



HOME ON THE RANGE

CONSERVING WESTERN HUNTING GROUNDS, ONE SAGE GROUSE AT A TIME.

It was my first-ever western hunt. My parents and I had driven halfway across the country from Pennsylvania to the high plains of eastern Wyoming to hunt pronghorn and mule deer. Dad dropped me off early the first morning and I hiked up to the top of a rise and stood for a moment leaning against a fencepost, drinking in a sweep of wide-open country. Nearby were a few of the rancher's cattle, grazing contentedly. The distinctive smell of sagebrush—unfamiliar to my Eastern-bred senses—filled my nose, and the plains before me glowed with the plant's whitish-green hue in the early morning light. Most exciting of all, far below me I could see tan and white dots—a herd of pronghorn. Surveying this vista of rangeland, I knew I was in the real West at last.

Since then I've explored a lot more of the American West, but I'll never forget the iconic image I saw on that lovely fall morning: plains dotted with cattle, pronghorn, and sagebrush. I don't remember spotting a sage grouse on that trip, but I've seen a few since then—chunky, mottled birds with light-colored breasts and spiky tails. They're famous for their courtship dance—one of the most elaborate mating rituals in the bird world, which takes place every spring across the sagebrush plains on staging grounds called leks.

Unfortunately, sage grouse populations are in a steep decline, and that is deeply disturbing news to those who love the West. There may be as few as 200,000 of the ground-dwelling birds left (down from perhaps 16 million in the 1800s), hit hard by the boom in oil and gas development and conversion of their native rangeland habitat into shopping centers and cultivated fields. The decline is so severe that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has proposed listing the sage grouse as "threatened" under the Endan-



A male sage grouse in its breeding plumage.



Grouse, as well as pronghorn and mule deer, need unbroken sagebrush habitat.

gered Species Act as early as 2015. An ESA listing is not something most residents of the West want; it would impose restrictions on everyone from ranchers to drillers, and it's anyone's guess if it would really solve the sage grouse's problems in time.

The future of this bird matters, scientists say, because as goes the sage grouse, so goes the pronghorn, plains mule deer, and the other residents of the sagebrush ecosystem. The sage grouse is like a canary in a coal mine, the first species to falter in the face of a host of problems that also threaten the other inhabitants of its unique neighborhood.

The crux of the problem is fragmentation. What used to be wide-open spaces are now a patchwork of oil wells, wind turbines, shopping centers, roads, houses, and farm fields. Western Canada provides a cautionary tale: It used to have flourishing sage grouse populations, but a flurry of oil and gas development in the western provinces has nearly wiped out the birds. There are now just 200 birds in Saskatchewan and less than 100 in Alberta.

"Sage grouse need big and intact native rangelands," said University of Montana biologist David Naugle, one of the nation's leading sage grouse experts. "When you preserve these, you also benefit mule deer and pronghorn."

You benefit ranchers and hunters, too. Done properly, cattle grazing actually nourishes the grasses and plants of the sagebrush plains and promotes their growth, because these grasses and plants evolved in the presence of grazing animals such as bison. Wildlife conservation and sustainable ranching go hand-in-hand. Unfortunately, not all cattle grazing is done sustainably, and even when it is, more and more ranches are now giving way to housing developments, oil and gas rigs, and access roads.

Recognizing this, a project called the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is going full-bore to conserve the sage grouse

and its habitat without imposing onerous regulations on freedom-loving Westerners. Employing a collaborative model of voluntary cooperation, incentives, and community support, SGI is a model for the sort of project that could help other troubled wildlife species—and avoid additional ESA listings in the process.

SGI is administered by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. It launched in 2010 and is powered by funding from the Farm Bill. Three-quarters of the remaining sage grouse live in about 50 million acres across 11 states—the “core areas.” SGI targets the majority of its efforts on these lands, a large percentage of which are privately owned.

More than 700 ranchers are voluntarily enrolled in the program. These landowners have agreed to implement grouse-friendly practices such as sustainable, rotational cattle grazing (now happening on more than 2 million acres), removal of invasive conifers on 200,000 acres (sage grouse hate trees because predators hide in them), and marking or removing more than 500 miles of fences to head off bird collisions. The NRCS kicks in about three-quarters of the cost of the improvements and the ranchers pay for the rest. This gives them a stake in the outcome, and the projects benefit the overall health of their grazing land, so it's a win-win.

Management projects with ranchers are only part of the story. Funds from SGI are also being used to secure more than 240,000 acres of conservation easements on private lands that were on the brink of development. Energy and residential developers are being encouraged to steer their projects toward less sensitive regions. The BLM and Forest Service are working to protect sage grouse habitat on some federal lands, and states such as Wyoming are also heavily invested in the effort—working to limit oil and gas development in the most important grouse habitat areas. It's in everyone's interest to make the initiative work.

Naugle calls SGI the “largest conservation experiment that's ever been conducted in the United States.” Is it working? Only time will tell, but a recent study projected that the conservation initiatives implemented under SGI should cut sage grouse losses by roughly half in Wyoming alone. In the meantime, the work is having some beneficial side effects: The sage grouse efforts have helped conserve about 75 percent of the crucial winter-range habitat of the Mesa mule deer herd in oil- and gas-rich western Wyoming. Perhaps most importantly, it may provide a new model for conservation—a way to trade the unpleasant “stick” of federal regulation for the more palatable “carrot” of cooperation and incentives.—*Diana Rupp*



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