



For Immediate Release

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State of the Birds Report Further Evidence of Need to Protect Western Grouse Guardians Urges Administration to Take Next Step

PHOENIX, AZ - WildEarth Guardians applauds the release of a new report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey and others describing the rapid decline of bird species in the United States (www.stateofthebirds.org/news-release). Compiling data from multiple sources, *State of the Birds 2009* found that western deserts and grasslands—home to greater sage-grouse, Gunnison sage-grouse, Mono Basin sage grouse, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, and lesser prairie-chicken—are among the most degraded habitats in the country. WildEarth Guardians has sought to protect these western grouse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for more than a decade.

“This report confirms what we’ve said for years—grasslands and deserts are highly abused landscapes, as indicated by the decimated populations of western grouse that live there,” said Mark Salvo, coordinator of the Western Grouse Project for WildEarth Guardians. “The Fish and Wildlife Service should couple this report with the one thing that would make a world of difference for these beleaguered birds: federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.”

The Service has resisted listing imperiled western grouse for years. WildEarth Guardians asks the Obama Administration to buck this trend. There are immediate opportunities for the Administration to do so.

- Next Monday the Service must announce to a federal court whether it will continue to defend the Bush Administration’s decision not to protect Gunnison sage-grouse under the ESA. The agency should abandon its position and set the Gunnison sage-grouse on a course to listing. Gunnison sage-grouse occur in eight small populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. The species has experienced significant declines from historic numbers and only about 4,000 breeding individuals remain.
- Next month the Service must issue a listing determination for Mono Basin sage-grouse. The agency should propose to list the bird as “threatened” or “endangered.” Mono Basin sage-grouse are a genetically distinct population of greater sage-grouse that occur in small populations in southeastern California and southwestern Nevada.

- The agency is also obligated to render a listing decision for greater sage-grouse later this year. Greater sage-grouse distribution has decreased by 56 percent, while rangewide abundance has been reduced by as much as 93 percent from historic levels.
- The Service is currently defending its negative finding on a petition to list Columbian sharp-tailed grouse under the ESA in federal court. The agency should settle the lawsuit and initiate a status review on the subspecies. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse distribution has declined significantly since 1900. The subspecies now occurs in less than ten percent of its historic range. Although millions of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse probably occurred in the West historically, only 18,000 – 25,000 breeding individuals currently remain in the United States.
- The Service has listed the lesser prairie-chicken as a “candidate” for ESA protection since 1998, but has been unwilling to elevate its status to “threatened” or “endangered” for more than a decade. The agency should propose listing for the species. The current range of lesser prairie-chicken has been reduced to relatively small and scattered areas that comprise approximately 8 percent of historic range. The species total population has been roughly estimated at between 10,000-25,000 individuals.

The Fish and Wildlife Service knows the importance of listing imperiled species under the ESA—simultaneous with its release of the *State of the Birds* report, the Service announced it will list a plant, *Phyllostegia hispida*, to support its recovery in Hawaii. The agency also understands the value of listing bird species to recovery efforts—*State of the Birds 2009* describes many instances where listing has helped recover threatened birds across the country. In fact, scientists estimate that 227 species would have gone extinct had it not been for ESA protection. The Service has stated that over 99% of the plants and animals listed under the ESA continue to persist today.

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