

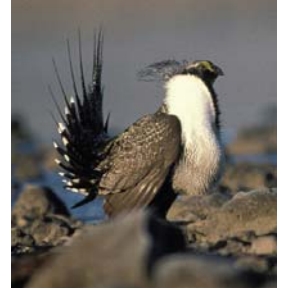
WILDEARTH

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

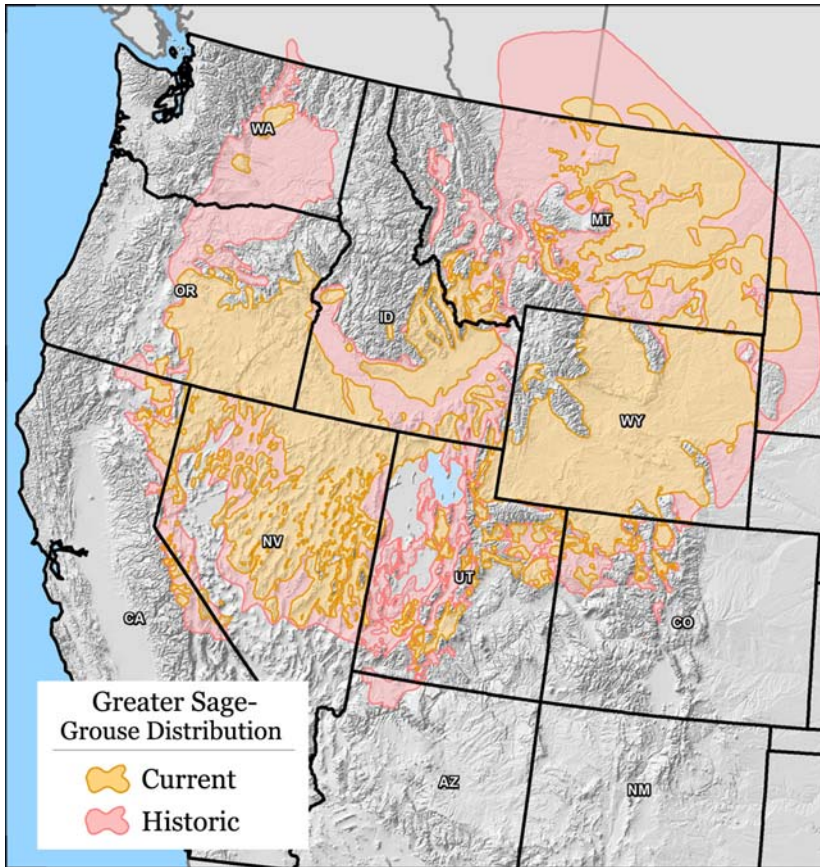
The sage-grouse mating ritual is fascinating to observe, and often described as among the most stirring and colorful natural history pageants in the West. In early spring, at dawn and often at dusk, sage-grouse congregate on "leks"—ancestral strutting grounds to which the birds return year after year. 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.

Range/Population

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 current sage-grouse population represents less than ten percent of historic numbers.**



Threats

Human activities in the Sagebrush Sea have decimated sage-grouse habitat. Livestock grazing, gas and oil development, agricultural conversion, application of herbicides and pesticides, unnatural fire, urban development, 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. Sage-grouse are still hunted in most states where they occur.

Conservation Status

The greater sage-grouse is a candidate for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. Both the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service list the grouse as a sensitive species.

Conserving Greater Sage-Grouse

Most remaining sage-grouse habitat is on public land, and most of it is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM must adopt stronger protections for sage-grouse on public land. These include limiting gas and oil development in sage-grouse range, restricting livestock grazing and off-road vehicle use on sensitive habitat, preventing the spread of West Nile virus, and controlling development on private lands through the use of conservation easements. WildEarth Guardians is also working to identify and designate sagebrush reserves on public land to conserve sage-grouse and other sagebrush-dependent species.

For More Information

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