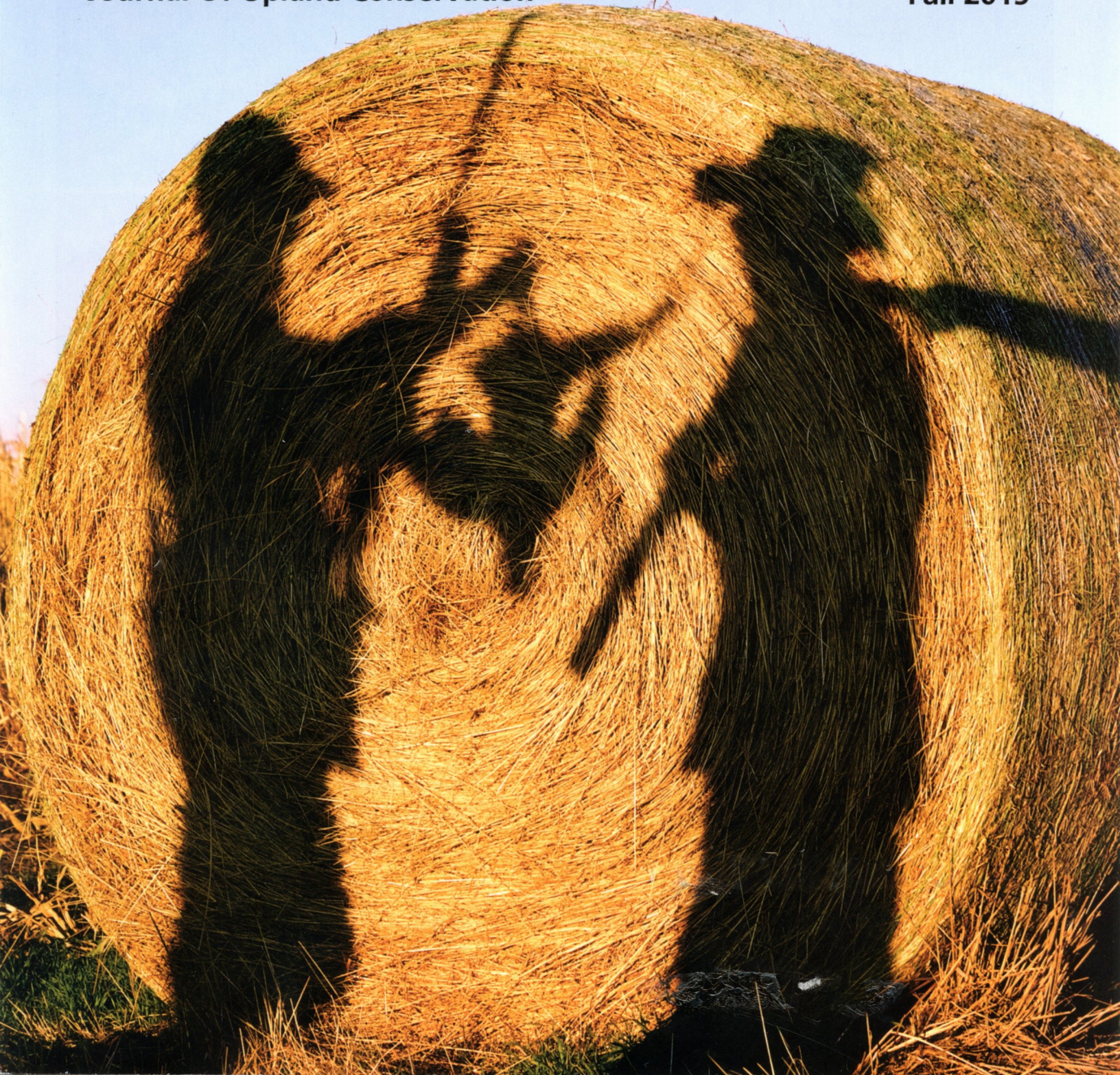


PHEASANTS FOREVER

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Story and photos
by Mark Herwig

THE FUTURE IS *in Their Hands*



The Brown County Chapter's new, young leadership includes VP Jeremy Berg, left, and President Dan Braulick.

The next generation takes the reigns of Southwestern Minnesota's Brown County Chapter



Twas November 3 in Minnesota's corn country and not a stalk of corn was left to clatter in the prairie winds. All the corn was down, you see, and the roosters were nervous ... and for good reason.

Most of the landscape in southwest Minnesota is planted to corn and soybeans and when it's harvested, there are fewer places for the wily ring-necked pheasant to hide from gunner and dog. The early news reports about the pheasant season last year all said the hunting was just ok because of all the standing corn. But not anymore, as we would soon discover.



Brown County PF used Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Funds to buy the 160-acre Dennis and Mary Hoffrogge Tract in 2012. Money from the chapter and other local conservation organizations was raised for a required 10 percent local match.



The 400-acre Rathman Tract was a joint project between the chapter and the Minnesota DNR. The Rathman family's strong conservationist ethic was an important part of preserving this vital prairie habitat in heavily row-cropped western Minnesota.

Landowner and chapter Webmeister Tim Kraskey has worked hard to manage his 200 acres of CRP. We had one heck of a hunt on his place (below). Build it and they will come!



A great morning at Kraskey's! From left, Kraskey, chapter Youth Coordinator Scott Zeig, Braulick, Kraskey's father John and Berg.



Notice the two different color phases of roosters harvested at Kraskey's — a green-phase bird, center, bookended by two blue-phase roosters.





THE FUTURE IS in Their Hands

This was the scouting intel as I arrived in historic New Ulm on the Minnesota River, the Brown County Chapter's home city.

There, I met up with Dan Braulick, chapter president, and Jeremy Berg, chapter vice-president. Braulick, a tool designer at a local machine shop, also farms with his dad Joe.

We didn't waste any time in town and immediately headed out to hunt chapter member Tim Kraskey's land near Comfrey in southwest Brown County.

Along the way, I got to know these two young conservation leaders. Both of them are in their early 30s, a hopeful sign the next generation is stepping up to continue wildlife conservation in these parts. Another chapter

leader, Treasurer Tim Schwartz, is 33. In contrast, the average PF member is 60, with 64 percent of PF's members being 55 and older, according to a 2015 survey.

Driving by Braulick's country home, he pointed out a CRP buffer his grandfather Ben planted years ago along the Little Cottonwood River. Buffers filter eroded sediment and other contaminants from crop field runoff, keeping it out of our valued rivers and lakes.

"Seeing grandpa's buffer and the ones other farmers have planted on the Little Cottonwood River is what attracted me to conservation and Pheasants Forever," Braulick said.

Following his father's example, Braulick established a 10-acre CRP field of his own, which is also on the Little Cottonwood. It includes a windbreak and adjacent corn rows he leaves

for the birds. "It's surprising how much wildlife this habitat project supports," he said.

We next passed by a newly protected state wildlife management area and then another named Meadowlark Acres. The chapter helped with both projects. In fact, Brown County PF has helped with 2,000 acres of WMA acquisitions (and maintenance) valued at over \$2 million. I was told Berg, a lawyer, has donated the legal work for the projects.

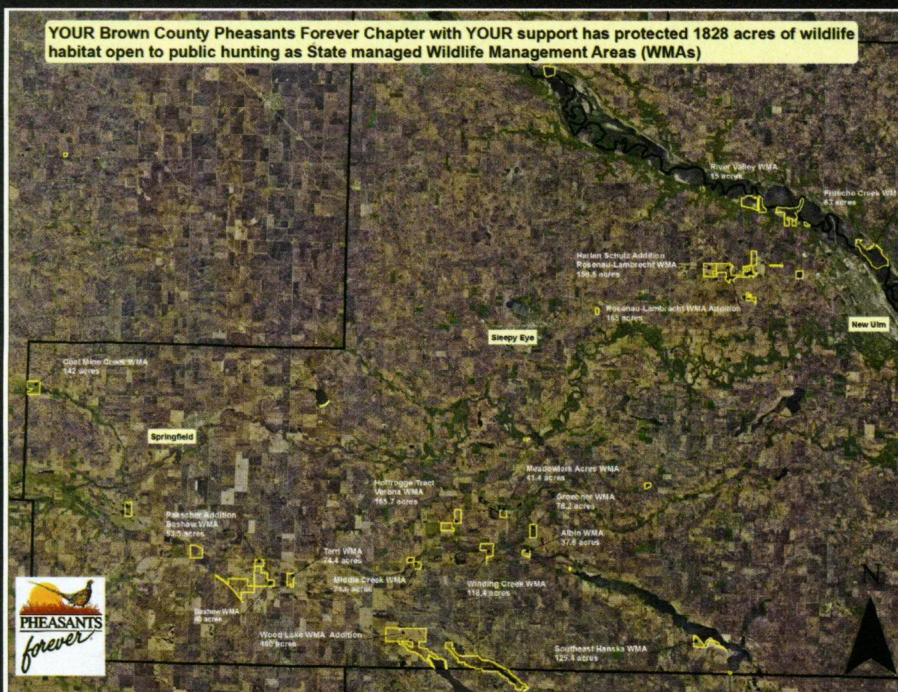
"We don't compete with farmers to buy land for conservation. Farmers come to us to sell willingly. The chapter focuses on land acquisitions, not field work," Braulick noted. Not a bad strategy at a time when so much temporary habitat is being plowed up.

"I'll be honest, if the money the chapter raised didn't stay local, I wouldn't do this. Why? Because with PF, what we do locally for the birds will be here for my kids," Braulick said.

We then drove by land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). The CREP's goal was to help clean up the Minnesota River, to make it swimmable and fishable. It is the most polluted large tributary of the Mississippi River. While the CREP helped, more needs to be done, so another CREP has been launched and a recent buffer requirement has been passed with PF support.

As we approached Kraskey's, I noticed a little rain had fallen. This would help the dogs on the scenting trail. It was also a balmy 50 degrees — not too hot, not too cold. Things were looking up.

We arrived at Kraskey's place, which is atop a hill



This map shows over 1,800 acres of habitat acquisitions aided by Minnesota's Brown County Chapter. The chapter emphasizes fee title acquisitions to increase public hunting acreage.



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overlooking his beautiful 200 acres of CRP, about 11:30 a.m. His land, of course, is on the Little Cottonwood River — it seems this little prairie river runs through the very 'heart' of his habitat community. Kraskey's father John, 77, also met us there. He's a pretty game guy and joined us on the hunt!

"I joined PF three years ago," the younger Kraskey said, "because I love pheasant hunting. It's a gorgeous bird."

Kraskey, who maintains the chapter's website, said the land is regularly maintained by burning and was recently planted with 6,000 shrub and fruit trees for a winter shelterbelt and food source. PF Habitat Team Specialist Dennis Pederson (now retired) and the Redwood County Soil and Water Conservation District helped with the project.

Their conservation ethic and hard work has paid off

for wildlife and hunters alike: Kraskey and friends bagged 25 roosters from this land the previous three weekends.

I was excited to hear that a cornfield on the north end of his land was just cut. This meant the birds would be holed up in the CRP. I was now even more excited to load up the guns and loose the dogs! (Scott Zeig, who organizes the chapter's many youth events, and his GSH Otis also joined us at Kraskey's. He told me the chapter recently agreed to financially support a new trap shooting team at the New Ulm High School.)

Hunter, my springer, and I took the left flank on the first drive. We soon approached a small cattail slough thick with tall shrubs and trees, all surrounded by cut corn. This was looking good. Soon, my hopes were confirmed as Hunter flushed six birds out the other end. I didn't have a shot, but Berg, who was to my right, did, dropping the first rooster of the day. His golden Gunnar made the retrieve.

But the best was yet to come, in the form of a drive along the face of a gently sloping hill. It became a free-for-all!

First, Hunter flushed some hens, and then a rooster broke behind me, which I dropped on a right-left cross. Kraskey then dropped one, with Berg and I tag teaming another. We pivoted toward the Little Cottonwood River where another rooster flushed. I missed, but 'Deadeye' Kraskey didn't! His Labradoodle Billie and golden-doodle Nellie were soon on it.

At one point, six roosters were in the air at the same time. At the drive's end, Kraskey's father John, our blocker, finally got his turn, dropping another fine Minnesota rooster.

It was the "The Brown County Bonanza!"

Of course, on the return drive over the same ground (a good strategy), Hunter flushed one cool-headed rooster that had held its ground through the initial drive. I (thankfully) missed a first shot (too close anyway), but made good on a second. Zeig's Otis made a great long distance retrieve! I love dogs like that! By 4 p.m., the six of us had nine birds in the bag (Minnesota's limit is two roosters/hunter).

'THE BIRDS'

Speaking of birds, birds everywhere, I learned that Tippi Hedren, 85, star of the famous 1963 Alfred Hitchcock movie *The Birds*, was born in New Ulm. The city, which is named after a southern German town, was founded in 1854 by the German Land Company of Chicago. This very Germanic city, not surprisingly, is a center for brewing in the Upper Midwest and, thus, home to the August



The Hoffrogge Tract partnership celebration. This project, completed in 2009, was one of the first to use Outdoor Heritage funds.



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Schell Brewing Company and a regionally popular Oktoberfest.

Unfortunately, not everything has always been fun in New Ulm. In an 1862 uprising by the Dakota people over their treatment on a nearby reservation, the city was attacked twice and much of it burned. The widespread fighting, which even caused many residents of Pheasants Forever's headquarters town of White Bear Lake to flee east, lasted nearly six weeks. In that time, more than 600 civilians and U.S. soldiers were killed. An unknown number of Dakota were killed, imprisoned, deported or fled west.

MORE TO DO

Kraskey's place was fantastic, so I wasn't surprised when Berg told me other landowners visit here to see how he does it. And Kraskey isn't finished. No, he's now considering buying a new tractor, a no-till seed drill, planting sunflowers, more food plots (he uses PF seed) and more.

"What I've been saying to my farmer friends is to leave the last

row of corn standing next to their habitat," Kraskey said. "Can you imagine how that would help if every landowner did it!"

After our hunt at Kraskey's, we headed for lunch at Carl's Corner (voted Best Chicken by one TV station) in Essig. There, we were joined by chapter members Ralph Grundmeyer, Danny Hoffman, Dale Trebesch and retired NRCS District Conservationist Greg Tenant.

Grundmeyer and Zeig, I was told, sell 90 percent of the chapter's raffle tickets. They told me Dave and Deb Huhn gather 90 percent of the chapter's donations for its banquet, which this year drew over 400. Wow!

"I'm glad some of the young guys have volunteered with the chapter," Grundmeyer said. "They stepped up. They've made some mistakes, like we did, but they're good to go now."

Grundmeyer would know. He and Hoffman helped start the chapter in 1985 along with other area hunters and conservationists.

"When we became the chapter's leaders, we took it from a notebook-based deal to a lap top. That's all we did.


The founders, Grundmeyer and Hoffman, did the rest," Braulick said in tribute to his predecessors.

The chapter's long-term effectiveness has made a difference. Tenant said conservation acres are actually up in Brown County in a time when many areas are experiencing net habitat losses. One reason is higher rental rates. One farmer squared up his field, saving field time and costs, and in the bargain increased his income from \$50/acre for cash rent to \$85/acre in CRP. (The chapter helped in the effort to increase CRP acreage rates by donating to PF's Legislative Action Fund. One donation was for an impressive \$10,000.)

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You know, while visiting this chapter, I sure had a great time hunting. But, I experienced something even better — the pride the chapter had in giving back to the resource and a real concern for the birds. One member even said, "Hey, the state should end the pheasant season earlier. It's too hard on the birds to be hunted so late in winter."

You don't hear that from everybody. But then Minnesota is, after all, Pheasants Forever's founding state. A quarter of PF members are Minnesotans. Our passion runs deep for conservation and hunting.

Thanks Brown County for helping keep conservation and our hunting heritage alive for the next generation, for successfully adapting to changing realities and showing why Minnesota is one of the nation's top wildlife habitat conservation leaders. 

Herwig is editor of Pheasants Forever Journal.



The Brown County Mentored Youth Hunt, held at River Ridge Gun Club, is recruiting new hunter-conservationists to keep this chapter doing conservation well into the future.