

A Shot Worth Taking

Why Montana still allows sage-grouse hunting. *By Ben Pierce*



PRAIRIE TRADITION An upland hunter selects a single bird from a small covey of sage-grouse.

When European settlers first arrived on the Montana frontier in the mid-1800s, they found a land teeming with game. Bison, pronghorn, and enormous flocks of sage-grouse populated the prairie. The large grassland birds, which can live only where there is sagebrush, occupied most of the state's eastern half along with large tracts in southwestern Montana. Across the American West, sage-grouse once ranged over 290 million acres of sagebrush grassland.

For decades sage-grouse were shot for their meat by pioneer families. Later, recreational hunters favored the bird for its willingness to hold for a pointing dog. Hunters also enjoy hunting the handsome bird in its native sagebrush habitat.

Yet hunters and others have been seeing fewer of the large upland birds in recent decades. Largely because of habitat loss, the number of sage-grouse in the West has declined since the 1970s. The drop prompted

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calls for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the species as threatened or endangered—a designation that would significantly affect agriculture, energy development, and hunting.

In fall 2015, the USFWS decided not to list the sage-grouse. The agency announced that, despite population declines, the species remains relatively abundant and well-distributed across much of its western range and does not face the risk of extinction.

During the years leading to the USFWS decision, studies by that agency and western states' conservation departments showed

that the main threats to sage-grouse are habitat loss and fragmentation. Of particular concern in Montana is conversion of sagebrush grasslands to row crops such as wheat. Another key threat is oil and gas development, which crisscrosses the bird's habitat with roads and power lines. Though ranching and energy development dodged a bullet with the USFWS decision not to list the sage-grouse, how those practices affect the species is still under scrutiny.

Understandably, many ranchers and energy interests in turn ask why Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks continues to allow sage-grouse hunting when state and federal agencies are so concerned about the species.

"It's a good question," says John Vore, FWP Game Management Bureau chief. "The answer is pretty simple. The effect of hunting on Montana sage-grouse is hardly even measurable. Basically, hunting has nothing to do with sage-grouse declines."

Vore notes that sage-grouse hunter numbers in Montana have dropped in recent

years, and hunter harvest now accounts for only a tiny fraction of the birds that die every year. Of 1,300 radio-collared adult birds in huntable areas of Montana between 2000 and 2016, only nine died from hunting, researchers found. "And adult birds make up only a portion of the population," Vore says. "Because reproduction rates are so high, there are also a lot of new young birds out there each fall."

Vore says the focus on sage-grouse hunting diverts attention from the big issue: habitat loss. He explains that by far the largest threat to sage-grouse populations comes not from individual mortality but rangewide reductions of sagebrush grasslands. A recent energy boom in eastern Montana and rising grain prices persuaded some ranchers to lease their lands for oil and gas development or plow sagebrush areas historically used for grazing. The development punches holes in habitat and disturbs the birds. Sage-grouse are sensitive to sound and require vast areas of sagebrush prairie to mate and nest. Development and associated infrastructure (roads, power lines, and well pads)—and the noise and habitat fragmentation that comes with them—means less habitat and, as a result, fewer birds.

"Many people don't realize how much habitat sage-grouse require," Vore says. "We need to think at the landscape scale—townships, not sections. And habitat cannot be fragmented. Converting even 10 percent of large swaths of intact sagebrush habitat to grain fields, subdivisions, or oil pads can reduce the number of sage-grouse breeding sites by 50 percent."

Though sage-grouse in Montana occupy only about half their historic range, the state still possesses large tracts of sagebrush grassland that have remained largely intact due to well-managed cattle grazing. In the mid-2000s, FWP identified "core areas" of critical sage-grouse habitat. Beginning in 2006, government programs began paying private landowners not to spray, till, or burn sagebrush habitat on their land. Those efforts have protected

nearly 200,000 acres in Montana that benefit not only sage-grouse, but prairie species like mule deer, pronghorn, and other grassland birds.

Even though hunting plays a tiny role in sage-grouse population dynamics, FWP still carefully manages hunting seasons. "In cases of extremely low counts, we will close hunting until populations rebound," says Vore.

By keeping the hunting season open, FWP provides recreational opportunities that connect people to the land and the birds, creating strong advocates for sage-grouse and sagebrush conservation.

Moving forward, Montana must keep a close watch on sage-grouse to ensure the bird's future on the prairie, says Vore. Farmers, ranchers, hunters, and government agencies

have all pitched in, and that work has led to the healthy populations and sage-grouse hunting opportunities that Montanans and visitors enjoy today.

"Montana needs to continue managing sage-grouse the way we have been doing," Vore says. "Hunters, conservation groups, and state and federal agencies will need to keep working with landowners to help them find financially viable ways to keep sage-grouse habitat intact." 🐾

Citing recently increased populations, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission reopened areas for the 2016 season that in 2015 were closed to sage-grouse hunting, and maintained the bag limit of two, possession limit of four, and a one-month hunting season (September 1-30).

Only 9 of the 1,300 sage-grouse in the study died from sport hunting.

SAGE-GROUSE FAN CLUB Below: In addition to generating revenue for sage-grouse monitoring and habitat conservation, hunting seasons create and maintain strong advocates for the prairie birds.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GARY WARMER/NET; JUEL MAKES; CHUCK AND GALE ROBBINS