

The Salt Lake Tribune

October 31, 2007

State seeks a protective designation for rare bird

Gunnison sage-grouse would be a 'species of concern' to allow for better monitoring

By Patty Henetz

A rare bird knocked off the federal endangered species list by a disgraced Bush administration official would get at least a little protection back if Utah wildlife officials have their way.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is trying to get the Gunnison sage-grouse named a state "species of concern," which would allow division scientists to monitor the birds' environmental health in the absence of higher-level protection.

Other species also will be considered for the state designation, said Carmen Bailey, a state wildlife analyst. But because Gunnison sage-grouse can't be relocated, their welfare is a top concern.

"We want to keep the common species common," Bailey said. "As it is now, we have limited funds that go to critters with the highest priority" - that is, federally protected species and state species of concern.

Estimates vary on how many Gunnison sage-grouse are still alive in San Juan County and western Colorado, their only remaining habitat. There could be 2,000 to 4,000 individual birds, but Utah wildlife experts estimate only about 235 remain here.

Even that could be an optimistic count, said Clait Braun, one of the biologists who determined in 1995 that the Gunnison sage-grouse was a unique species. He believes there may be as few as 75 of the birds in San Juan County and predicted they could all be gone within 20 years without protective intervention.

"The Utah population is very small. It is at great risk of extinction," Braun said.

And once they're gone, Bailey said, "they don't come back."

The Gunnison sage-grouse is one of a dozen endangered or threatened species former Deputy Interior Secretary Julie McDonald has been accused of meddling with by rewriting scientific findings for political reasons. McDonald, a civil engineer and Bush appointee, resigned in May after Interior's Inspector General released a report chronicling her malfeasance. McDonald's announcement came just days before Congress was to begin an investigation of the allegations.

Colorado already has given its Gunnison sage-grouse population status as a species of concern. If Utah does the same, that means funds could be available for habitat preservation.

Because most of the sage-grouse in San Juan County are on private land, farmers and ranchers will have a lot to do with whether they survive. Financial assistance for the landowners is crucial.

"You've got to have money," Braun said. "People need to buy in to the situation and money will help that. I use the term 'buy in,' not 'paid off.' "

The Gunnison sage-grouse is known for its showy plumage and elaborate mating dance during mating season.

It was a candidate for endangered listing until McDonald intervened in 2006.

Its natural habitat once covered all the land east of the Colorado River in Utah and into several western Colorado counties.

Its range also is believed to have once extended into New Mexico and Arizona and as far east as Kansas and Oklahoma.

Grazing, drought, farming, motorized recreation and human habitation are the main contributors to its extreme die-off.

Most nesting areas near Monticello are in trouble for lack of sagebrush cover, according to the Division of Wildlife Resources. Current threats include a wind-farm proposal that would be 1.5 miles from a mating ground. Braun said there should be at least a 5-mile buffer.

Public meeting

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources will hold a public meeting Nov. 13 to consider whether to name five birds, two fish and one amphibian as "species of concern," which would help with conservation efforts to keep the animals off the federal endangered or threatened list.

The meeting will begin at 11 a.m. in room 3710 of the Department of Natural Resources Building, 1594 W. North Temple, Salt Lake City.

The list of proposed species of concern designations and documentation backing the request is available on the Web at www.wildlife.utah.gov/pdf/SpofConcern07.pdf. The species are the Gunnison sage-grouse, the bald eagle, Albert's towhee, mountain plover, peregrine falcon, the Southern and Northern leatherside chub and the Great Plains toad. Anyone wishing to speak during the hearing must submit comments in writing to Department of Natural Resources executive director Mike Styler at the above address for review at least 14 days prior to the meeting. Written comments can be submitted a week before the meeting.