# Showcasing the DNR: GEMS – a decade of enhancing habitat and hunter opportunity

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When [Grouse Enhanced Management Sites](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/hunting/where) were established in 2014, the goal was simple yet ambitious: create premium grouse and woodcock habitat for hunters.

“We recognized the need to highlight grouse and woodcock habitat management while providing new, more easily accessible hunting opportunities for hunters,” said Adam Bump, upland game bird specialist for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The GEMS program launched with just eight sites on public hunting lands in Cheboygan, Chippewa, Dickinson, Gladwin, Gogebic, Mackinac, Marquette and Ontonagon counties. The vision was a network of upland game bird hunting destinations that would connect hunters with local communities and partner organizations through hunting tourism and habitat stewardship.

To yield good opportunities for hunters, each area is diligently managed for grouse and woodcock habitat. In addition, GEMS optimize the hunter’s experience by incorporating hunter walking trails, parking lots, and trail and habitat cover maps.

“GEMS were designed for a broad spectrum of hunters – from those who might not navigate thick, tangled vegetation as easily anymore, to new hunters who are learning how to identify grouse habitat,” said Bump.

Over the past decade, the program has grown to include 19 sites, spanning 73,000 acres in Michigan’s Upper and northern Lower peninsulas. The sites range in size from 500 to 11,000 acres. After 10 years, the GEMS program continues to thrive thanks to years of dedicated support from DNR land managers, conservation partners, local communities and volunteers.

## Aspen: the crown jewel of the GEMS

“Aspen forest management has been the key to making GEMS successful,” said Bruce Barlow, DNR wildlife biologist and land manager for the Lame Duck Foot Access GEMS, the largest in the state at 11,000 acres.

Ground-nesting birds such as grouse and woodcock need young aspen forests to complete their lifecycle. The slender trunks of aspen trees grow densely packed together under a kaleidoscope-like, leafy canopy, providing camouflage and concealment for wildlife below.

Aspen bark and flower buds provide food for grouse, while fallen trees create drumming logs that become a stage for grouse courtship displays. During these displays, male grouse drum on the logs by rapidly flapping their wings, producing a low-frequency sound that echoes through the forest. Each [drumming session](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Ruffed_Grouse/sounds) lasts about eight to 10 seconds, with up to 50 wing beats, showcasing the male’s vitality and strength.

But aspen forests require a watchful eye and attentive management. Aspen trees need direct sunlight and will not grow in the shade of larger trees. To keep habitats thriving and forests regenerating, mature aspen stands are removed through timber harvests. At the [Lame Duck Foot Access GEMS](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/Publications/pdfs/ArcGISOnline/interactiveMaps/gems/), land managers help the forest regenerate by removing groups of 50-year-old aspen trees, allowing for new growth and new age classes to be established.

The timber is sold to a [forest products company](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/forestry/products) to make composite panels (oriented strand board, similar to particle board), pulpwood or saw logs.

“The most abundant habitat in the GEMS is aspen. As the young forest naturally regrows, it provides an ongoing cycle of habitat for grouse, white-tailed deer, woodcock, black bear, American beaver, golden-winged warblers and many other species,” Barlow said.

When aspen stands are first cut, [they can be ugly](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/167a6aa). But in a year or two, the aspen will return and form a dense, vigorous forest full of life. For the next 45 years, this forest will provide habitat for grouse and a host of other species.

Most GEMS are located within DNR-managed state forests, though some are on U.S. Forest Service lands or on private lands enrolled in Commercial Forest programs.

GEMS are nested into Michigan’s nearly 4 million acres of state forests, all of which are managed under the guidelines of the State Forest Management Plan. This plan is currently open for public review and input, and since Michigan’s forests affect all of us, we encourage your feedback on the [2024 State Forest Management Plan](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/forestry/management/region#:~:text=The%20state%20forest%20management%20plan%20is%20part%20of,inform%20the%20public%20on%20Michigan%27s%20for%20public%20review.) by Dec. 31.

## A learning tool for new hunters

Aspen forest management not only supports wildlife, but also creates an ideal environment for new hunters to learn and develop their skills.

Over 15,000 small game hunters take to the GEMS in the fall for ruffed grouse and woodcock hunting, according to the DNR’s [2021 small game harvest survey](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/-/media/Project/Websites/dnr/Documents/WLD/Reports/2021sgreport.pdf?rev=0d3b2b4317234e2f814281988f7e2383).

Gabe Stone, regional engagement coordinator for the [Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society](https://ruffedgrousesociety.org/), started hunting grouse and woodcock on GEMS.

"Until your boots are on the ground in good grouse habitat, it’s hard to identify it," Stone said. “GEMS are a tremendous resource for hunters to learn what good grouse and woodcock habitat looks like.”

Stone said that GEMS act as a “training kit” for hunters, softening the learning curve by helping them to better understand the nuances of habitat and bird behavior before exploring new areas.

“On the area, you learn where to locate birds, what parts of the habitat to focus on, how to work your dogs, how to navigate dense stands, or you can opt to stick to walking trails until you’re ready for a challenge,” said Stone.

For new hunters looking to try grouse or woodcock hunting, Stone also recommends starting at a GEMS and plugging into the conservation community by joining the Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society.

"We have over 20 chapters in Michigan, all filled with people who love to take others hunting and get them involved. These folks have years of stories, knowledge and expertise to share.”

## Community through conservation

Blake Renfrow, a GEMS hunter and Ruffed Grouse Society/American Woodcock Society committee member, has been helping revitalize the Jim Foote chapter of the organization.

Renfrow and his girlfriend recently moved to Gaylord, and, like many others working from home, found it challenging to connect with new people. During his hunting outings at GEMS, he noticed habitat improvements made by RGS/AWS and realized that volunteering to help with these projects was likely a great way to connect with like-minded people. Renfrow and others have since engaged with the chapter and have been hosting social events such as "Birds and Brews" at local breweries.

“Most of the places we go to are dog-friendly, of course,” said Renfrow.

For more information, check the [Jim Foote RGS Chapter Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/people/Jim-Foote-RGS-Chapter/61560583653861/?_rdr).

## Partners are key to success

The Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society have been critical partners in the GEMS program since its beginning, supporting it through fundraising and habitat improvement.

Glen Blackwood, director of regional development for RGA/AWS, covering Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan, said GEMS are raising awareness for the broader sense of conservation.

“Before the GEMS program began, many of these areas were already good public grouse hunting lands. But GEMS showcased their significance and the value of managing for grouse and woodcock habitat to the wider bird hunting community,” Blackwood said. “You can’t go to a GEMS in September without seeing trucks with dog crates and license plates from Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana or Pennsylvania.”

As one of the top three states in the country for grouse hunting, Michigan is a destination for out-of-state hunters, especially in the Upper Peninsula. A [study by researchers Scott Knoche and Frank Lupi](https://wildlife.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/jwmg.589) published in The Journal of Wildlife Management in 2013 found that the average ruffed grouse hunter annually contributes about $235 to the economy from using publicly accessible hunting lands. In total, Michigan’s publicly accessible hunting lands (state, federal and commercial) generate around $20.8 million in economic benefits each year from ruffed grouse hunting.

In the past decade, many other conservation organizations also have contributed to the success of the GEMS program through sponsorships and habitat projects. Notable contributors include Ducks Unlimited, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, the National Wild Turkey Federation, the U.P. Wildlife Habitat Fund, the Wildlife Management Institute, Wildlife Unlimited, and several other organizations and volunteers.

## GEMS fall hunting a treasured tradition

There’s still time to experience GEMS during the 10th anniversary year. Eighteen sites are equipped with a map, information kiosk and hunter walking trails. If you’re looking for a more remote experience with no trails, check out the Norwich GEMS, located in the [Ottawa National Forest](https://www.fs.usda.gov/ottawa).

Find GEMS habitat cover types and additional public hunting lands using the [Mi-HUNT interactive map](https://www.mcgi.state.mi.us/mi-hunt/). This free mapping tool provides cover types, trails and approximate boundaries of lands open to public hunting. In the drop-down menu under “Mi-HUNT Cover Types,” select the yellow-colored box for aspen habitat.

Learn more about Mi-HUNT and watch video tutorials of how to use the application at [Michigan.gov/MiHunt.](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/hunting/where)

To dive deeper into GEMS habitat management, tune in to the August edition of the ["Wildtalk" podcast](https://www.buzzsprout.com/1808556/episodes/15513731-u-p-gems-grouse-and-the-chipmunk). Listen to GEMS managers from the DNR’s Wildlife and Forest Resources divisions discuss their contributions to the program and offer insights into its success.

For more information on ruffed grouse or woodcock hunting in Michigan, visit [Michigan.gov/SmallGame](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/hunting/small-game).

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