

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS

Mono Basin Sage-Grouse

Centrocercus urophasianus

The Mono Basin sage-grouse is a genetically distinct population of greater sage-grouse that occur on the border of California and Nevada. Except for their unique genetic traits, Mono Basin sage-grouse appear and behave as other sage-grouse. Unfortunately, like other sage-grouse, the Mono Basin population has experienced significant declines from historic numbers—only about 3,000 birds remain.



Displaying male sage-grouse.

Natural History

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.

Research published in 2005 found that Mono Basin sage-grouse have “a unique history of isolation distinct from all other populations” and that they are “at least as divergent from other populations of the greater sage-grouse as Gunnison sage-grouse are from the greater sage-grouse.” Geneticists even noted that the genetically distinct Mono Basin population might even warrant consideration as a new subspecies of sage-grouse.

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. 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!"



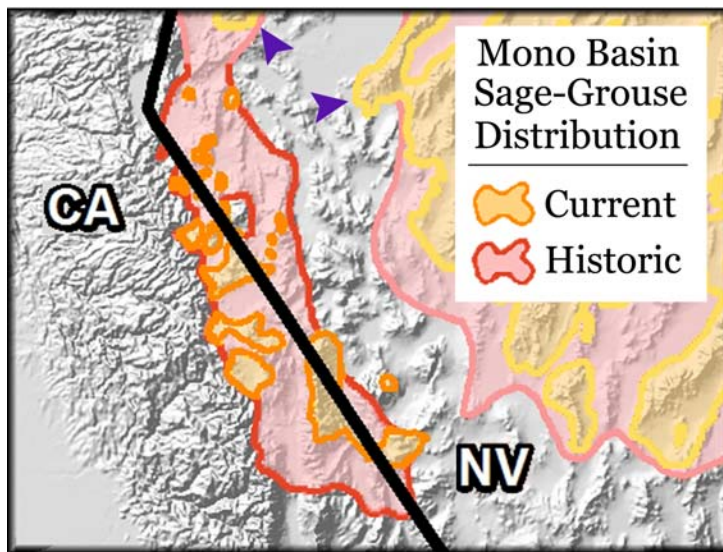
A well-camouflaged sage-grouse hen in sagebrush steppe.

Habitat

Sage-grouse require different seasonal habitats consisting of sagebrush, grasses, forbs, and other flora throughout the year and over the course of their lifecycle. 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 indivisible. Given the species varying habitat requirements, sage-grouse need vast expanses of healthy sagebrush habitat with a thriving mosaic of native vegetation and functioning hydrologic systems to survive and flourish.

Population/Range

Mono Basin sage-grouse distribution is limited to an area approximately 18,310 km² (7,069 mi²) in size, including and extending north, east and south of the Mono Basin in southeast California and southwestern Nevada. The Mono Basin population is isolated from all other sage-grouse. The Mono Basin population itself is fragmented into more than 15 subpopulations, many of which are isolated from each other. **The total population of Mono Basin sage-grouse was estimated between 2,712-3,048 in 2010.**



▶ Nearest populations of greater sage-grouse.

sage-grouse warrants separate consideration for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Now known as the “Bi-State Distinct Population Segment of greater sage-grouse,” the agency declared the Mono Basin birds a candidate for listing in 2010.

Conserving Mono Basin 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. WildEarth Guardians and partners are working to reduce grazing in Mono Basin sage-grouse range to improve habitat for the species.

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

For More Information

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Threats

Sage grouse habitat in the Mono Basin area has been degraded and eliminated by livestock grazing; off-road vehicle use; residential development; pinyon-juniper encroachment; invasive species; unnatural fire; mining; and the placement and construction of roads, fences and transmission lines. Most of the remaining habitat for the Mono Basin sage-grouse is on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service.

Conservation Status

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the genetically distinct and geographically isolated Mono Basin