunters in ruffed grouse population assessment in areas of range contraction; and
- Review regulations with the view to enhance sustainable hunting opportunities and standardize (where there are no conservation concerns).

Spruce Grouse

The Hunting Regulations Summary suggests that spruce grouse distribution is much further south than is actually the case.

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- Amend the combined regulations for ruffed and spruce grouse to reflect the actual distribution where these species overlap (i.e. northern Ontario and Algonquin Highlands).

Ptarmigan

Ptarmigan distribution in Ontario is restricted to the Hudson Bay lowlands.

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- Revise the Hunting Regulations Summary to reflect the actual range of ptarmigan in Ontario (i.e. W.M.U.'s 1A and 1B).

Sharp-tailed Grouse

O.F.A.H. recommendations (preliminary):

- Sharp-tailed grouse and ptarmigan hunting regulations should be separated in the summary;
- Review daily and possession limits of sharp-tailed grouse (currently 5 and 15, respectively);
- Sharp-tailed grouse regulations should be amended (remove seasons from W.M.U.'s where no birds are known to exist; i.e. all of southern Ontario, except Manitoulin Island);
- Encourage stewardship of critical sharp-tailed habitat (i.e. dancing grounds, nesting and brood areas, and wintering habitat on suitable private land); and
- Facilitate recovery of sharp-tails (and other game birds) through permitted translocation to suitable habitat in areas where the birds no longer exist.

Grey (Hungarian) Partridge

Hungarian partridge range has continued to shrink in the past two decades. Populations are apparently restricted only to the Norfolk/Oxford/Brant area of southwestern Ontario, and Prescott and Russell, Stormont/Dundas and Glengarry, and Renfrew/Ottawa areas of southeastern Ontario.

O.F.A.H. Recommendations (preliminary):

- Hunting regulations should be amended to reflect current distribution of grey partridge in Ontario;
- Daily and possession limits should be reduced (from 8 and 16, respectively) to promote conservation and possible recovery of birds; and
- The M.N.R. should partner with the O.F.A.H. to develop an education/communication plan to encourage hunter participation in grey partridge recovery and conservation.

Ring-necked Pheasant

Accurate information needs to be gathered about the status of ring-necked pheasant in Ontario. The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario shows a surprisingly wide (but declining) distribution of ring-necked pheasant across the Carolinian zone of southwestern Ontario, and along the north shore of Lake Ontario from Durham to Kingston. To what degree these may be relatively hardy self-sustaining populations (verses released pen-reared birds) is an important management and conservation question to answer.

Some conservationists are not convinced that the reintroduction of wild ring-necks from Saskatchewan into Lambton and Elgin Counties should have stopped at such limited numbers/releases; however, if there are hardy, wild free-ranging pheasants in southern Ontario, there should be more management and restoration attention focused on these birds.

As part of that exercise, the O.F.A.H. recommends reviewing the complicated ring-necked pheasant regulations with the view to updating and simplifying, where beneficial, for conservation.

Northern Bobwhite (Bobwhite Quail)

O.F.A.H. Recommendations (preliminary):

- To the extent possible, the small game review needs to convey the importance of involving the hunting and farming community in the Northern Bobwhite Recovery Strategy/Plan as soon as possible. With our history of partnership in other game birds, such as the successful reintroduction of wild turkey, we would appreciate a commitment to involve the O.F.A.H. in bobwhite restoration.

Also, we note that the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario indicates that, although the population of northern bobwhite is thin and less than what it was 20 years ago, pockets of birds may still be more widely distributed in southwestern Ontario than we have been led to believe.

- Given the above and anecdotal information we have received that also suggest a wider distribution of isolated bobwhite pockets, we recommend that the M.N.R. engage the O.F.A.H. and farmers in a discussion about a possible partnership in enhanced bobwhite quail communication/education and public involvement in population surveying.
- Finally we have no doubt that the Endangered Species Act (E.S.A.)/C.O.S.S.A.R.O. listing of this bird as threatened will prove an impediment to its restoration and recovery unless landowners can be assured, through something of an exemption or “safe harbor” agreement, that participating in a bobwhite quail restoration project will not bring the s.10 E.S.A. habitat protection to bear on private landowners. We recommend that the counter-productive nature of the E.S.A. be recognized and addressed with recommendations in the review (as s.10 creates a disincentive for voluntary landowner participation in the stewardship and restoration of quail habitat/reintroduction on private agricultural habitats). We believe that there is an opportunity and need here to demonstrate how the flexibility promised under the new E.S.A. will be used, creatively, to actually create the environment in which landowners would welcome these birds back onto their properties.

American Woodcock

O.F.A.H. members are concerned about the steady and incremental decline in woodcock numbers (presumably because of preferred habitat conditions succeeding and increased predation).

Although a migratory species, we would ask that the M.N.R. keep in mind the value of engaging O.F.A.H. members and other hunters in cooperative upland game surveying. Those who hunt grouse are usually hunting woodcock at the same time, so where there is benefit for obtaining enhanced harvest information about grouse and woodcock, it only makes sense for the M.N.R., Canadian Wildlife Service, and hunters to do so cooperatively.

Grey Squirrel – Southwestern Ontario

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- We recommend more consistency and standardization of southern Ontario squirrel hunting seasons, in particular, expansion of the short eight-day season in W.M.U.'s 93 and 94 to September 25 to December 15.

Raccoon (Hunting Seasons)

Raccoon seasons have not been updated for years, have not kept pace with increasing populations, and have reduced fur-prices and harvest.

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- Extend raccoon hunting seasons to open with other small game seasons.

Rabbits and Hares

O.F.A.H. Recommendations:

- For W.M.U.'s 72, 73, 76, 77, and 81 to 86 inclusive, make the season the same as south-central Ontario (i.e. September 25 to March 31, the same as W.M.U.'s 60, 68, 69A, 70, 71, 74, and 75);
- Consult with the O.F.A.H. toward expansion and standardization of rabbit and hare hunting seasons in southwestern Ontario with the view to opening rabbit and hare hunting seasons earlier (e.g. September 25 rather than late October in W.M.U.'s 78, 79, 80, 87, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, and possibly 95).

Red Fox

- No recommendation for change.

Arctic Fox

- No recommendation for change.

Grey Fox

(Note: I believe the O.F.A.H. made a submission regarding E.S.A./F.W.C.A. protection in 2008.)

Virginia Opossum

Are the regulations adequate? Is the October 25 season start too late?

Skunk

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- Skunk should be rescheduled under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act as furbearers that can be killed in protection of property (they are not considered by Ontario hunters as "small game.")

Weasel

O.F.A.H. Recommendation (preliminary):

- Weasel should be rescheduled as furbearers that can be killed in protection of property (the same as skunks, they are not considered by Ontario hunters as "small game.")