

WILD AT HEART

THE WORD FROM WILDEARTH GUARDIANS

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Secrets of the Sagebrush Sea

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RESTORING THE VISION

John Horning

There are moments in the life of every self-identified westerner when you become not just a citizen of a nation, or a state, but also of a particular landscape. For me, one of those moments occurred when I was visiting Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in eastern Oregon in the early 1990s.

On that visit I was filled with the sights and smells of the Sagebrush Sea. I remember hundreds of gangly-legged pronghorns bouncing across the horizon, a horizon filled with the unbroken olive-green of sagebrush. I had never known a place so naked, so wild, so big and seemingly so resilient. My sense of citizenship was renewed and expanded by that experience.

Though I left with a lasting impression of fertility, abundance and intactness, the reality on the ground was just the opposite. New and mounting threats continue to tear at the tapestry of life that enriches the Sagebrush Sea.

One of the most endangered and iconic residents of the Sagebrush Sea is the beautiful greater sage grouse. Under the leadership of Mark Salvo, our Sagebrush Sea Campaign has a bold vision, not only to secure federal protection for the species, but also to create a large system of reserves that would protect millions of acres for sage-grouse and other wildlife. We are also working to pass legislation to retire grazing permits since grazing poses a major threat to the landscape.

Realizing our vision will not be easy given the political challenges of protecting the millions of acres of Sagebrush Sea and its iconic species. Fortunately, because Mark is a trusted coalition builder, conservationists are counting on WILDEARTH GUARDIANS to provide the cohesive leadership required to meet these challenges. This means WILDEARTH is leading the way to protect and restore the West's expansive Sagebrush Sea.

Mark Salvo

In the sagebrush lands of the West... the natural landscape is eloquent of the interplay of forces that have created it. It is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is and why we should preserve its integrity. But the pages lie unread.

— RACHEL CARSON, *SILENT SPRING*, 1962

Forest Service manages eight percent and western states own five percent of the Sagebrush Sea. The rest of sagebrush habitat exists on private lands.

There is no system as vast as this one in such free fall.

— AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVANCY, 2007

Historically, the Sagebrush Sea covered more than 150 million acres in western North America, and was perhaps as large as 243 million acres, spanning parts of what became sixteen states and three Canadian provinces. Despite its size, sagebrush steppe is one of the most endangered landscapes in North America. The Sagebrush Sea has been reduced in area by as much as 50 percent since European settlement. According to one noted researcher, in only 150-300 years European inhabitants “have brought about more profound changes” to sagebrush steppe “than all those of the previous 13,000 years.”

Unfortunately, livestock grazing, gas and oil development, agricultural conversion, roads, fences, powerlines and pipelines, off-road vehicles, urban sprawl, mining, unnatural fire, and invasive weeds continue to destroy or degrade much of what remains of the Sagebrush Sea.

Past and current mismanagement of the Sagebrush Sea has exacted a heavy toll on resident flora and fauna. More than 350 species (and as many as 630 species) in the Sagebrush Sea may be threatened by human activities and related effects. Approximately 20 percent of native flora and fauna in the Sagebrush Sea are imperiled.

Legions of leagues (the expression is by no means too strong) are covered with a wild growth of sage, that seems designed by Nature than for nothing else that to feed a certain variety of the feathered family known as “sagecocks.”

— MATTHEW FIELD, 1843,
Prairie and Mountain Sketches, 1957

The Sagebrush Sea, scientifically known as “sagebrush steppe,” is a vast, beautiful and diverse landscape. The Sagebrush Sea is expansive country—“open space” prized by so many Americans. The landscape features lakes, rivers, streams, springs, wetlands, hot springs, salt flats, dunes, volcanic rock formations and mountain ranges. Sadly, many Americans are unaware of the Sagebrush Sea and the rich tapestry of life it supports.

The Sagebrush Sea is an ecologically vibrant ecosystem. While sagebrush dominates the landscape visually, it grows in delicate balance with trees, grasses, wildflowers and other shrubs. Healthy sagebrush steppe is teeming with birds, large and small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, crustaceans, insects and fish. Among these are a suite of species that depend on sagebrush for their survival, including greater sage-grouse,

Animals such as pronghorn and pygmy rabbits depend on the Sagebrush Sea for survival.



Gunnison sage-grouse, sage sparrow, Brewer’s sparrow, sage thrasher, pygmy rabbit, sagebrush vole, sagebrush lizard, and pronghorn.

Most of the Sagebrush Sea is publicly owned in the United States. The Bureau of Land Management controls approximately half of remaining sagebrush steppe. The U.S.

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The Sagebrush Sea

Despite its size, the vast Sagebrush Sea of the American West is one of North America's most endangered landscapes.

“Sagecocks,” now called sage-grouse, are the most charismatic of all Sagebrush Sea denizens. 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. As many as 16 million sage-grouse may have occurred in sagebrush steppe prior to the arrival of Europeans.

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, males prance, 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 sound: “swish-swish-coo-oopink!”

Sage-grouse use every part of the Sagebrush Sea. In the spring, wildflowers provide essential

nutrition to egg-carrying hens. Newly hatched chicks feed on insects found in the grasses, and later feed on wildflowers. Sage-grouse summer range is a combination of sagebrush and wildflower-rich areas, including wet meadows and streamsides. Sage-grouse eat only sagebrush during the winter.

Sage-grouse and pristine sagebrush habitat are inseparable. Sage-grouse need expanses of healthy sagebrush habitat – perhaps hundreds of square miles – with a mosaic of native vegetation and meandering waterways to survive and flourish.

The physics of beauty is one department of natural science still in the Dark Ages. Not even the manipulators of bent space have tried to solve its equations. Everybody knows, for example, that the autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a ruffed grouse. In terms of conventional physics, the grouse represents only a millionth of either the mass or the energy of an acre. Yet subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead.

— ALDO LEOPOLD, 1937

Unfortunately, the loss of sagebrush steppe over the last 150 years has precipitated steep declines in sage-grouse populations. Greater sage-grouse populations have declined by as much as 93 percent from historic levels.

Gunnison sage-grouse, distinct from greater sage-grouse, now occupy less than ten percent of their original distribution in the Southwest. These birds have experienced significant declines and only about 4,000 breeding individuals remain. Gunnison sage-grouse may be on the brink of extinction.

New research predicts further loss of sagebrush steppe and sage-grouse. Livestock grazing, gas and oil development, the spread of weeds and resultant wildfire will continue to threaten sagebrush habitat and species. New challenges posed by climate change, wind energy

WHY ARE YOU A GUARDIAN?



The Sagebrush Sea reveals Earth's naked splendor as nowhere else. To the geologists' eye, these seemingly-barren vistas dance with life and the vastness of time.

Today, the Sagebrush Sea's vanishing natives are a telling reminder of nature's fragility and resilience, and of the planet's vulnerability to unceasing disturbance by humans. If we cannot save this extraordinary, wild landscape, what hope is there for us?

Sincerely,
ELLEN MORRIS BISHOP
Oregon Paleo Lands Institute

Sign up to be a Sagebrush Sea Guardian:
wildearthguardians.org

Left to right:
greater sage-grouse,
Gunnison sage-grouse



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LOUIS SWIFT



development, and increasing off-road vehicle use will further threaten the landscape.

There is an urgent need to protect and restore the Sagebrush Sea. WILDEARTH GUARDIANS' Sagebrush Sea Campaign has developed a necessarily ambitious plan to reverse the decline of Sagebrush Sea species and conserve and restore sagebrush steppe.

The Sagebrush Sea is America's least known—and therefore least loved and protected—landscape. But that's beginning to change. WILDEARTH GUARDIANS is doing for greater sage-grouse and the Sagebrush Sea of the Interior West what Oregon Wild did for the northern spotted owl and ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest.

—ANDY KERR, Senior Counselor,
Oregon Wild, 2009

In October, WILDEARTH GUARDIANS published mapping analyses that quantify the extent of several threats facing the Sagebrush Sea. The report, *The Shrinking Sagebrush Sea*, found that gas and oil drilling, livestock grazing, cheatgrass incursion and other threats, both individually and cumulatively, affect more than 80 percent of sage-grouse current range. We also discovered that less than three percent of sage-grouse habitat benefits from some (often very minimal) level of federal protection.

• Protecting Sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS is using data presented in *The Shrinking Sagebrush Sea* to buttress efforts to protect the iconic sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Conservationists' campaign to list the greater sage-grouse and Gunnison sage-grouse under the Act began ten years ago. The effort has drawn significant

interest—and opposition—since it was first announced. Former Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton feared the potential effects of listing sage-grouse under the ESA, claiming listing could have an even greater impact on land use than protecting the northern spotted owl had on logging in the Pacific Northwest: “some say the grouse could become the spotted owl of the intermountain West. But the sage grouse occupies nearly 12 times as much land as the northern spotted owl.” Statements like these are hyperbolic attempts to incite industry opposition to protecting sage-grouse from extinction.

Efforts to list greater sage-grouse under the ESA are presently in round two. Last winter, a federal court found that political appointees in the Bush administration unduly influenced a decision not to list the species in 2005. WILDEARTH GUARDIANS and our partners are also challenging the Bush administration's decision to deny protection to Gunnison sage-grouse as politically motivated and scientifically unsound.

• Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS is also pursuing legislative options to reduce livestock grazing in the Sagebrush Sea. Livestock grazing is permitted on 91 percent of sage-grouse current range on federal public land, making it the most ubiquitous use of sage-grouse habitat. Livestock grazing in sagebrush steppe can severely degrade habitat for sage-grouse and other wildlife. Conversely, sage-grouse and other species have benefited where livestock grazing has been reduced or eliminated on the landscape.

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS seeks to end public lands livestock grazing in sage-grouse range by proposing that the federal government compensate ranchers to retire their grazing operations on public land in the Sagebrush Sea. We are presently working on a pilot project to demonstrate the concept's utility to the public, ranchers and decisionmakers.



WILDEARTH GUARDIANS is working to eliminate the many threats to the Sagebrush Sea, including oil and gas drilling and livestock grazing.

• Sagebrush Sea Reserves

Despite its size, the Sagebrush Sea is among the least protected landscapes in the country. Congress and the administration must designate a system of Sagebrush Sea reserves to protect critical habitat cores and wildlife corridors and sustain Sagebrush Sea species until the current energy development boom in sagebrush steppe has subsided, livestock have been removed from federal public land, and sagebrush habitat can be restored from cheatgrass invasion and wildfire. WILDEARTH GUARDIANS is developing additional maps and analyses, and related public information and legislative campaigns to create new reserves in the Sagebrush Sea.

Remember that the yield of a hard country is a love deeper than a fat and easy land inspire, [and] that throughout the arid West Americans have found a secret treasure... a country brimming with a beauty not to be found elsewhere.
—BERNARD DEVOTO, *The Year of Decision: 1846*

Protecting the Sagebrush Sea will be neither quick nor easy. The landscape has been misunderstood and mismanaged for hundreds of years. WILDEARTH GUARDIANS will continue to tell the secrets of the Sagebrush Sea until this vast and uniquely American landscape is protected and restored.

Visit Sagebrush Sea at wildearthguardians.org



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