

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS

Gunnison Sage-grouse *Centrocercus minimus*

The Gunnison sage-grouse is distinct from greater sage-grouse, identified by researchers as early as the 1970s and recognized as a new species by the American Ornithologists' Union in 2000. While its historic range may have included parts of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona, the species now occurs only in eight small populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Gunnison sage-grouse have experienced significant declines from historic numbers and only about 4,000 breeding individuals remain.



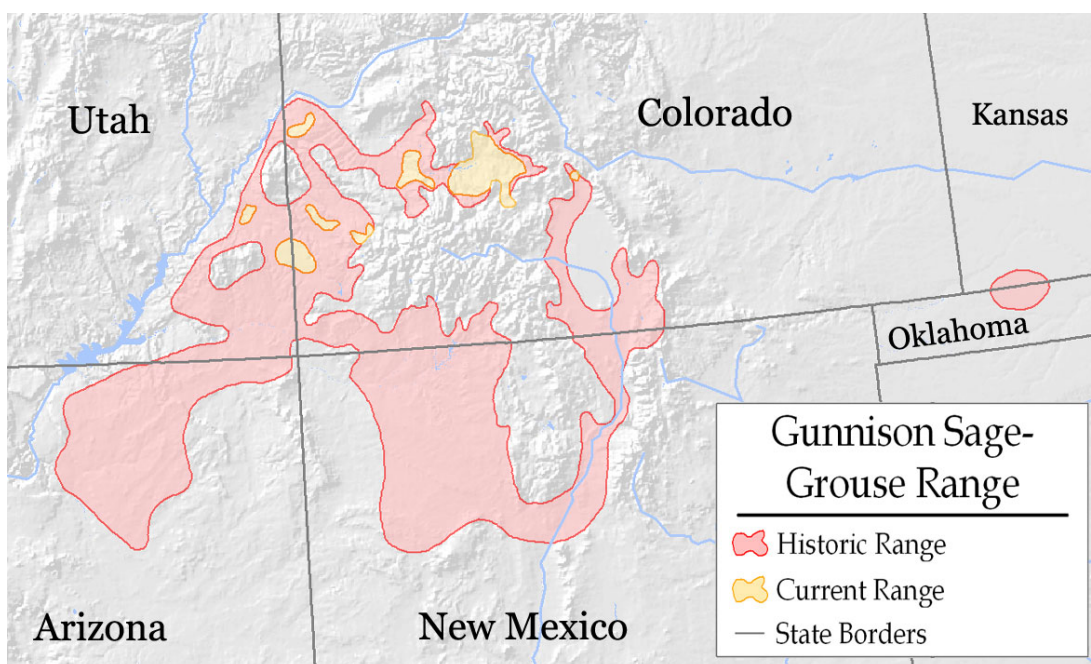
Male Gunnison sage-grouse.
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Natural History

Gunnison sage-grouse are smaller than greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), and have distinct genetic, physical and behavioral differences. Like the greater sage-grouse, the Gunnison sage-grouse is known for its impressive mating ritual, though the mating behavior of the Gunnison sage-grouse differs from that of greater sage-grouse. The Gunnison sage-grouse annual spring display involves unique visual and acoustical characteristics that do not occur in greater sage-grouse. Gunnison males have more noticeable white barring in the sharply pointed tail feathers (retrices), which are longer than are those of greater sage-grouse. Gunnison sage-grouse males also have longer, thicker filoplumes (hairlike feathers extending back from the nape of the neck) than greater sage-grouse males, which they use more conspicuously by tossing them above their heads during the strut.

Population/Range

Gunnison sage-grouse occur in eight small populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. The largest population, approximately 3,500 individuals, inhabits the Gunnison Basin. The San Miguel (Dry Creek/Miramonte) population is the next largest with approximately 300 individuals. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service manage public lands with large areas of Gunnison sage-grouse habitat.





Displaying male Gunnison sage-grouse. BLM

Habitat

Gunnison sage-grouse require large expanses of undisturbed sagebrush steppe with a full compliment of sagebrush species, native grasses and forbs (wildflowers) and associated riparian ecosystems. The species uses a variety of habitats (breeding, nesting, loafing, etc.) throughout the year. The grouse relies almost exclusively on big sagebrush varieties for food in winter.

Threats

Livestock grazing, energy development, motorized recreation, and development threaten Gunnison sage-grouse. Severe drought in recent years has exacerbated the effects of these human impacts.

Severely fragmented populations of grouse have low genetic variation. Urbanization threatens to eliminate critical winter habitat for Gunnison sage-grouse. West Nile virus, a disease that is fatal to greater sage-grouse, has been discovered in Gunnison sage-grouse range.

Legal Status

The Gunnison sage-grouse is a species of special concern in Colorado. Conservation organizations petitioned to list the grouse as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act in 2000. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) used various tactics to delay listing the grouse and then ultimately denied protection to the species in 2006. San Miguel County (CO), and conservation and government accountability organizations have sued over the agency’s “not warranted” decision.

Conserving Gunnison Sage-grouse

Livestock grazing is among the most harmful and pervasive uses of public lands in Gunnison sage-grouse range. Livestock stocking rates and timing of grazing on public lands allotments are far too excessive to allow habitats to recover from annual grazing use. Gunnison 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 Gunnison sage-grouse range by proposing that the federal government pay grazing permittees generous compensation to relinquish their grazing permits back to the BLM or Forest Service so that grazing allotments can be permanently retired from grazing use.

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

For More Information

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