Updates From the Field:

**Dirt Rich in Northwest Minnesota**

Conservation professionals and local producers gathered at the David Miller Farm near Red Lake Falls on August 28 to dig into soil health. The event was a workshop put on by Pennington SWCD and the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA), part of the “Dirt Rich” series put on each summer. Around 50 attendees at the workshop spent the morning learning about soil health and cover crops from soil health experts Justin Morris with NRCS and Kent Solberg with SFA.

The morning was capped off with learning about the Miller Farm operation which includes David, his wife Peggy, daughter Mikayla Tabert and son-in-law Ben Tabert. They are a 150 pair calf-to-finish operation and have been grazing cover crops for six years. They have been doing strip till and no till for 25 years. It was an excellent opportunity for the Miller’s to showcase their operation.

In the afternoon, participants got to tour some of the farm and see a strip tilling demonstration, diverse pasture plantings, and cover crops interseeded with corn. There have not been many events done for soil health in the Northwest and it was a great day for people to network and see how one producer is growing cover crops. It was a fun day and was a group effort to put together.

* Photos and article courtesy of Jill Fejszes, PF MN FBB
Meet the Newest Members of our Team!

Sara Reagan - Farm Bill Biologist; Lac qui Parle County

My name is Sara Reagan and I am the Farm Bill Biologist for Pheasants Forever in Lac qui Parle County, MN. I have always loved the outdoors and have a passion for wildlife and animal behavior. I graduated from North Dakota State University in Fargo, ND, in 2010 with a bachelor’s degree in Zoology – Animal Behavior. Prior to working for PF, I worked as a zookeeper for eight years at the Chahinkapa Zoo in Wahpeton, ND and Lincoln Children’s Zoo in Lincoln, NE. I cared for tigers, leopards, cougars, bears, otters, fossa, and penguins (to name a few). I also hand-raised a bobcat and a wallaby. My husband and I just moved back to Minnesota - I grew up just south of Lac qui Parle county and it’s great to be back in MN. My husband works with my dad and brother farming and selling seed. We even got married in a CRP field! In July we welcomed our first child – Henry Miles. I’m looking forward to creating more habitat for wildlife and continuing to learn from my very knowledgeable peers!

Luke Thoma - Farm Bill Biologist; Todd County

Hi, I am Luke Thoma, Farm Bill Biologist in Todd County. I graduated from the University of Minnesota Crookston with a Bachelor of Science in Natural Resources Management. I also attended Itasca Community College and earned an Associates of Applied Science in Forestry Management. Prior to my employment with PF I had been working all around the state of MN gaining experience in the natural resources field. I spent a season in Cambridge, MN working for the DNR forestry division. We spent our time cruising timber stands, responding to insect and disease phone calls, overseeing logging operations and other various forestry work. I then spent two seasons in Brainerd, MN working with aquatic invasive species and trails and waterways. Finally, I spent a season up in Karlstad, MN working for The Nature Conservancy, performing prescribed burns and prairie restoration management practices on TNC and state-owned lands. I grew up on a hobby farm just West of Little Falls, MN. As a child I spent a lot of my time outdoors helping my dad out around the farm and jumping at any opportunity I could to get out hunting or fishing. Over the years I’ve grown a passion for conservation and I am excited about the opportunity PF is providing me here in Todd County. My fiancé, Whitney, recently took a position in Long Prairie as well and we are both very happy and excited to be a part of the local communities. Thank you all for the welcome and I look forward to meeting and working with you.
Ethan Boertje—Farm Bill Biologist; Brown County

Hello! My name is Ethan Boertje, and I am excited to join the MN Pheasants Forever team as a Farm Bill Biologist in Brown County. I grew up in South-Central Minnesota where my family runs a small farm operation. I was always a member of PF growing up and attended banquets religiously with my Dad! I attended North Dakota State University in Fargo, ND and received a B.S. Degree in Zoology-Wildlife Ecology, and a M.S. in Biology. I grew up an avid outdoorsman and have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to hunt, fish, and enjoy public land all throughout the United States! Before joining the bird club, I worked as a hunting guide in Central Colorado and worked for an erosion control company in Southern MN. I am excited to be closer to home so I can watch my new nephew grow up and teach him about hunting and fishing all while doing my part for conservation in the area I grew up, enjoying the many beautiful prairie plots we have down here! Go Bison!

BJ Werk—Precision Ag & Conservation Specialist

I was born and raised on a dairy farm in West-Central Minnesota near the small town of Herman, MN. Growing up on the farm I developed an appreciation for hard work, agriculture and the wildlife that shares my family's operation. I attended North Dakota State University (NDSU) following high school and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Crop & Weed Science in 2002 and continued my education at NDSU, completing a Master of Science degree in Crop Production. I began my professional career in the Crop Insurance industry with Rural Community Insurance Services in Anoka, Minnesota. Prior to joining Pheasants Forever, I spent the previous 5 years as the Integrated Solutions Manager for a John Deere Dealership. In that role I managed the Precision Farming Department for a four-store dealership. I am a Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) that allows me to continue my education to provide exceptional service, experience and knowledge to farmers and landowners.

I also spend a great deal of time hunting with both family and friends and work continually on managing, maintaining and improving the wildlife habitat on our owned acres. This is a dream opportunity combining my two passions in helping farmers with profitable decisions that also provides wildlife benefits.
Plant Profile - Compass Plant

Compass Plant (*Silphium laciniatum*) is a native perennial plant that belongs to the Asteraceae (Aster) Family. Ideal habitat for this plant is dry prairie and can also be found along roadsides, railroad beds, or disturbed areas. Its native range in MN is mostly concentrated in the southern 1/3 of the state, though it may sometimes be found growing further north. It blooms in summer and fall, around July-September in Minnesota.

When in bloom, flowers are yellow, consisting of roughly 25 yellow petals and a yellow center. They are located alternately along the upper end of the hairy stem, either singly or in small clusters. The center disk flowers are sterile, meaning they are unable to produce seed.

One of the tallest plants that grows in the prairie, it can reach heights as tall as 8-10’. Its leaves, also boasting to be some of the largest of all prairie plants, have deep narrow lobes with a dense covering of short hairs. Basal leaves can be 1-2 ft long and tend to orientate themselves in a north-south direction, which it’s common name can be attributed to.

*Article and photos courtesy of Gemma Kleinschmidt, PF Senior FBB

Farm Bill Biologist Quarterly Highlights:
July 1 - September 30, 2018

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Standing at around seven inches tall and weighing about as much as a deck of cards, the saw-whet owl is one of the smallest owls in North America. It has a small, round head and lacks the signature ear tufts of more well-known North American owls like the screech and great horned. They have brown, tan, and cream-colored plumage and large yellow eyes. As with most raptors, females are larger than males.

The saw-whet owl inhabits forested areas across most of North America, with breeding taking place in the more northern parts of the continent. Some owls will remain on breeding grounds throughout the year while others will migrate south during the colder months. These little owls are nocturnal and prey mostly on small mammals – mice, voles, shrews, and juvenile gophers, squirrels, and chipmunks. However, they will also hunt small songbirds and large insects.

As with all owls, the saw-whet owl cannot move its eyes. It compensates this immobility with the ability to rotate its neck up to 270 degrees to the left or right and turn its head almost upside-down. Owls are known for having excellent vision, the saw-whet being no exception. The ears of the saw-whet owl are placed unevenly on the sides of its head and are different sizes, giving them an incredible sense of hearing. Saw-whet owls are unique in that their “ear openings” are located higher on their head, meaning you can see the backs of their eyes when looking through their ear openings. Like most raptors, they have no sense of smell.

Due to its elusive nature, saw-whet owls are hard to track, but estimates put the population at about two million individuals. While the owl is well-populated throughout its range, numbers may be on the decline due to habitat loss. The name “saw-whet” comes from the breeding call of the males, which early settlers thought sounded like a saw being sharpened on a whetstone.

*Article courtesy of Sara Reagan, MN FBB; Photo by Riley Burns - Washago, Ontario, Canada.
“A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.”
- Aldo Leopold

Contact a PF Biologist Near You:

Ethan Boertje - Brown County - (507) 341-0050, eboertje@pheasantsforever.org
Kayla Blocker - McLeod County - (515) 320-4007, kblocker@pheasantsforever.org
Jill Fejszes - Marshall, West Polk, Pennington Counties - (218) 280-5978, jfejszes@pheasantsforever.org
Jacob Granfors - Aitkin, Carlton Counties - (218) 434-0929, jgranfors@pheasantsforever.org
Megan Howell - Murray County - (641) 860-0890, mhowell@pheasantsforever.org
Gemma Kleinschmidt - Swift County - (701) 215-8386, gkleinschmidt@pheasantsforever.org
Josh Meissner - Douglas County - (320) 292-6606, jmeissner@pheasantsforever.org
Laura Merten - Kandiyohi County - (507) 438-2913, lmerten@pheasantsforever.org
Jacob Nelson - West Ottertail County - (218) 234-8487, jnelson@pheasantsforever.org
Tony Nelson - Clay County - (218) 791-6714, tnelson@pheasantsforever.org
Josh Pommier - Meeker County - (320) 292-5860, jpommier@pheasantsforever.org
Jeff Potts - Blue Earth County - (507) 508-0615, jpotts@pheasantsforever.org
John Rainey - Lyon County - (507) 696-9064, jrainey@pheasantsforever.org
Sara Reagan - Lac qui Parle County - (507) 829-0778, sreagan@pheasantsforever.org
Eric Ressel - Houston County - (262) 339-7586, eressel@pheasantsforever.org
Nick Smetana - Watonwan County - (608) 797-3375, nsmetana@pheasantsforever.org
Luke Thoma - Todd County - (320) 232-7079, lthoma@pheasantsforever.org
BJ Werk - Precision Ag & Conservation Specialist - (701) 238-6504, bwerk@pheasantsforever.org

About The Farm Bill Biologist (FBB) Position:
Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists are staff in who specialize in conservation programs and habitat planning and work with landowners who are interested in voluntary conservation programs.

These positions are made possible due to the support of the following partners and the Farm Bill Assistance Partnership (FBAP):

- Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA), Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD), Environment Trust Fund and local Pheasants Forever Chapters.