

Today's author, Gary Dunsmoor, graduated from the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point with a degree in Wildlife Management. In his 38 year career with the Department of Natural Resources, Gary focused on Sharp-tailed Grouse, doing surveys and educating the public about the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area. A Spooner resident, Gary enjoys outdoor activities and frequenting the Barrens as a volunteer.



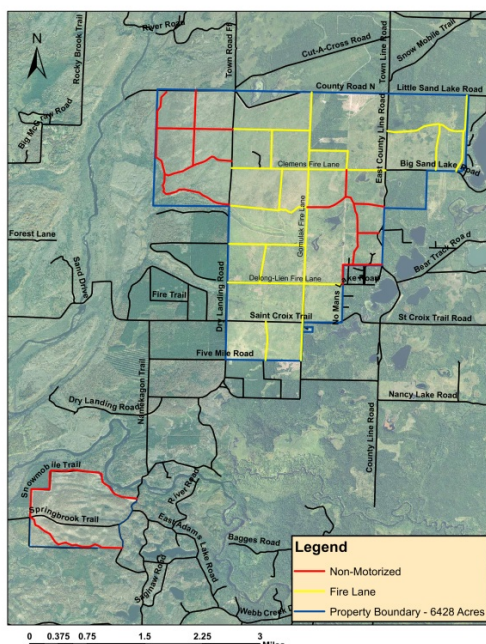
## Did You Know?

# *The Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area and the Dance of the Sharp-tailed Grouse*

Gary Dunsmoor

Drive, walk or boat around the Eau Claire Lakes and you become acclimated to forests and lakes. Not many miles away, 20 minutes southwest of Gordon, is the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area. It isn't exactly alien, but is remarkably different. The forests change to open, grassy, shrubby, and mostly treeless landscape. The beautiful Namekagon winds through the area on its northerly arc, but otherwise it feels a little arid. If you have never heard of, or want to learn more about, the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area (NBWA) please read on.

Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area



Owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the 'Barrens', as many people call it, consists of a South Unit and North Unit, with a total of 6,428 acres, located in the far northeast corner of Burnett County. The North Unit is much larger and flatter, comprising 5,732 acres, while the South Unit, three miles to the southwest of the North Unit, consists of 696 acres of rolling hills. The federal National Wild and Scenic Namekagon River flows between the units. This 10 square miles of dry, sandy, semi-open, pine-oak barrens habitat is dominated by grasses, forbs, low shrubs and scattered trees. The open landscape is very scenic, breaking up vast areas of northern forest in Wisconsin.

The Namekagon Barrens is part of the Northwest Sands Ecological Landscape of northwest Wisconsin, and was designated a Wisconsin Natural Heritage Scientific Area in 2017. Pine-oak barrens habitat is a globally rare, fire-dependent community, rich with diverse prairie flora and fauna. It is home to the largest Wisconsin population of the Sharp-tailed Grouse, and other uncommon birds such as the Upland Sandpiper, which nest in this unique habitat.

Sharp-tailed grouse viewing is available each April and May. Registration opens mid to late January and you are invited to witness this fascinating display. The Friends of the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area (FNBWA) and the WDNR make blinds available for up-close viewing of the startling and entertaining mating dance of the sharp-tailed grouse. To reserve a blind, visit the [FNBWA web page](#). FNBWA requests a minimum donation of \$10 per blind reservation. All money goes to NBWA management, and includes a free FNBWA membership.

Then get up early, real early. You'll need to be in your blind 45 minutes before sunrise, then watch from just a few feet away as males show off, competing for the chance to mate.



Veterans of the viewing suggest you find your way to your blind some mid-day prior to your viewing appointment, to make yourself familiar with the roads and the blind which you'll be traveling to in the dark. Some roads are closed in the spring to protect the sharp-tail breeding. Going mid-day you will not interrupt someone else's viewing or the DNR research which may be going on.

The roads in and around the Barrens are sand and gravel and can be rough to travel. While the townships are always improving the sand roads in this area by adding more gravel, there can still be bad spots after a heavy rain or damage by ATV/UTVs. (While ATV/UTVs are welcome on the town road trail system, they are not allowed on NWBA roads/firebreaks.) Snowmobiling is allowed on marked trails. One trail goes around the north side of the south unit and right through the NBWA north unit. In non-winter months one can get around with little problems even with a regular car.

The diverse flora and wildlife provide year-round recreational opportunities, including birding, hunting, blueberry picking, photography, hiking and spring viewing of the sharp-tailed grouse mating ritual on their 'dancing' grounds.

Be sure to get out and walk through the Barrens to take in the rich beauty of the wildflowers or enjoy the self-guided auto tour. You'll find a variety of historical features worth your time to contemplate, including an historic wagon trail and pioneer cemetery. Don't miss the cavity nesting birds and the Namekagon River.

[NBWA Self-guided Auto Tour](#)

[Reserve A Viewing Blind](#)

[Friends of the NWBA Website](#)

[Friends of the NBWA Facebook Page](#)

[NBWA WI DNR Website](#)



*Author Gary Dunsmoor shown leading a wildflower and butterfly field trip on the Barrens in June, 2022. Here Gary is discussing the Karner Blue Butterfly-lupine relationship while kneeling in a bed of wild lupine.*