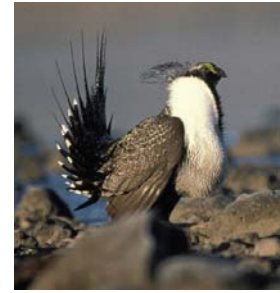


# WILDEARTH GUARDIANS

## Greater Sage-Grouse

*Centrocercus urophasianus*

*The greater sage-grouse is both an indicator and umbrella species for the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem. First described by Lewis and Clark in 1805, nineteenth century travelers and settlers reported huge flocks of sage grouse that darkened the sky as they lifted from valley floors. The historic range of greater sage-grouse closely conformed to the distribution of sagebrush-steppe in what became thirteen western states and three Canadian provinces. However, since 1900 sage grouse populations have declined. Greater sage-grouse distribution has been reduced by almost half, while rangewide abundance has decreased between 69-99 percent from historic levels.*



Male greater sage-grouse.  
Dave Menke, U.S. Fish and  
Wildlife Service

### Natural History

Greater sage-grouse are a striking and charismatic bird that derives its name, food and shelter from the sagebrush on which it depends. Slightly less than 2 feet in size, both males and females are a mottled, brownish-gray. Males weigh up to six pounds; females half as much. White chest feathers and specialized head feathers distinguish cocks during the spring breeding season. Cocks have long black tail feathers with white tips, while female tail feathers are mottled black, brown, and white.

### Mating Ritual

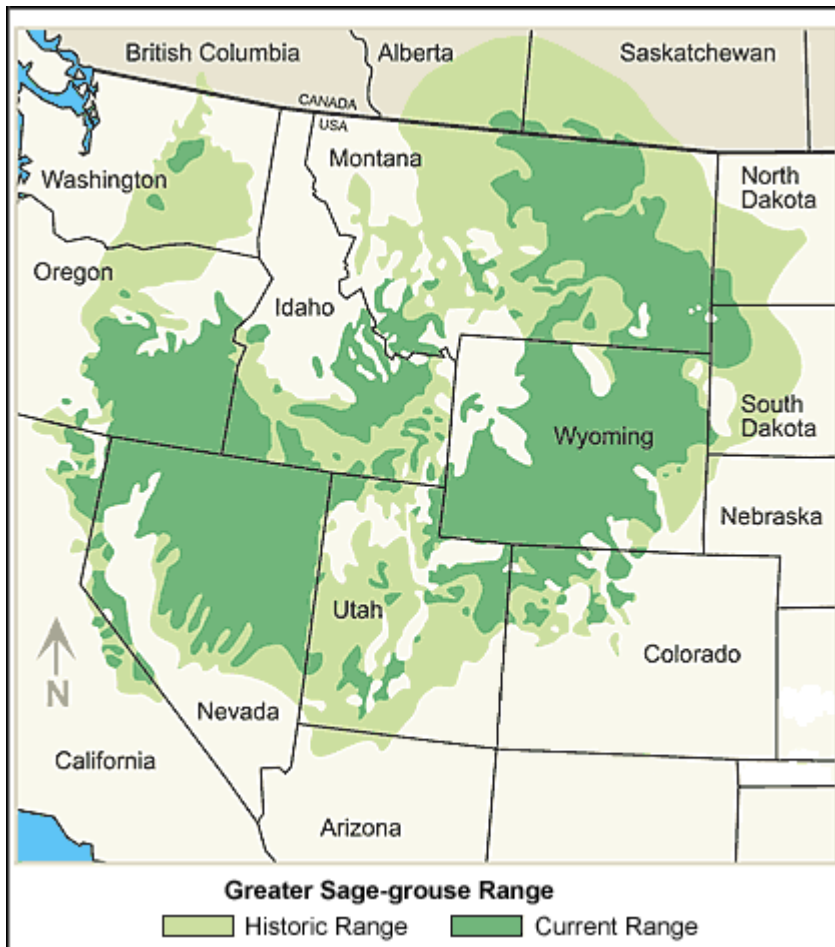
The sage-grouse mating ritual is fascinating to observe, and often described as among the most stirring and colorful natural history pageants in the West. In early spring, at dawn and often at dusk, males congregate on "leks"—ancestral strutting grounds to which the birds return year after year. Leks vary in size from one to forty acres and may be up to fifty miles from winter habitat. To attract a hen, cocks strut, fan their tail feathers and swell their breasts to reveal bright yellow air sacs. The combination of wing movements and inflating and deflating air sacs make an utterly unique "swish-swish-coo-oopink!"

### Habitat

Sage-grouse require different seasonal habitats consisting of sagebrush, grasses, forbs, and other flora throughout the year and over the course of their life cycle. In the spring, forbs (wildflowers) provide essential nutrition to gravid (egg carrying) hens. Newly hatched chicks feed on insects and wildflowers. Sage-grouse summer range is a combination of sagebrush and wildflower-rich areas, including wet meadows and riparian areas. Sage-grouse eat only sagebrush during the winter, so good winter range must provide grouse access to sagebrush under all snow conditions. Sage-grouse and pristine sagebrush habitat are inseparable. Given the species varying habitat requirements, sage-grouse need vast expanses of healthy sagebrush habitat – perhaps hundreds of square miles – with a thriving mosaic of native vegetation and functioning hydrologic systems to survive and flourish.

### Population/Range

Greater sage-grouse are a widely distributed but sparsely populated species that occur in Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Colorado, with remnant populations in Washington, California, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alberta and Saskatchewan. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has acknowledged that sage-grouse numbers have declined in recent decades. **The total sage-grouse population may represent only about seven percent of historic numbers.**



### Conserving Greater Sage-Grouse

Livestock grazing is among the most harmful and pervasive uses of public land in sage-grouse habitat. Livestock stocking rates and timing of grazing on public land allotments are too excessive to allow habitats to recover from annual grazing use. Greater sage-grouse have benefited where livestock grazing has been reduced or eliminated on the landscape. Conservationists seek to build on this success by permanently ending livestock grazing on public lands in sage-grouse range by proposing that the federal government pay grazing permittees generous compensation to relinquish their grazing permits so that grazing allotments can be permanently retired from grazing use.

Other necessary conservation actions include restricting oil and gas development, off-road vehicle use and other harmful activities on public lands in greater sage-grouse range, preventing the spread of West Nile virus, and limiting development in habitat on private lands through the use of conservation easements.

### For More Information

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Male greater sage-grouse on lek.  
 Bureau of Land Management

### Threats

Human activities in the Sagebrush Sea have decimated sage-grouse habitat. Livestock grazing, agricultural conversion, application of herbicides and pesticides, unnatural fire, oil and gas development, urban sprawl, mining, off-road vehicle use, and the placement and construction of utility corridors, roads and fences have fragmented, degraded and eliminated sage-grouse habitat throughout its range.

### Legal Status

Sage-grouse are still hunted in most states where they occur. Greater sage-grouse were petitioned for listing as a “threatened” or “endangered” species under the Endangered Species Act in 2003, but the petition was rejected by the Fish and Wildlife Service in 2005. Conservation organizations sued to reverse the agency’s 2005 “not warranted” decision and a federal court recently ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to produce a new decision for the grouse in 2010.