



About Sage Grouse

Characteristics

The sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is a large chicken-like land bird that is dependent upon sagebrush-grassland habitats throughout western North America. Both male and female are grayish in color with a black belly and long pointed tail. The males of the species weigh four to seven pounds, and are considerably larger than the female. They are distinguished by a white breast and black throat. Females, which range in weight from two to four pounds, are drabber in color and lack the yellow pouches that males inflate during courtship.

Range & Habitat

Sage grouse are currently found from southwestern Canada on the north, the Dakotas on the east, and extend south and east into the inter-mountain and Great Basin regions of the West. Where sage grouse can still be found, their populations are greatly reduced. They have disappeared altogether from British Columbia, Nebraska, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Although still being studied, much of the bird's decline can be attributed to loss of habitat, and fragmentation and degradation of habitat. Sage grouse are dependent upon sagebrush, however, they prefer a mix or mosaic of habitat types that they use seasonally. Populations suffer when the mix gets out of balance, such as when sagebrush stands age or lack the grasses and forbs grouse need for food and cover, or when development and urbanization alter or destroy habitat.

Habits & Breeding

In the spring, sage grouse start to gather on strutting grounds known as leks. Leks are generally found in open areas that are sparsely vegetated, such as meadows and grassy openings, or man-made sites like roads and airstrips. During the spring mating season, in hopes of attracting females for mating, males dance on the leks, putting on an impressive display of strutting and tail-fanning, while inflating pouches in their chest and making distinctive popping noises.

After mating, hens leave the strutting grounds to nest. Most nests are found under sagebrush with a grass understory that protects the nest from predators and the elements. Females normally lay six to nine greenish colored eggs that take 28 days to hatch. Chicks are able to feed immediately after hatching and soon leave the nest. They can fly weakly within seven days and progress to strong fliers by five weeks. By mid-August, the birds have almost reached adult size.

Breeding success and brood survival is highly dependent on the availability of quality food and cover. Abundant insects for forage, grasses and forbs, combined with a mix of big and low sagebrush sites for cover are necessary. As spring becomes summer and the food plants mature and dry, sage grouse move to areas that support succulent vegetation. Moist grassy areas and upland meadows, native or irrigated, are an important part of summer brood habitat. The drier the summer, the more important these green areas become.

Produced by the Sage Grouse
Communications Committee:

Bureau of Land Management, Nevada Department of Agriculture, Nevada Department of Wildlife, Natural Resources Conservation Service, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service & our partners including the Cattlemen's Association, the Nevada Farm Bureau, and the Rangeland Resources Commission. 2005



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Sage grouse form flocks as brood groups break up in early fall and then slowly make their way to winter ranges. Consumption of sagebrush increases as forbs dry and die. As winter comes on, sage grouse will feed almost exclusively on sagebrush. Therefore, it is critical that sagebrush stems and leaves protrude above the snow, and the birds can often be found near wind blown ridges where the sagebrush is available.

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