



ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION

ELK COUNTRY and the HUNT

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NEWS FROM ELK COUNTRY



NEIL LOSIN

Unlisted, but Not Out of the Woods

What will the future hold for sage grouse, elk and the 40 million acres of sagebrush they share?

It was a decision heralded by many as a victory of epic collaboration and by others as a missed opportunity: on September 22 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its conclusion that the greater sage grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

For David Naugle, national science advisor for the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), the ruling was, above all, a call to continued action.

"That's the dirty little secret," says Naugle, who has worked exclusively on protecting sage grouse habitat across the West for the past five years. "It's never going to be over. If you want these critters on the planet, you're going to have to do some management to

keep them here."

Launched by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2010, SGI harnesses the power of the Farm Bill to battle habitat loss and degradation for the imperiled bird across 11 western states. As the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) revealed its decision, groups including the RMEF that have worked to improve the prospects for sage grouse were already making plans to ensure the future success of the species.

Elk and sage grouse share 40 million acres of habitat, including critical winter range for some of the West's largest elk herds. Projects to enhance sage grouse habitat often help both species. Cutting

encroaching conifers opens up forage for elk and breeding grounds for sage grouse. Conservation easements ensure large swaths of unfragmented lands remain intact. Removing unnecessary fencing that entangles and kills sage grouse in flight also eliminates hazards for big game.

In a way, the no-list decision worked to further stimulate the collaborative efforts for sage grouse and the landscape on which they, mule deer, elk and many other species depend. The long-awaited ruling spurred 98 amendments to federal land management plans that will beef up oversight in core sage grouse habitat over the next 10 years. In Wyoming, regulatory mechanisms kicked in to limit

surface disturbance from energy development. Idaho is reinforcing leases and permits on state land to protect 700,000 acres of vital habitat.

Just days before the FWS announced its decision not to list the bird, the Sage Grouse Initiative unveiled SGI 2.0, its conservation strategy for the next three years.

"In the really big picture, our goal is conservation of the sagebrush ecosystem, so we're going to continue our work no matter what," says Naugle. SGI works with federal and state agencies, conservation organizations like RMEF as well as private landowners to ensure the continued survival of a species that has become a symbol for an entire troubled ecosystem.

SGI 2.0 calls for exactly the types of projects RMEF specializes in. Over the next few years, SGI will map and target priority areas for removing encroaching conifers across more than 102 million acres of sage grouse habitat. In Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota, it will work to secure conservation easements to protect core habitat on

private land and encourage ranching and farming practices that benefit both sage grouse and livestock. In Wyoming, it aims to secure another 105,000 acres of vital habitat through conservation easements.

"The enormous amount of conservation that has already occurred can't stop now," says Chris Yarbrough, RMEF's range/wildlife conservationist partner, whose position is co-funded by the NRCS and the Intermountain West Joint Venture. "We can't take our foot off the gas just because the sage grouse wasn't listed a few weeks ago."

Weighing up to 7 pounds and standing 2 feet tall, greater sage grouse are the largest of North America's native grouse by a good measure. They gained national attention in 2010 when groups petitioned to have them listed as an endangered species. Their population has declined by more than 90 percent over the past 200 years and they occupy less than half of their historical range. Breeding grounds, called leks, were disappearing due to energy

and residential development, encroaching conifer forests that provide perches for avian predators, and noxious weeds that limit forage and fuel catastrophic wildfires. Falling grouse numbers were also indicative of a larger ailing ecosystem—an area that covers 173 million acres across the West, which grouse share with some 350 species.

Naugle points to conservation easements as one of the best tools for preserving the sagebrush sea. Since 2010, SGI has partnered with 1,129 ranches across 11 western states to conserve 4.4 million acres of land. It's a strategy Blake Henning, RMEF vice president of lands and conservation, considers proactive and more effective than federal mandates.

"We think voluntary collaboration is a much better way to go than dealing with the constraints and issues that ESA listing can bring," Henning says. "If we make the land healthy for sage grouse it's going to be healthy for elk, too."

—Nicky Ouellet, Bugle Intern

ELK 101 Where do bulls go after the rut?



MELISSA ANDERSON

The rut might be a riot for hunters and elk alike, but for bulls it's also a grueling gauntlet. A month of fighting, chasing and breeding can take a harsh toll. According to *North American Elk*, the average bull sustains 40-60 antler wounds during the course of the rut and can lose up to 20 percent of its body weight. While elk can survive nearly 70 days off of fat stores alone, once their testosterone levels plunge, emaciated bulls seek out secluded pockets of dense cover near dependable water sources to recuperate. Like a wily whitetail buck, they often move little unless forced to as they attempt to pack on calories and heal out of sight of hunters.

There's another good reason big bulls steer clear of cows after the dust of the rut settles. Both humans with high-powered rifles and wolves are motivated to pick a bull out of a herd of cows. For their part, wolves zero in on antlers knowing from experience bulls may be too exhausted to withstand either an extended chase or battle after rutting for weeks on end.

And so battle-worn bulls instead seek solitude or the company of one or two of the same foes they may have hoped to skewer just weeks before. Fellow males don't compete for food the way a large herd of pregnant cows will, yet offer extra noses, eyes and ears critical to detecting creeping hunters of all stripes.

Because of bulls' tendencies to hide out in the darkest patches of the forest, post-rut can be the toughest time to lay eyes on a bull elk, but odds are the deeper into elk country a hunter gets, the better their chances are of finding an old beast biding its time and re-energizing for winter.

—Cavan Williams, Bugle Intern