



2026 MINNESOTA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE SURVEY

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Minnesota DNR coordinates sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) surveys each spring with the help of wildlife staff and cooperating biologists in the Northwest (NW) and East-Central (EC) survey regions. In 2026, sharp-tailed grouse surveys were conducted between 2 April and 12 May, with 1,945 birds (males and birds of unknown sex) observed at 164 leks. The mean numbers of sharp-tailed grouse/lek were 8.1 (6.3 – 10.5) in the EC survey region, 12.4 (11.1 – 13.8) in the NW region, and 11.9 (10.6 – 13.1) statewide (EC and NW combined). No data were submitted for leks in the Southwest this year. Comparisons between leks observed in both 2025 and 2026 indicated similar numbers of birds observed in the NW region ($t = 0.08$, $P = 0.9$) and statewide ($t = 1.0$, $P = 0.3$) this year, but fewer birds/lek were observed in the EC region ($t = 3.5$, $P < 0.002$) than last year. The number of leks in the EC region is low ($n = 22$) compared to the 70 leks counted as recently as 2010. Small populations are vulnerable to stochastic events like catastrophic storms, extreme flooding, and disease outbreaks, and the population in the EC region remains small.

INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota DNR coordinates grouse surveys each year to monitor changes in grouse populations through time. These surveys provide a reasonable index to population trends when the primary source of variation in counts among years is change in densities. However, weather, habitat conditions, observer ability, and grouse behavior also vary over time and can influence survey counts. Thus, making inferences from survey data over short time periods (e.g., a few years) can be tenuous. Nevertheless, over longer time periods and when large changes in index values occur, these surveys can provide a reasonable index to long-term grouse population trends.

The first surveys of sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) in Minnesota occurred between the early-1940s and 1960. The current survey is based on counts at dancing grounds during the spring and was first conducted in 1976. Male sharp-tailed grouse display, or dance, together in open areas to attract females in the spring. This display consists of the males stomping their feet with out-stretched wings. Females visit the dancing grounds to select males for breeding. These dancing grounds, or leks, are reasonably stable in location from year to year, allowing surveyors to visit and count individuals each spring. Staff and cooperators conduct surveys in openland portions of the state where sharp-tailed grouse persist, although sharp-tailed grouse were formerly much more widely distributed in Minnesota at the early part of the 20th century. In recent years, sharp-tailed grouse have reportedly been expanding

southward into the range of the Greater Prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) in western Minnesota but have been declining in the east-central part of the state.

Sharp-tailed grouse are popular among hunters. Annual harvest has been 5,000 – 22,000 birds since the early-1990s, with 4,000 – 10,000 hunters in Minnesota. However, the hunting season was closed in the East-Central (EC) region beginning in 2021 due to concerns about the population decline in this region and challenges to implementing a hunting season with remaining leks concentrated primarily in the Aitkin Wildlife area.

METHODS

Wildlife staff and volunteers survey known sharp-tailed grouse lek locations in the Northwest (NW) and EC portions of the state (Figure 1) during the peak in lek attendance, which usually occurs in the latter half of April and the first week of May. The NW survey region consists of Lake Agassiz & Aspen Parklands, Northern Minnesota & Ontario Peatlands, and Red River Valley Sections of the Ecological Classification System (ECS). The EC survey region consists of selected subsections of the Northern Minnesota Drift & Lake Plains, Western Superior Uplands, and Southern Superior Uplands sections. In the EC region, and in eastern portions of the NW region where sharp-tailed grouse occur at low densities, most known leks are surveyed each year. Some leks may have been missed, but most managers in these regions believe that they include most of the leks in their work area, with the exception of Aitkin and Tower work areas where workloads have not permitted exhaustive surveys. In the western part of the NW region, sharp-tailed grouse occur at higher densities, and thus surveying all leks is not feasible. Therefore, in the western portion of the NW region (e.g., Roseau, Thief River Falls), managers conduct surveys along 20- to 25-mile (32- to 40-km) routes. Given the uncertainty in the proportion of leks missed, especially those occurring outside traditional areas, the survey does not reflect sharp-tailed grouse numbers in counties or subregions.

Each cooperator was provided with instructions and asked to conduct surveys on ≥ 1 day in an attempt to obtain a maximum count of male sharp-tailed grouse attendance at each lek. Observers were asked to conduct surveys within 2.5 hours of sunrise under clear skies and during low winds (< 16 km/hr, or < 10 mph) when lek attendance and ability to detect leks were expected to be greatest. Data recorded during each lek visit included the number of males, females, and birds of unknown sex. The sex of birds can be determined when birds are viewed displaying, but it is more difficult when the birds are not displaying or flush and fly away. Observed lek size can vary as a function of population changes, lek numbers, and the timing, effort, and conditions of surveys, so it is important to consider all these factors when collecting data.

The number of sharp-tailed grouse per dancing ground was used as the index value and was averaged for the NW region, the EC region, and statewide, using known males and birds of unknown sex. Observations of just 1 grouse were not included in the index. Data from former survey years were available for comparison, however, survey effort and success varied among years, rendering comparisons of the full survey among years invalid. Therefore, to make valid comparisons between 2 consecutive years, only counts of birds from dancing grounds that were surveyed during both years were considered. Paired t-tests were used to test the significance of comparisons among years. Confidence intervals (95%) were calculated using 10,000 bootstrap samples of lek counts for each region and statewide.

Beginning in 2022, the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGs) has been leading an independent citizen volunteer effort to search for sharp-tailed grouse in Southwest Minnesota. I

included their findings in previous reports to document the presence of lek activity outside the traditional survey region. However, no data were submitted for the Southwest this year.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A total of 1,945 male sharp-tailed grouse and grouse of unknown sex were counted statewide at 164 leks (Table 1). Surveys were conducted during 2 April to 12 May 2026. Leks with ≥ 2 grouse were observed an average of 1.8 times. The statewide index value of 11.9 (10.6 – 13.1) grouse/lek was similar to last year (Figure 2) and leks observed statewide in both 2025 and 2026 had similar numbers of birds this year as last year ($t = 1.0$, $P = 0.3$).

In the NW survey region, 1,766 grouse were counted on 142 leks with 12.4 (11.1 – 13.8) grouse/lek. Counts at leks that were observed during both 2025 and 2026 were similar in the NW survey region ($t = 0.08$, $P = 0.9$), and sharp-tailed grouse appear to be increasing in the NW region over the long term. Biologists in the greater prairie-chicken survey regions (the southern part of the NW survey region for sharp-tailed grouse) have also reported more sharp-tailed grouse in areas that used to primarily hold greater prairie-chickens, although these numbers were not available at the time of this report writing.

In the EC survey region, 179 sharp-tailed grouse were counted on 22 leks in 2026, which was fewer than in 2025. The grouse/lek index in the EC region was lower (8.3, CI: 6.3 – 10.5) and counts at leks surveyed in both 2025 and 2026 were also lower ($t = 3.5$, $P = 0.002$; Table 2). So not only were there fewer leks this year than last, but the leks that were detected were smaller than last year. Birds and leks declined sharply in this region in the 2021 survey compared to 2019 (surveys were not conducted in 2020), from 216 grouse counted on 30 leks to 132 birds on 18 leks (Figure 3), which prompted a hunting season closure in this region. Lek and bird numbers increased after the season closure but have been slowly declining over the last few years, although numbers remain higher than before the closure. The number of leks in the EC region remains low compared to the 626 birds counted on 70 leks as recently as 2010.

The distribution and number of leks in the EC region is localized and small. Most (82%) leks reported in the EC region were in the Aitkin Wildlife work area. No leks have been reported in the Cambridge work area since 2018, despite fairly consistent survey effort. The Tower work area reported 0 leks in 2021, 3 leks in 2022 and 2023, only one lek in 2024, 3-4 leks in 2025, (12 total birds, but 3 birds were flying and were not observed displaying), and 2 leks in 2026. At St. Croix State Park, no birds were observed this year, although ≥ 1 sharp-tailed grouse had been reported at the park in the spring for the last 4 years. Only 1 lek was reported in the Cloquet work area for the second year, which is 2 fewer leks than 2 years ago. These survey data, in combination with studies indicating a genetic population bottleneck in the EC region (Roy and Gregory, 2019) and reporting inconsistent lek attendance (Roy and Coy, 2021), support the conclusion that birds in the EC region are exhibiting traits of a population in decline and may be vulnerable to stochasticity among years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Annual sharp-tailed grouse surveys were accomplished through the efforts of staff and volunteers at Aitkin, Baudette, Bemidji, Cloquet, Grand Rapids, Karlstad, Red Lake WMA, Roseau River WMA, Thief Lake WMA, Thief River Falls, and Tower work areas. In 2022, the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society initiated an effort to survey Southwest Minnesota for sharp-tailed grouse leks and submitted data for state records. Dave Pauly also completed surveys in the Cambridge work area and at St. Croix State Park. Mike Larson reviewed this report. This work was funded in part through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act.

References

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- Roy, C. L., and P. L. Coy. 2021. Lek attendance and disturbance at viewing blinds in a small, declining Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) population. *Avian Conservation and Ecology* 16 (2):25. [online] URL: <http://www.ace-eco.org/vol16/iss2/art25/>.

Table 1. Sharp-tailed grouse / lek (≥ 2 males) at leks observed during spring surveys each year in the Northwest and East Central regions in Minnesota.

Year	Statewide			Northwest ^a			East Central ^a		
	Mean	95% CI ^b	<i>n</i> ^c	Mean	95% CI ^b	<i>n</i> ^c	Mean	95% CI ^b	<i>n</i> ^c
2004	11.2	10.1 – 12.3	183	12.7	11.3 – 14.2	116	8.5	7.2 – 9.9	67
2005	11.3	10.2 – 12.5	161	13.1	11.5 – 14.7	95	8.8	7.3 – 10.2	66
2006	9.2	8.3 – 10.1	161	9.8	8.7 – 11.1	97	8.2	6.9 – 9.7	64
2007	11.6	10.5 – 12.8	188	12.7	11.3 – 14.1	128	9.4	8.0 – 11.0	60
2008	12.4	11.2 – 13.7	192	13.6	12.0 – 15.3	122	10.4	8.7 – 12.3	70
2009	13.6	12.2 – 15.1	199	15.2	13.4 – 17.0	137	10.0	8.5 – 11.7	62
2010	10.7	9.8 – 11.7	202	11.7	10.5 – 12.9	132	8.9	7.5 – 10.5	70
2011	10.2	9.5 – 11.1	216	11.2	10.2 – 12.2	156	7.8	6.7 – 8.9	60
2012	9.2	8.2 – 10.3	153	10.7	9.3 – 12.3	100	6.3	5.4 – 7.3	53
2013	9.2	8.2 – 10.2	139	10.5	9.3 – 11.7	107	4.8	3.8 – 5.9	32
2014	9.8	8.8 – 10.9	181	10.9	9.8 – 12.1	144	5.4	4.5 – 6.4	37
2015	9.8	8.9 – 10.7	206	10.8	9.9 – 11.9	167	5.3	4.4 – 6.4	39
2016	9.5	8.6 – 10.5	182	10.2	9.2 – 11.4	152	6.0	4.9 – 7.3	30
2017	9.7	8.7 – 10.8	181	10.4	9.2 – 11.8	141	7.2	5.8 – 8.6	40
2018	9.3	8.4 – 10.3	161 ^d	9.8	8.8 – 10.9	130	7.3	5.4 – 9.6	30
2019	10.2	9.1 – 11.4	152	11.0	9.7 – 12.3	122	7.2	5.4 – 9.5	30
2020	NA ^e	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2021	10.8	9.7 – 11.9	150 ^d	11.3	10.1 – 12.5	131	7.3	5.1 – 9.8	18
2022	12.2	11.0 – 13.4	163	12.5	11.2 – 13.9	142	9.8	7.0 – 13.0	21
2023	11.5	10.4 – 12.7	154	12.4	11.1 – 13.8	123	8.0	6.3 – 9.9	31
2024	15.3	13.9 – 16.9	184	15.9	14.3 – 17.6	159	11.8	8.4 – 15.4	25
2025	12.0	10.8 – 13.3	169	12.0	10.6 – 13.4	144	11.9	9.4 – 14.6	25
2026	11.9	10.6 – 13.1	164	12.4	11.1 – 13.8	142	8.1	6.3 – 10.5	22

^a Survey regions; see Figure 1.

^b 95% CI = 95% confidence interval

^c *n* = number of leks in the sample.

^d One lek was located just south of the NW region in Clearwater County.

^e No data were collected in 2020 due to the Governor's Stay at Home Order during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Difference in the number of sharp-tailed grouse / lek observed during spring surveys of the same lek in consecutive years in Minnesota.

Comparison ^b	Statewide			Northwest ^a			East Central ^a		
	Mean	95% CI ^c	<i>n</i> ^d	Mean	95% CI ^c	<i>n</i> ^d	Mean	95% CI ^c	<i>n</i> ^d
2004 – 2005	-1.3	-2.2 – -0.3	186	-2.1	-3.5 – -0.8	112	0.0	-1.0 – 1.1	74
2005 – 2006	-2.5	-3.7 – -1.3	126	-3.6	-5.3 – -1.9	70	-1.1	-2.6 – 0.6	56
2006 – 2007	2.6	1.5 – 3.8	152	3.3	1.7 – 5.1	99	1.2	0.1 – 2.3	53
2007 – 2008	0.4	-0.8 – 1.5	166	0.0	-1.6 – 1.6	115	1.2	0.1 – 2.5	51
2008 – 2009	0.9	-0.4 – 2.3	181	1.8	-0.1 – 3.8	120	-0.8	-2.1 – 0.6	61
2009 – 2010	-0.6	-1.8 – 0.6	179	-0.8	-2.6 – 1.0	118	-0.1	-1.2 – 1.0	61
2010 – 2011	-1.7	-2.7 – -0.8	183	-1.8	-3.1 – -0.5	124	-1.5	-2.8 – -0.3	59
2011 – 2012	-2.0	-2.9 – -1.1	170	-1.7	-2.9 – -0.4	112	-2.4	-3.3 – -1.6	58
2012 – 2013	-0.8	-2.0 – 0.4	140	0.4	-1.3 – 2.3	88	-2.9	-4.2 – -1.8	52
2013 – 2014	1.4	0.1 – 2.7	121	1.6	-0.3 – 3.5	79	1.1	-0.1 – 2.3	42
2014 – 2015	-0.2	-1.4 – 0.9	141	-0.3	-1.9 – 1.3	102	-0.1	-1.1 – 1.1	39
2015 – 2016	-1.3	-2.3 – -0.2	167	-1.6	-2.9 – -0.2	129	-0.2	-1.3 – 0.9	38
2016 – 2017	-0.3	-1.5 – 0.9	166	-0.3	-1.8 – 1.2	128	-0.2	-1.2 – 0.8	38
2017 – 2018	-2.2	-3.3 – -1.1	159 ^e	-2.4	-3.9 – -0.4	123	-1.4	-2.8 – 0.2	36
2018 – 2019	-0.3	-1.5 – 1.0	132	0.0	-1.5 – 1.6	101	-1.4	-3.0 – 0.1	31
2019 – 2020 ^f	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2019 – 2021 ^g	-0.7	-2.2 – 0.7	124	-0.5	-2.3 – 1.3	96	-1.6	-2.9 – -0.3	28
2021 – 2022	1.6	0.2 – 3.0	122	1.3	-0.3 – 3.0	96	2.7	0.5 – 5.0	26
2022 – 2023	0.7	-1.6 – 1.7	127	0.2	-1.7 – 2.1	106	-0.5	-3.4 – 1.9	21
2023 – 2024	4.6	2.7 – 6.6	147	5.3	3.1 – 7.8	115	1.8	-0.7 – 4.0	32
2024 – 2025	-3.9	-5.5 – -2.3	181	-4.4	-6.2 – -2.6	152	-1.0	-3.5 – 1.5	29
2025 – 2026	-0.9	-2.5 – 0.8	158	-0.1	-1.8 – 1.8	131	-4.6	-7.3 – -2.2	27

^a Survey regions; see Figure 1.

^b Consecutive years for which comparable leks were compared.

^c 95% CI = 95% confidence interval

^d *n* = number of leks in the sample. Here, a lek can have a 0 count in 1 of the 2 years and still be considered.

^e One lek was located just south of the NW region in Clearwater County.

^f No data were collected in 2020 due to the Governor's Stay at Home Order during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁹Comparisons were made between 2019 and 2021 because the survey was not conducted in 2020.

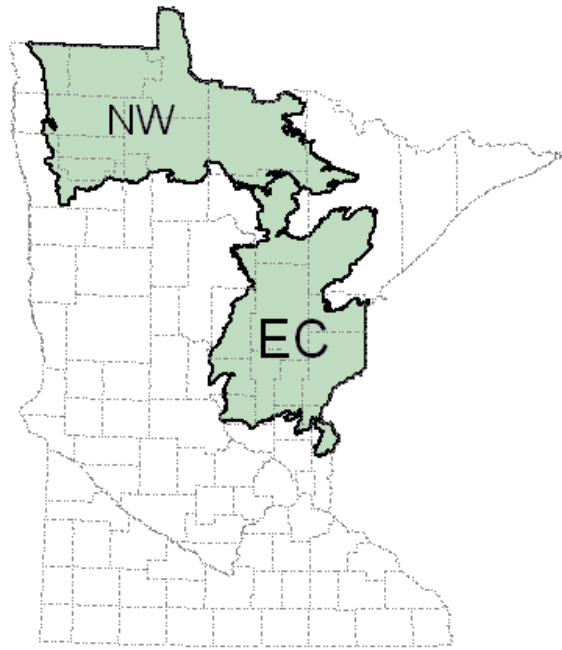


Figure 1. Survey regions for **sharp-tailed grouse** in Minnesota. Northwest (NW) and East Central (EC) survey regions are depicted relative to county boundaries (dashed lines) and influenced by Ecological Classification System Subsection boundaries.

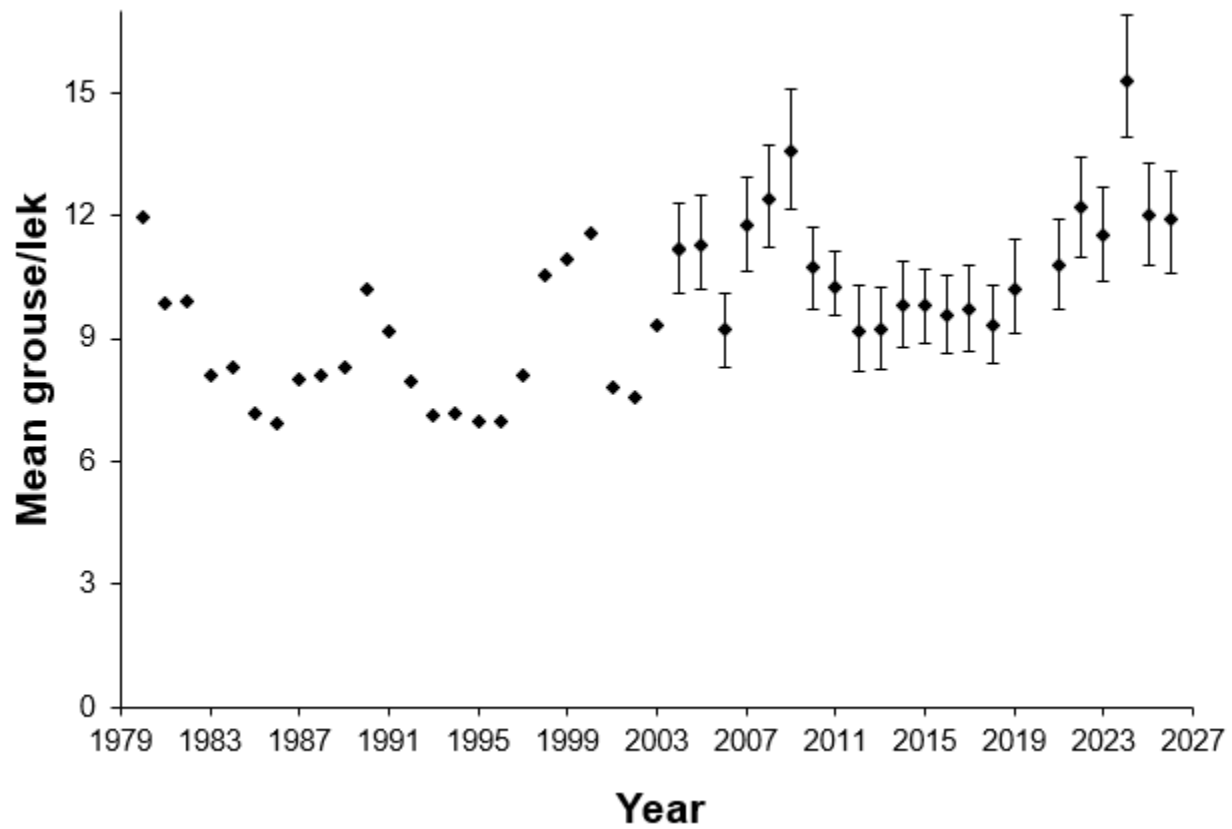


Figure 2. **Sharp-tailed grouse** counted in spring lek surveys statewide in Minnesota during 1980–2026. Bootstrap (95%) confidence intervals are provided for recent years. Annual means are not connected by lines because the same leks were not surveyed every year. No data were collected in 2020 due to the Governor’s Stay at Home Order during the COVID-19 pandemic.

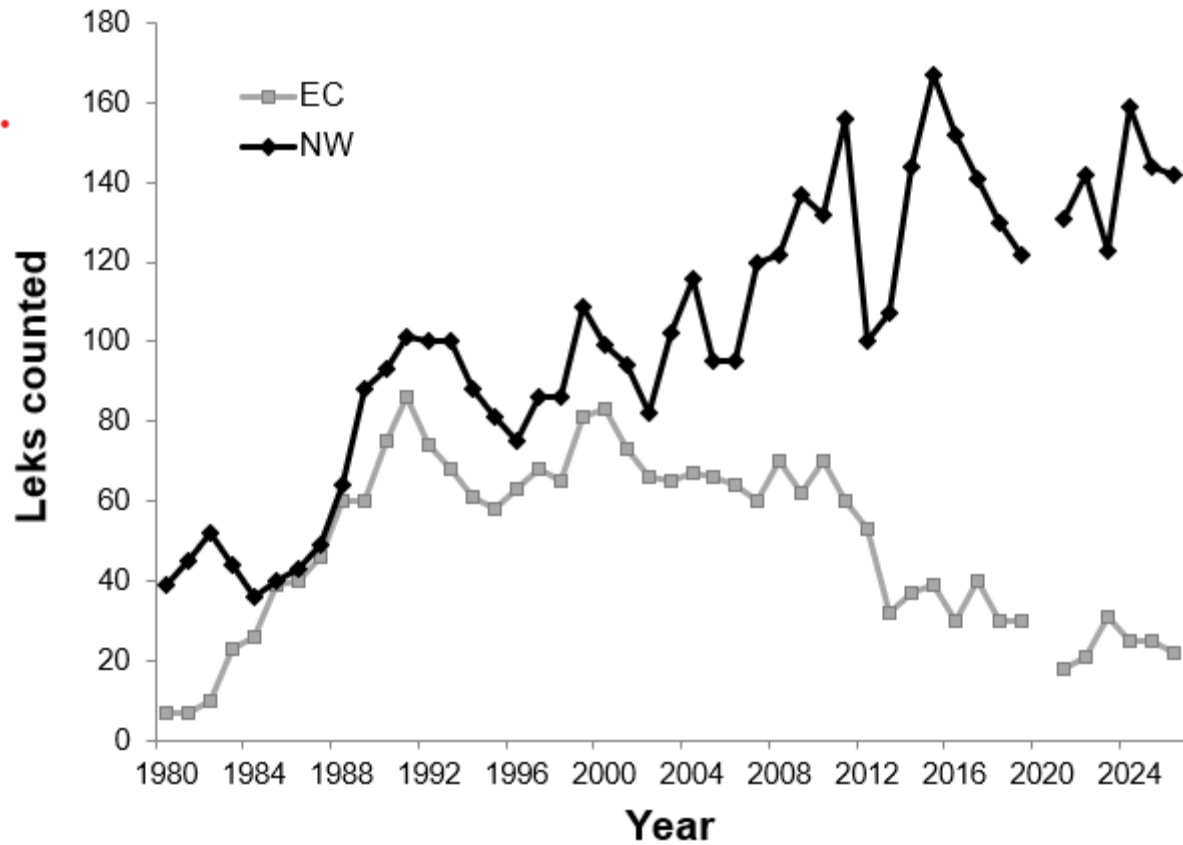


Figure 3. The number of **sharp-tailed grouse** leks with 2 or more birds counted in spring lek surveys in the Northwest (NW) and East Central (EC) survey regions of Minnesota during 1980 – 2026. This metric can be influenced by survey effort. Survey data were not collected in 2020 due to the Governor’s Stay at Home Order during the COVID-19 pandemic.