

Vestaburg State Game Area Master Plan

Michigan Department of Natural Resources



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December 19, 2016

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Intended Purpose and General Management Direction

The Vestaburg State Game Area (VSGA) was dedicated in 1963 after 2 parcels of land, totaling 943 acres were purchased by the State. Currently, the game area consists of 2,971 acres. Much of the land on the game area was purchased with federal Pittman-Robertson Funds, but significant acquisitions were also made using the Natural Resources Trust Fund, and recreation bond monies. The VSGA is located in the Southwest Region (SWR) of the Lower Peninsula in Montcalm County (Figure 1). Over time, the VSGA has been managed to provide quality habitat for wild turkey, ring-necked pheasants, cottontail rabbits and white-tailed deer and for recreational opportunities associated with these species. Farming practices, through share cropping agreements and establishment and maintenance of native grasslands, have been the primary habitat management technique on the area.

This master plan covers a 10 year period for field operations at the SGA, while considering how our management will contribute to the long-term (50-100 years) sustainability of important wildlife populations and their habitats.

Background

At a local level, this plan helps fulfill goals and objectives of other higher level Department and Wildlife Division plans and initiatives. The Department goals (protect natural resources, sustainable recreation, strong natural resource-based economies, and strong relationships and partnerships), the Wildlife Division's Guiding Principles and Strategies (GPS) (Goal 2-Manage habitat for sustainable wildlife populations and wildlife-based recreation, Goal 4-Enhance sustainable wildlife-based recreation use and enjoyment), More Bang For Your Buck concepts (outstanding grouse, woodcock and turkey hunting, challenge of small game hunting), and the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative all provided guidance to development of this plan. In addition, the Southwest Regional Operational Plan, Southwest Region Habitat Guidance documents, the Southwest Region Featured Species Habitat Management Guide and the Southwest Region Land Management Plan are all reflected in this master plan.

Wildlife Species

True to the intended purpose of the VSGA when it was dedicated in 1963, we will continue to focus our efforts on species and habitats that help meet our goals for the area (Table 1) to provide quality hunting opportunities and our other public trust responsibilities.

Table 1. A list of species or projects to be worked on during this planning period, reflecting opportunities for habitat or recreational management.

Common Name	Featured Species
Wild turkey	Yes
Cottontail rabbit	Yes
Ring-necked pheasant	Yes
White-tailed deer	Yes

The Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) Elements of Biodiversity database indicates that no Endangered, Threatened or Special Concern Species have been documented on the Vestaburg SGA within the last 50 years. Ginseng is known to occur within 5 miles of the game area and several mussels including round pigtoe (*Pleurobema coccineum*), elktoe (*Alasmidonta marginata*), slippershell (*Alasmidonta viridis*) and rainbow mussel (*villosa iris*) were found in the Pine River approximately 4 miles north of the game area. Habitat management and other activities will be planned and implemented with consideration for the needs of these species and to avoid take where appropriate.

Existing Conditions

A variety of vegetation types can be found on the area including extensive lowland forests (silver maple, red maple, green ash, elm), wetlands and brush lands associated with the Fish Creek watershed, along with second growth upland forests (mostly mixed stands of aspen, oak, red maple and white pine), and old fields that are remnants of agricultural activities (Figures 3 and 4).

Unlike most SGAs in the Southwest Region of Michigan, the VSGA has some potential ring-necked pheasant habitat consisting of grasslands and agricultural fields. While the acreage is limited (Table 2), this habitat may provide enough food and cover to support a limited pheasant population. Since the VSGA is small (2,971 acres), a single set of Goals and Objectives have been selected for the entire area.

Table 2. Current cover types on the Vestaburg SGA based on MiFI surveys from 2015.

Cover type	Acres	Percent of Game Area
Lowland Deciduous	1,170	41
Marsh	411	14
Mixed Upland Deciduous	342	12
Herbaceous Openland	315	10
Cropland	140	7
Oak	158	4
Northern Hardwoods	130	4

Cover type	Acres	Percent of Game Area
Lowland Shrub	114	4
Aspen	85	3
Upland Shrub	35	1
Lowland Aspen/Balsam	33	1
Other	39	1
Total	2,971	

Recreational Use

The VSGA provides a host of recreational opportunities for local residents and visitors alike, including hunting, trapping, birding and wildlife viewing. State Game Areas in southern Michigan are under continual pressure for other uses, however under Federal and State regulations, recreational and commercial uses on the area that are not incidental to our management for the purposes described above are generally not allowed. Some of these uses can be allowed, under the following circumstances:

1. The uses do not interfere or conflict with the wildlife conservation purposes of the area described above.
2. The Department has no obligations to determine if requested uses would conflict or interfere; the burden of determining must remain with those requesting the uses.
3. The requested uses cannot be exclusive of other allowable uses and must not result in the Department losing management control of any portion of the area.
4. A lack of a specific prohibition in rules and regulations for the area does not constitute approval of the activity.
5. The Department always reserves the ability to disallow activities previously allowed as wildlife conservation needs dictate.

Additionally, the Department will continue to monitor any existing commercial and recreational uses for interference with the intended purposes of the area as described in this plan.

Impacts on the Local Economy

Contributions to the local economy resulting from activities on the game area include share crop farming on approximately 140 acres of land. Share crop farming provides opportunities where 75% of the crops are harvested and provide income to local farmers and 25% of the crop each year is left unharvested to provide food for wildlife. In

addition, hunters and other visitors using the area provide a direct boost to local restaurants, convenience stores and gas stations.

Management Direction

The desired future conditions for the Vestaburg State Game Area are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Desired future condition of cover types and habitat issue direction on the Vestaburg SGA.

Cover type and Habitat Issues	Desired Future Condition
Aspen	Increase
Oak	Maintain
Northern Hardwoods	Maintain
Mixed Upland Deciduous	Decrease
Herbaceous Open land	Maintain
Natural Pines	Maintain
Red Pine	Maintain
Mixed Upland Conifers	Maintain
Lowland Deciduous Forest	Maintain
Lowland Coniferous Forest	Maintain
Lowland Mixed Forest	Maintain
Lowland Shrub	Maintain
Emergent Wetland	Maintain
Agriculture	Maintain
Warm Season Grass	Maintain
Cool Season Grass	Maintain
# of Forest Openings	Maintain
Grassland Patches > 150 Acres	None
Grassland Patches >250 Acres	None
Mature Forest	Maintain
Unfragmented Forest	Maintain
Riparian Corridor	Maintain

Goals, Objectives, and Management Actions

What follows is the strategic direction for the Vestaburg SGA, to be implemented during this planning cycle. This plan describes the **goals** or desired future condition for the area, the **objectives** under each goal, and the **actions** associated with each objective. Goals come mostly from the featured species and habitat issues relevant to the VSGA.

Goal 1 sustainable populations of white-tailed deer on the Vestaburg SGA

Rationale: White-tailed deer are highly desirable game species. White-tailed deer are common in the area and do well in areas with diverse habitats consisting of a mixture of young dense forests, mature forests, wetlands, grasslands and agricultural lands like that found on the VSGA.

Metrics: staff observation and hunter surveys; assessment of aspen, oak and agricultural types within IFMAP

Objective A. Increase the accessible aspen cover type on the VSGA and provide a balance of age classes on a 40 year rotation (25% at age 0-10, 25% at age 11-20, 25% at age 21-30, 25% at age 31-40)

Action 1. Establish an aspen harvest regime (~40 acres every decade) that will result in a suitable amount of young forest on the SGA

Objective B. To provide suitable agricultural habitat (140 acres), comprising 7% of the SGA as an important food and cover source

Action1. Continue to utilize share cropping to provide important food and cover

Objective C. Maintain the current oak cover type (158 acres) and increase the oak component in non-oak stands

Action 1. Maintain current oak stands by implementing forest management practices (timber harvest, prescribed fire, herbicide, etc.) on approximately 20 acres every 10 years to ensure regeneration and recruitment of oak

Action 2. When managing other forested cover types, identify opportunities for maintaining or increasing the oak component by leaving oaks uncut

Goal II sustainable populations of wild turkeys on the Vestaburg SGA

Rationale: Wild turkeys are highly desirable game species and managing for their habitat, especially the oak component of the forest, benefits numerous other wildlife species. Turkeys also benefit from actions taken under Goal I (above) as young dense forests, oak forests and agriculture provide excellent food and cover for turkeys

Metrics: staff observation and hunter surveys; assessment of oak types within IFMAP, number of acres of agriculture

Objective A. Maintain the current extent (158 acres) of oak cover type on the SGA and increase the oak component in non-oak stands

Action 1. Maintain current oak stands by implementing forest management practices (timber harvest, prescribed fire, herbicide,

etc.) on approximately 20 acres every 10 years to ensure regeneration and recruitment of oak

Action 2. When managing other forested hardwood cover types, identify opportunities for maintaining or increasing the oak component by leaving oaks uncut

Objective B. To provide suitable agricultural habitat (140 acres), comprising 7% of the SGA as an important food and cover source

Action1. Continue to utilize share cropping to provide important food and cover

Objective C. Provide suitable cover for brood rearing areas by maintaining warm season grasslands (100 acres)

Action 1. Treat existing grasslands with Rx fire, herbicide and mowing as needed to maintain high quality grasslands

Goal III sustainable populations of cottontail rabbit on the SGA

Rationale: rabbits are popular game species and will benefit from management implemented for Goals I and II above

Metrics: staff observation and discussion with hunters; number of brush piles created

Objective A. Provide suitable cover by maintaining warm season grasslands (100 acres)

Action 1. Treat existing grasslands with Rx fire, herbicide and mowing as needed to maintain high quality grasslands

Objective B. To provide suitable agricultural habitat (140 acres), comprising 7% of the SGA as an important food and cover source

Action1. Continue to utilize share cropping to provide important food and cover

Objective C. Provide suitable cover by creating brush piles

Action 1. Establish a timber harvest regime (associated with Goals I and II) that will require loggers to create 2 brush piles for every acre harvested resulting in 70 brush over 10 years

Goal IV sustainable populations of ring-necked pheasant on the SGA

Rationale: pheasants are popular game species and will benefit from some of the management implemented for Goals I, II and III above

Metrics: staff observation and discussion with hunters; quality of grasslands maintained

Objective A. Provide suitable cover by maintaining warm season grasslands (100 acres)

Action 1. Treat existing grasslands with Rx fire, herbicide and mowing as needed to maintain high quality grasslands

Objective B. To provide suitable agricultural habitat (140 acres), comprising 7% of the SGA as an important food and cover source

Action1. Continue to utilize share cropping to provide important food and cover

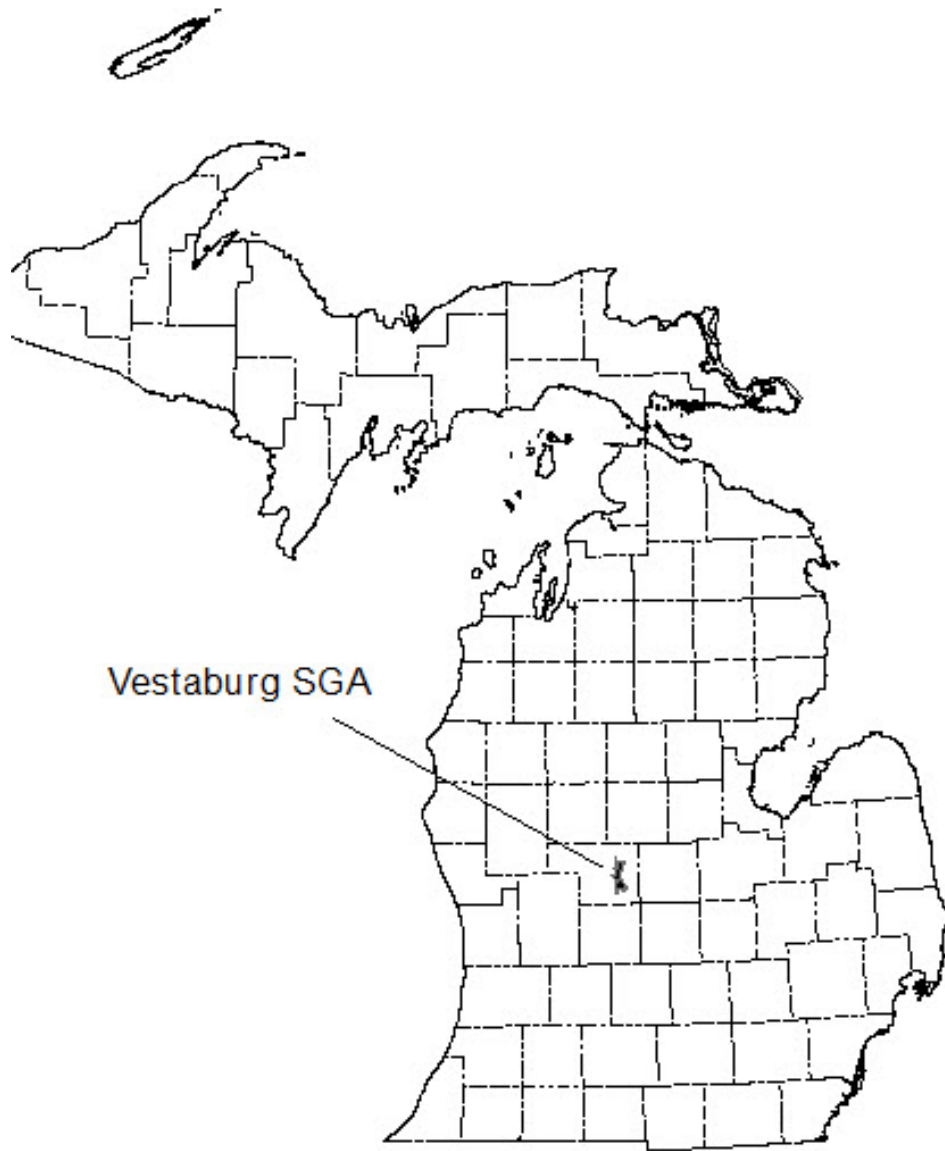


Figure 1. Location of the Vestaburg SGA.

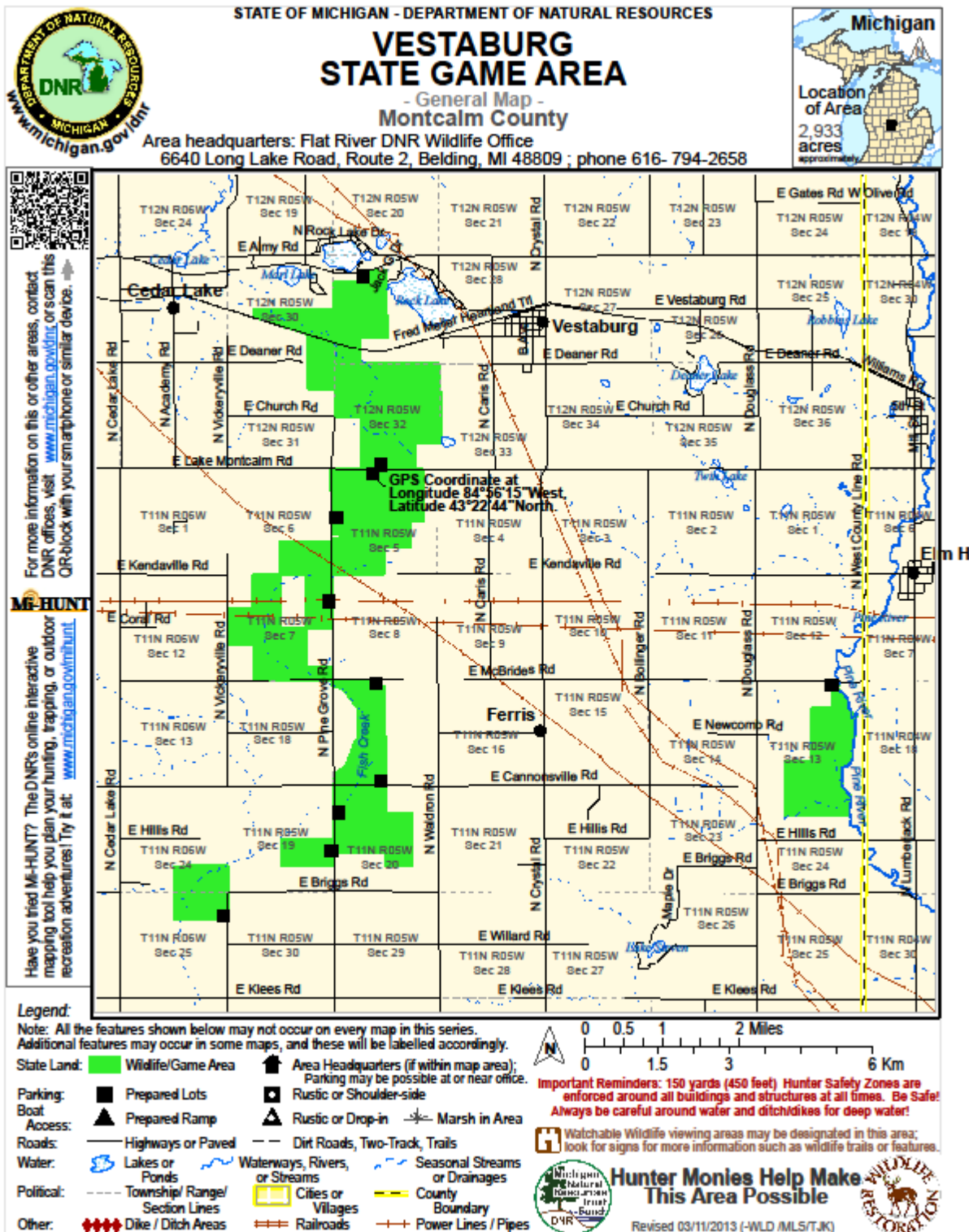


Figure 2. Vestaburg SGA boundaries.



Figure 3. Map representing the major habitat cover type classes in the Vestaburg SGA.

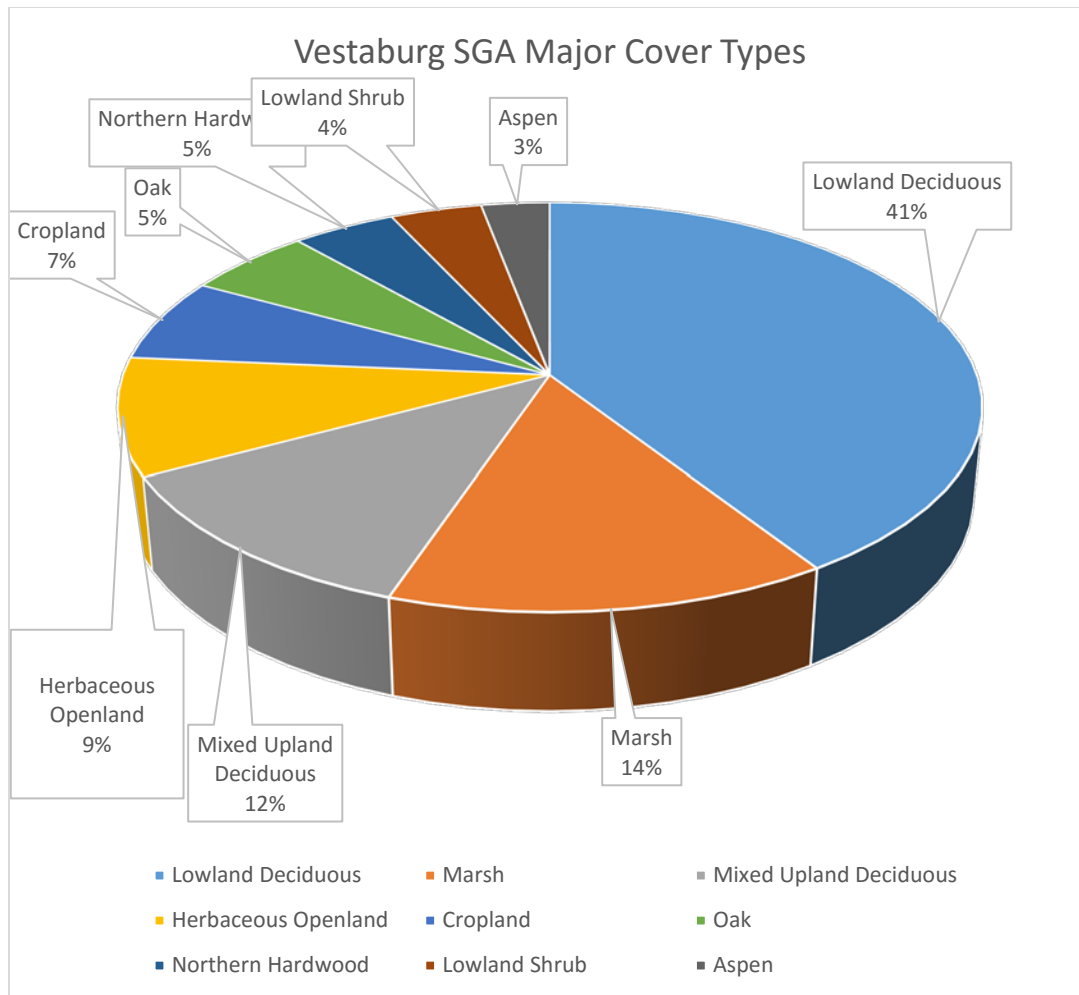


Figure 4. Major habitat cover type classes in the Vestaburg SGA

Acquisition and Disposal of Land

The Vestaburg SGA is an important game area that provides a host of recreational opportunities for local residents and visitors. Our overall goal is to continue to provide these opportunities. Since the VSGA is located in southern Michigan, the land acquisition strategy for the SGA is to fill in state ownership by acquiring available blocks located within and among current state ownership and where appropriate to expand the area by obtaining parcels that may be outside the current ownership but within the acquisition boundary. Parcels will be evaluated as they become available and will be acquired on a willing seller basis only.

Vestaburg SGA Review and Approval

This plan will be available for public review and comment on the DNR website between Mxxx yy, 2017 and Axxx yy, 2017. Changes will be made, as necessary, based on public feedback.

Once the plan is approved, it will be placed on the DNR website and will be reviewed again within 10 years of the approved date.

Approvals

John Niewoonder, Field Operations Manager

Date

Mark Sargent, Regional Supervisor

Date