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Rare bird fights for survival

Feds take hands-off stand - Gunnison grouse's comeback keeps it off endangered list

By Jeremy P. Meyer

Gunnison - Morning sun crested over the Fossil Ridge Wilderness, illuminating dozens of Gunnison Sage-grouse performing their age-old breast-puffing mating ritual - what some call a dance on the edge of extinction.

The birds strut, fight and strike Kabuki-like poses in a rite as wild and natural as the sagebrush around them.

But even on this remote and vacant land, the wild birds have not escaped the impacts of humans.

Grouse habitat has been destroyed, the bird's population cut, and its future is being litigated and regulated.

"A single species becomes a symbol for a much larger issue about the degradation of land," said Jessica Young, a biology professor at Western State College in Gunnison.

The Gunnison grouse is one of the country's most endangered birds, according to the Audubon Society and the World Conservation Union.

Yet after the grouse's six years as a candidate for federal protection, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2006 removed it from consideration for the endangered-species list.

The decision relieved ranchers and outraged conservationists.

Faced with federal regulation of the land, Gunnison ranchers and local officials a decade ago began a homegrown effort to protect the grouse.

More than \$11 million in public funds has been spent to preserve 17,000 acres and enhance the bird's habitat.

Ranchers say they also have changed their grazing practices; roads are closed during grouse mating season; and in the last decade, the bird's numbers in Gunnison have more than doubled to 4,245.

"As far as the Gunnison basin is concerned, we believe the best program is local," said Jim Cochran, a rancher and Gunnison County Sage-grouse coordinator. "The future of the bird is here. Unfortunately, it also makes us the bull's-eye."

Environmentalists, however, filed a lawsuit seeking to block the endangered-species decision, saying science proves the bird is imperiled - and that the Bush administration meddled in the decision.

"Mechanisms aren't there to protect them in the long term," said Erin Robertson, biologist with the Center for Native Ecosystems - one of nine environmental organizations, along with San Miguel County, that signed onto the lawsuit.

One recent April morning, dozens of grouse flocked to a strutting ground on a remote sagebrush patch called a lek.

Male birds pranced in the dawn light trying to impress seemingly unimpressed hens.

J. Wenum, manager with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, peered through binoculars from the inside of a truck 200 yards away, counting the males.

"Think of this as a singles bar, and we are wildlife voyeurs," he said.

The dance in the sagebrush has occurred for more than 10,000 years, making the birds' drastic decline in the last 50 years all the more remarkable, said Western State College's Young, who has studied the grouse for 19 years.

The Gunnison Sage-grouse is an "indicator species" for shrub-steppe habitat, meaning its welfare is directly connected to the health of its ecosystem.

Throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries, humans looked at sagebrush as wasteland.

"We simply didn't put the same value on the sage as we put on the forests and wetlands," Young said. "... It's where we put our landfills."

By 1958, most of the sagebrush ecosystem had been lost - broken into pieces by development, overgrazed by cattle and mined for minerals.

The grouse lost 90 percent of its habitat, Young said.

Few people ever noticed the grouse except during hunting season - when hills around the valley would turn orange with hunter's vests, ranchers say.

In the 1970s, hunters were asked to drop a wing into a bucket near the trailhead from birds they bagged so biologists could determine the birds' health.

That's when Clait Braun, former Colorado Division of Wildlife biologist, realized the Gunnison Sage-grouse was two-thirds smaller than the more common Greater Sage-grouse, whose range spans from California to Canada.

"These birds were midgets," Braun said of the Gunnison grouse. "I knew it was a different species. "We told the people in Gunnison that this bird was different and it was going to change their lives."

Braun also noticed the bird's numbers were falling.

In 1995, just 2,202 Gunnison Sage-grouse were counted, with 1,797 in the Gunnison Basin.

In 2000, the Gunnison Sage- grouse was officially designated a separate species and also became a candidate for the endangered-species list.

By 2005, it appeared the bird was destined for listing - worrying many locals in Gunnison because 80 percent of all the birds were in the Gunnison basin.

In addition, 40 percent of the bird's habitat was on private land and the rest on public land leased to ranchers for grazing.

The prospect of the bird getting listed galvanized the community, said Matt Kales, Fish and Wildlife legislative-affairs specialist.

"You could say it was fear," Kales said. "Whether or not you agree with it, it got people to the table."

Had the bird been listed, the federal government would have drawn up a recovery plan and restrictions would have been placed on habitat modification or degradation that could affect the birds' feeding, breeding and sheltering.

Gunnison County hired a Sage-grouse coordinator in 2005 and formed a strategic committee. Agencies began spending money to save the bird's habitat.

Since 1999, Great Outdoors Colorado, the state's trust using lottery money for open space and recreation, has spent nearly \$5 million on 11,000 acres of grouse-conservation easements.

Federal and state agencies have spent another \$6 million for 6,000 acres of easements.

The federal government also paid for aerial seeding to provide food for the grouse, did strategic mowing to open heavy sage stands for the bird and closed roads during breeding and nesting seasons.

About 100 ranchers with 102,000 acres of grouse habitat say they are considering voluntary conservation efforts if it would give them safe harbor if the bird were federally listed.

"We wanted enough local controls in place that the Fish and Wildlife Service would let us continue to manage the bird," said Paula Swenson, Gunnison County commissioner.

Since 2004, the number of birds has increased rangewide, which includes six sites outside the Gunnison basin, from 2,443 in 2004 to 5,205 in 2006, according to the state Division of Wildlife.

That trend was the basis for the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision not to list the bird, said Edward Garton, a University of Idaho professor who analyzed the data for the government.

"Overall, the population shows what you would describe as recovering after dropping in numbers," Garton said.

For now, ranching coexists in the basin with the birds and their curious, spring dance for love.

"It's just one of the more beautiful primordial experiences," said Sue Navy, the environmental representative on the county's grouse committee.

"It's like watching the sun come up," said Navy, who gets up before dawn every year to watch the birds. "They are a part of our basin; they are an indicator of our ecosystem's health. They belong here."