

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

LOSS OF SAGEBRUSH HAS DEALT SAGE GROUSE A HARD BLOW. NOW BIOLOGISTS AND RANCHERS HAVE BEGUN WORKING TOGETHER TO CONSERVE HABITAT AND GET THIS GREAT PRAIRIE BIRD BACK ON ITS FEET. BY DAVE CARTY

Craig Fager, a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist, frowns as he watches a pickup creep along a ridge several hundred yards in the distance. They're birders watching sage grouse display on an open expanse of Bureau of Land Management sagebrush-grasslands. Below their truck in a grassy meadow, sage grouse strut on leks—open areas in the sage where the birds conduct their mating ritual. The sounds of *poik, poik*—made by the males rapidly deflating large yellow air sacs on their breast—float up like the soft pop of distant balloons. Some birds are just a few feet from the truck's open window, the driver a black shadow in the gray morning light.

"Those guys are way too close," Fager says. "We'd prefer if people would watch sage grouse from a distance using binoculars or spotting scopes. In some cases, people are actually loving these birds to death."

The biologist lets his binoculars dangle from his neck and watches the truck for a few more minutes, then turns and strides back to his





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DRIVE-BY SHOOTING As more people learn about the spectacular mating display of sage grouse, the number who visit leks to observe and take photos has increased. Unfortunately, too much human disturbance can scare the birds off, thus reducing reproductive success.

pickup. The ground here is littered with whitened grouse droppings, and Fager stops to point out caecum, an oily, tarlike deposit that roosting sage grouse occasionally pass to rid their digestive systems of sagebrush residue and other by-products.

A sea of sagebrush stretches for miles in every direction from nearby Dillon, where Fager is based. This arid region contains some of the best sage grouse habitat in

planned for the rest of the day.

Back in his truck, Fager hunches over the wheel, sipping coffee through a few day's growth of sandy beard. Stacks of notes, empty cups, scattered clothing, and notebooks litter the seats. He aims the pickup down a dirt road, then turns in to a ranch. Thick clusters of blue bunch, Indian rice grass, and needle-and-thread grass grow between clumps of blue-gray sagebrush. Fager says private land

"Without all this," Fager says, indicating the ranchland around us, "sage grouse could be in real trouble in this part of the state."

NEARLY LISTED

Such a decline would mirror a trend across the bird's range elsewhere in the western United States. From 1965 to 1985, sage grouse numbers plummeted by more than 50 percent, due mostly to the loss of half of the species' historic sagebrush habitat, which has been degraded or converted to other uses. In 2003, nearly two dozen environmental and conservation groups, including the American Land Alliance and the Institute for Wildlife Protection, petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the sage grouse as a threatened or endangered species.

During the next year, under Endangered Species Act (ESA) requirements for petitioned species, the USFWS assessed risks to sage grouse based on factors such as habitat loss and predation. In late 2004, the agency concluded that the species "does not currently warrant federal protection."

"Even though there's been a decline in the species' range, the decrease wasn't enough to merit our definition of endangered under the Endangered Species Act," says Pat Diebert, a USFWS biologist in Cheyenne,

“ Despite falling sage grouse populations in some states, large enough tracts of good habitat exist in Montana and elsewhere to preclude listing. ”

Montana. Yet today Fager has counted only about half the number of grouse he saw on this site earlier this year. He suspects the difference is due to the offending truck. The wildlife biologist considers giving the occupants a talking to, then reconsiders. He has several other leks to visit and a full schedule

Freelance writer Dave Carty, Bozeman, is an avid upland bird hunter and a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors.

like this is essential to the future of sage grouse—a bird that recently was almost listed as a federally protected species.

"You hear a lot about the need to protect sagebrush on public land, but just as crucial are ranches like this adjacent to the public land," he explains. "Sage grouse mate and nest on the sagebrush flats, but then they raise their broods in riparian bottoms and irrigated alfalfa where the chicks find insects and succulent forbs [broad-leafed plants]."



GOODBYE SAGEBRUSH, HELLO CROPS Though important to farm economies, converting sagebrush-grasslands to fields of wheat and other grains steadily eats away sage grouse habitat. Poorly managed grazing can also damage areas essential to the birds' survival.

Wyoming, who was part of the agency team that advised against listing the grouse. “Despite falling sage grouse populations in some states, large enough tracts of good habitat exist in Montana and elsewhere to preclude listing. The birds are still well distributed in their historic range, and some of those numbers are actually increasing.”

PROBLEMS LOOM

Though Montana dodged the ESA bullet, that doesn't mean sage grouse are thriving here. “We've lost birds in peripheral areas where, slowly but surely, sagebrush is being converted to crops,” says Rick Northrup, FWP Upland Game Bird Program coordinator.

Other threats include some types of energy development, such as coal-bed natural gas (methane). Energy development increases the number of roads that chop up sagebrush habitat and adds power lines, which provide convenient roosts for raptors. Invasive plants add to the problem. Cheatgrass, for example, is an annual that dies off early in the season, increasing the frequency of fires that destroy sagebrush.

Glenn Hockett has seen firsthand how habitat loss has reduced sage grouse numbers. “I remember seeing sage grouse north of Malta, north of Loring, and around Three

Forks, Manhattan, Helena, and the Tobacco Roots,” he says. “They're virtually gone from those areas because their habitat is gone.”

Hockett is president of the Gallatin Wildlife Association, a hunting and conservation organization in Bozeman that joined the coalition of groups petitioning to list the

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sage grouse. Protecting the birds under the ESA, says Hockett, is the best way to protect both sage grouse and Montana's tradition of sage grouse hunting. He points out that in some years during the 1960s, hunters harvested nearly 100,000 sage grouse. But as sage grouse numbers dropped, Montana's upland bird hunters turned their attention to pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse. In recent years, Montana's annual sage grouse harvest has averaged only 7,000 birds.

Jay Bodner disagrees that listing sage grouse would be in the bird's best interest. Natural

resources coordinator for the Montana Stock-growers Association, Bodner believes that habitat loss has been overblown. He says other causes, such as increased predation by raptors, may be greater factors contributing to sage grouse population declines. Bodner is especially concerned that federal listing would harm

livestock operations. And that, he adds, could threaten sage grouse conservation.

“Listing would mean an increase in regulations on BLM [Bureau of Land Management] land, where a lot of grazing takes place,” Bodner says. “If BLM grazing allotments are cut back, that could affect the entire operation of a livestock producer. When you look at the big picture, if livestock growers have to start selling out because of overregulation, and then their land gets developed and chopped up with new housing, that doesn't help sage grouse one bit.”

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STEMMING POPULATION LOSS

FWP officials say they want to see sage grouse habitat conserved, the bird’s populations increase, and Montana’s sage grouse hunting tradition continue. But they maintain that the state’s sage grouse population is largely intact and supported the USFWS decision to not list the species.

“There are definitely some problems with the loss of sage grouse habitat in Montana,” says Northrup. “But compared to Washington and California, or even parts of Colorado, we have some really large and sustainable sage grouse numbers.”

To ensure those numbers stay strong, FWP developed a management plan that describes the current status of Montana’s sage grouse population and sagebrush habitat and identifies major threats.

As part of the plan, FWP has begun improving how it monitors populations. Wildlife biologists and volunteers keep tabs on sage grouse numbers from year to year by counting the birds on leks each spring. “We have some great data from areas of the state where we’ve gone back every year to monitor leks,” says Northrup.

But the overall information has been inadequate. Northrup says some past counts were haphazard—“convenience counting,” he calls it. Also, Montana has used monitoring protocols that differed from those used by other states. The lack of consistent, thorough data makes it difficult for Montana and other states to understand—much less explain to federal officials—how well their sage grouse populations are faring.

“Our new approach will be to inventory leks over the entire range of sage grouse in Montana,” Northrup says. “We’re hoping all the sage grouse states will use the same methodology, so that in 10 or 15 years comparable data over the bird’s entire range will be available.”

With better population information, biologists will be able to more accurately track sage grouse population range and densities.

FWP’s management plan also calls for conserving more sagebrush habitat. Recently, the department began purchasing 30-year lease agreements from private landowners whose property harbors key sage grouse habitat. Through the Montana Sagebrush Ini-



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tative, landowners agree to not spray, plow, or burn sagebrush-grasslands habitat in return for a one-time payment of \$12 per acre. So far, FWP has leased roughly 140,000 acres and aims to enroll another 40,000 acres by the end of 2006. The initiative is funded by FWP, using upland bird hunting license revenue, and the USFWS.

Montana is also conserving sagebrush through Habitat Montana. Made permanent by the 2005 legislature, the program uses hunting license dollars to purchase permanent conservation easements on private land containing prime wildlife habitat, including sagebrush-grasslands.

CONSERVATION IN PERPETUITY

Ranchers often are criticized for damaging wildlife habitat. Yet FWP officials maintain that most ranchers work hard to conserve the landscape, benefiting many open-range wildlife species.

“Ranchers are one of the main reasons we still have healthy sage grouse populations in Montana,” says Northrup.

Some landowners even go a step further and ensure that their land continues to benefit wildlife far into the future. Several years ago, Henry Gordon of Chinook sold FWP a 15,000-acre conservation easement containing critical wildlife habitat, including sagebrush-grasslands. Gordon comes from a line of stockgrowers stretching back to when his grandfather first filed for a homestead in 1888. Though now solely in cattle, the family also raised sheep for years.

“I can remember when I was a boy and we’d be running about ten sheep camps,” says Gordon, 56. “My dad would go out and hunt large groups of sage hens for camp meat. We’d see those grouse in bunches of 100 to 150.”

Such sage grouse numbers will likely never return. But Gordon, a lifelong wildlife fan, wants to make sure the prairie birds and other critters always have a home on his property. “It’s my way of saying that this land will never be torn up,” he says. “That’s what it’s all about. I like wildlife—swift fox, sage hens, and the other birds.”

He also, understandably, likes cattle. “I’m a cow man,” Gordon adds, “and you’ve got to understand that grass is our main liveli-

DOES HUNTING HURT SAGE GROUSE POPULATIONS?

Environmentalists and ranchers don’t always agree on issues related to wildlife. But over the past several years, some members of both camps have suggested that if sage grouse numbers are declining, Montana should end or greatly curtail hunting harvest. In 2005, the Montana Stockgrowers Association advocated reducing the sage grouse bag limit to one bird and dramatically shortening the season.

FWP opposed the proposal. Jeff Herbert, assistant chief of the FWP Wildlife Division, notes that of more than 900 sage grouse banded during research projects by FWP and university researchers in eastern Montana over the past several years, only nine have been shot by hunters. “That tells us harvest is just a small fraction of the population, which confirms that hunting is not driving Montana’s sage grouse populations,” Herbert says.

However, because sage grouse live longer and breed less productively than ducks, pheasants, and many other game birds, hunting can cut into numbers when populations get too low. Canada has decided to err on the side of caution and closed sage grouse hunting seasons entirely. Likewise, the Gunnison sage grouse subspecies in Colorado is now completely protected. Montana and other states established a trigger point at which they would adjust bag limits up or down, or, in the case of extremely low counts, not open seasons until numbers rebound.

FWP now sets sage grouse seasons using an adaptive-harvest management approach similar to how it regulates mule deer and waterfowl harvest.

“If our grouse counts on some specific leks are above average during a given year, then we will support a standard four-bird daily bag limit for sage grouse,” explains Rick Northrup, FWP Upland Game Bird Program coordinator. “But if they are below average, we’ll recommend a restrictive two-bird limit. That way, we can adapt the harvest to match current populations.”

Adds Herbert, “Whether it’s grouse harvest regulations or livestock grazing, we believe that all management decisions need to be based on the best science available.” ■



CHUCK & GALE ROBBINS

CALL IT A DAY? Some groups want FWP to reduce Montana’s sage grouse bag limit to just one bird.

hood, too.” When he was offered the opportunity to conserve sagebrush-grasslands that maintain healthy habitat for both wildlife and livestock, Gordon didn’t think twice. “The easement is working real good for us,” he says.

Hearing that from ranchers like Gordon has made Bodner, the stockgrowers association official, less critical of FWP conservation efforts. Though he and state biologists still don’t see eye to eye on all aspects of sage grouse conservation, Bodner says he’s pleased the department is conserving sagebrush habitat by working cooperatively with ranchers.

“I definitely think FWP is starting to take the right approach on this,” he says. 🐾



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

MONEY TALKS The Montana Sagebrush Initiative gives ranchers a one-time payment of \$12 per acre to not spray or otherwise destroy critical sagebrush-grasslands. Above: Sagebrush removed with herbicides on one property, intact sagebrush on another.