

THE TELLURIDE WATCH

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Advocates Say Gunnison Sage-grouse Needs Protection

Working Group Hires Coordinator

By Josie Jay

The Gunnison Sage-grouse has a new advocate. Leigh Robertson was hired in March to coordinate activities of the San Miguel Basin Gunnison Sage-grouse Working Group, which is comprised of local, federal and state agencies as well as members of the public interested in preserving the endangered species, whose population is estimated at fewer than 4,000 birds remaining.

Robertson moved to Placerville from Divide, Colo. She has extensive experience in the field of natural resources, previously working for the U.S. Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy and various state and local park departments. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Resources from Ohio State University.

“The main thing is trying to coordinate different people’s efforts,” Robertson said. Those people include the Colorado Division of Wildlife, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and The Nature Conservancy, among others. “They’re all trying to do things to help the sage-grouse,” Robertson added, especially now, in light of a decision made by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on April 12 not to add the Gunnison Sage-grouse to the federal list of threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. The service also removed the bird from its candidate list of species, to which it was added in 2000.

The USFWS based its decision not to list the bird in part on a trend analysis it funded last November. That analysis indicated that threats to the bird were neither imminent nor of such magnitude that they threatened or endangered the existence of the species, and that populations of Gunnison Sage-grouse were found to have been stable for the last 10 years. The USFWS will, however, continue to informally monitor the status of populations.

“A lot of people disagree with their study,” said Robertson. “A number of environmental groups have filed an intent to sue about the decision,” including the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Center for Native Ecosystems, Forest Guardians, The Larch Company, Sinapu and the Center for Biological Diversity.

“If you talk to people who work with sage-grouse in the field, the folks from the DOW who have been counting the bird for years, they would say the bird needs help,” she said. “The overall population has declined.” The bird is an indicator species for shrub-steppe habitat, meaning the health of the sage-grouse population is an indication of the health of the ecosystem as a whole.

Even though the bird was not listed, the DOW still considers it a species of special concern, meaning protecting the bird is a high priority for the organization. “The BLM also realizes the numbers aren’t very high,” Robertson said. “They’re still considering that when making different decisions about gas drilling in sage-grouse habitat. They will try to manage the land realizing they want to increase the population and preserve habitat.”

For example, the BLM may not allow certain activities in sage-grouse habitat, such as drilling. If they do allow drilling in a sensitive area, the developers may have to mitigate their actions by providing money to help purchase or improve sage grouse habitat. “There are different options,” said Robertson.

The Gunnison Sage-grouse, currently found in southwest Colorado and southeast Utah, “used to be found across a lot more of both those states, and in Arizona and New Mexico,” said Robertson. “And in much higher numbers.”

A healthy population exists in the Gunnison Basin area, where thousands of birds live, “but even so, more people are moving into the area and there is more development – and gas development – going in,” said Robertson. “All these are threats to the bird.”

The DOW has transplanted several birds from the Gunnison area to Dry Creek Basin in an effort to bolster numbers there, most recently releasing three birds last month. “The DOW is working with folks in the Gunnison area to decide what we should do, what’s best for the birds,” said Robertson.

“Gunnison Sage-grouse adults are really tied to their leks, or courtship area,” said Robertson. “I’ve seen pictures where they put in dams, the leks got flooded, and the birds would come back and display on the ice where their lek is underwater. They just know that is their spot.”

The key to successfully transplanting birds from one area to another, she said, is to capture juvenile males that don’t yet have a lek. If an adult male is caught, the bird is released back into its native area. Mating season for the birds runs mid-April through early May.

Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat is primarily in sagebrush, and during the winter, “they feed almost exclusively on sagebrush,” said Robertson. “There is good habitat in Dry Creek Basin because it doesn’t get quite as much snow.” When the hens have chicks, “they often like a wet meadow area with more insects,” which the chicks feed on. The birds also eat forbs, like wildflowers.

“They will be found sometimes in agricultural fields,” Robertson said. “But they couldn’t just have that habitat. They also need sagebrush for cover.”

The Working Group is helping protect the bird’s habitat through easements and the purchase of development rights.

“In some cases there have been land swaps,” she said. The different agencies are also working to improve the bird’s habitat. “The Dry Creek Basin habitat isn’t in great shape,” she added. “We’re

trying different things to improve the understory,” much of which is either lacking altogether or infiltrated by cheatgrass.

Robertson said her hope is to get more people involved with the Working Group. “We certainly could use more folks on some of the committees,” she said. “We would love to have landowners who own grouse habitat in the San Miguel Basin. A lot of people might own land that’s good grouse habitat, and we want to get their input.”

The Working Group has recently revitalized a number of its committees, including habitat protection, habitat improvement, land use review, and information/education/publicity. The chairpersons of the individual committees are currently setting up meeting times, said Robertson. “If someone wanted to help with hands-on work, it would be great if they got involved in one of the committees.” The next full Working Group meeting is scheduled for June 15, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., at the USFS office in Norwood.