

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS

Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse

Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus

The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse are the smallest and rarest of six subspecies of sharp-tailed grouse in North America. First described by Lewis and Clark in 1805, the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse was once considered the most abundant grouse in the Intermountain West. The historic range of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse included parts of what became ten western states and one Canadian province. However, by 1900 Columbian sharp-tailed grouse distribution had declined. The subspecies now exists in less than ten percent of its historic range.



Natural History

Sharp-tailed grouse are a medium-sized (16"-19" long) brown-gray grouse that are endemic to a variety of habitats in North America. The Columbian subspecies have darker gray plumage, more pronounced spotting on the throat, and narrower markings on the on its underside than other sharp-tailed grouse. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse are patterned with white, buffy, tawny brown, and blackish barring and spotting on the upper body. Spotting is abundant on the wings. The breast and sides are white and buff, with several v-shaped markings that fade towards the abdomen, while the back is dark brown. Their tail is wedge shaped. Males have a pink or pale violet air sac on each side of the neck, as well as yellow superciliary combs, both of which enlarge during display. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse average life-span is approximately three years.

Mating Ritual

The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse mating ritual is amazing to observe. Each spring, and occasionally in autumn, male grouse congregate on "leks" – ancestral strutting grounds to which the birds return year after year. The males arrive 30-60 minutes before sunrise and may remain on the lek for 2-3 hours. The males' courtship display consists of animated dancing and "freezing" phases. They strut, push their tails upward, inflate their air sacs, and rush forward or circle while stamping their feet, clicking their central tail feathers, and emitting hooting, clucking, cackling and gobbling sounds. Dancing bouts last 30-50 seconds. Males will often dance in synchrony, appearing to start and stop on signal. Mating on the lek is non-random, with the most central, dominant males on the lek doing most of the mating.



Displaying Columbian sharp-tailed grouse male.
Washington Department Fish and Wildlife

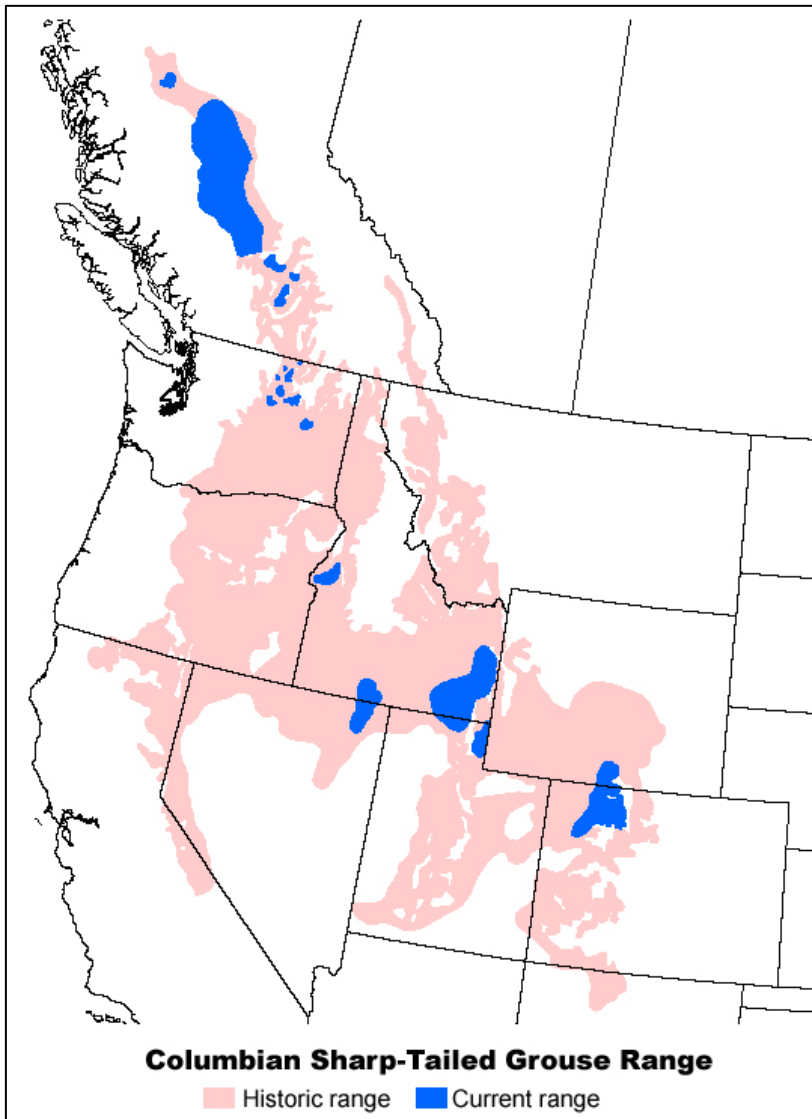
Habitat

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse use different seasonal habitats consisting of sagebrush steppe, meadows, mountain shrubs, brushy grasslands, and riparian and deciduous habitats. Structural characteristics appear to be important in habitat selection. The subspecies will often use transitional areas between habitat types, especially areas that offer a diversity of vegetative subspecies and structure. The grouse has also recently been found using lands enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program in some states.

Spring through fall activities are usually located near leks. After breeding, females build nests under shrubs or grasses, incubating eggs for 21-24 days. After hatching chicks eat mostly insects and remain with their mothers in broods for 6-8 weeks. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse remain in shrub steppe habitats until the onset of snow, when they form small flocks and move to either riparian or mountain shrub communities where vegetation remains above the snow line.

Population/Range

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse historically occurred in steppe, shrub-steppe and associated scrub forests and riparian habitats throughout western North America. The subspecies' range extended westward from the continental divide in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado, to northeastern California and eastern Oregon and Washington; southward to northern Nevada and central Utah; and northward through central British Columbia. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse now mostly occur in three metapopulations in central British Columbia, southeastern Idaho/northern Utah, and northwestern Colorado/south-central Wyoming. **Although millions of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse probably occurred in the West historically, only 18,000 – 25,000 breeding individuals currently remain in the United States.**



Threats

Human activities in the West have degraded and eliminated Columbian sharp-tailed habitat, including livestock grazing, agricultural conversion, application of herbicides and pesticides, skewed fire regimes, oil and gas development, urban sprawl, and mining. The potential loss of habitat enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) may also threaten Columbian sharp-tailed grouse.

Conservation Status

Relevant federal and state agencies have identified Columbian sharp-tailed grouse as a sensitive (sub)species (paradoxically, the grouse are also a game species that are hunted in several states). WildEarth Guardians have petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

Conserving Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse would benefit from reduced livestock grazing and restrictions on oil and gas development, off-road vehicle use, and other activities on public lands. Retaining important habitat in the Conservation Reserve Program may also be critical to the subspecies' survival.

For More Information

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