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Study: Many Intermountain West species in trouble

Look at birds, small mammals finds ecosystem woes

September 24 - PORTLAND - A report recently published by the High Desert Ecological Research Institute provides a comprehensive assessment of the distribution and conservation status of birds and small mammals of shrubsteppe landscapes across the Intermountain West.

Focusing on a combination of upland and riparian species, the report covers 37 species of birds and 24 species of small mammals in a broad-scale analysis of what is presently known about their distributions, abundances and sensitivity to habitat disturbance.

The study provides the first maps to depict geographic patterns of changes in bird populations from 1968 to 2001 in the Columbia Basin, Great Basin and Wyoming Basin, the three ecoregions with the greatest percentages of sagebrush landcover in the West.

“What this report underscores is a pervasive unraveling of shrubsteppe landscapes throughout the Intermountain West. Sage grouse are the charismatic front-end of an entire suite of small mammals and birds undergoing dramatic decline in these remote areas of the West,” said Bill Marlett of Bend, executive director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association, whose efforts brought the report to fruition.

According to Dr. David Dobkin, executive director of the Institute and senior author on the report, the research project’s results paint a picture of an ecosystem in trouble.

Dobkin and his staff found that at least 40 percent of the birds analyzed experienced significant long-term declines, and 49 percent of the species showed significant shorter-term declines. In contrast, only 8 percent of species exhibited significant long-term increases, and only 5 percent showed shorter-term increases.

Striking patterns of declining populations were seen even at the smaller regional scale, particularly across the long-term period for the Columbia Basin ecoregion that includes the shrubsteppe landscapes of eastern Washington, eastern Oregon and southern Idaho.

Results show a clear picture of high susceptibility to the effects of livestock grazing for 21 of the 24 mammal species analyzed. The effects of dominance by invasive non-native plants were found to be either clearly negative or unknown for all 18 of the upland mammal species considered. No evidence of positive responses to livestock grazing or exotic vegetation could be found for any of the 24 species.

“When we began this assessment, some of the species included in our analyses were known to be declining or rare, but we expected to find that conservation concern would be unwarranted for many of the species we analyzed,” said Dobkin. “Based on the information presented in our report, we find no basis for optimism about the future prospects in the Intermountain West of any of the 61 species we examined.”