

COLUMBIAN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus

Order: Galliformes
Family: Phasianidae



Historic and Current Distribution: Historic range is restricted to North America from the continental divide westward in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado to northeastern California, eastern Oregon and Washington; southward to northern Nevada and central Utah; and northward through central British Columbia. Currently, the core distribution for Columbian Sharp-tailed grouse occurs in southeast Idaho and northern Utah with small, fragmented populations in Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, and British Columbia.

Distribution in Nevada: The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse was extirpated from Nevada by 1952. In 1999, a trap and transplant program was initiated in Nevada to reintroduce birds into their former range. Between 1999 and 2005, 226 birds (146 males and 80 females) were transplanted from southern Idaho to the east side of the Snake Mountains in Elko County. Idaho has also moved birds from south-central Idaho to the Nevada/Idaho border along the Three Creek and Shoshone Basin areas in hope that the birds will continue to expand and eventually connect with the Snake Mountain population. Numerous sightings have been documented between the Snake Mountain reintroduction site and the border areas.

Habitat: Year-round habitat for Columbia sharp-tailed grouse occurs throughout sage-steppe and intermountain mixed shrub-grass communities. Common shrub cover includes sagebrush, bitterbrush, serviceberry, chokecherry, snowberry, and willow riparian areas. Breeding grounds, leks, are found on relatively flat, sparsely vegetated knolls, ridge-tops, recent burns, forest clearcuts, natural openings, and other areas with good visibility and good acoustics. Active leks have been located in areas with 100% snow cover. Nesting habitat is characterized by relatively tall, dense shrubs with dense, diverse grass and forb understory. Brood habitat typically includes a high diversity of shrubs, 20 to 40 percent cover, and 60 to 80 percent cover of perennial forbs and bunchgrasses. Selection of winter habitat depends primarily on snow conditions and usually consists of deciduous riparian shrubs and trees.

Identification: One of seven subspecies, the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse is medium-sized; smaller than sage and blue grouse, and larger than ruffed grouse. Adult males and females are almost identical in plumage: overall gray-brown with black and buffy markings. Conspicuous white spots on the wing feathers distinguish sharp-tailed from other grouse. The tail is wedge-shaped with two central tail feathers longer than the rest. Males have purple air sacs on the side of the neck that can only be seen when inflated during breeding activity.

Breeding and Nesting: In spring, males attract females to traditional breeding, or “dancing” grounds (leks). Established leks will be used for many years, although their exact location may shift over time. Males display twice daily at sunrise and shortly before sunset. Following breeding, if suitable habitat is available, females will nest within 1.5 miles of the lek in a shallow, grass and feather-lined hollow near the base of a shrub. Clutches of 11 to 14 olive-brown eggs, sometimes with brown spots, are laid and incubated by the female for 21 to 23 days.

Foraging and Feeding: During spring and summer, sharp-tailed grouse feed on grass seeds and forbs such as clover, goldenrod, hawksbeard, and dandelion. The fall and winter diet consists mainly of fruits and buds of shrubs such as serviceberry, chokecherry, wild rose, and snowberry, and deciduous trees including willow and aspen. When available, sharp-tailed grouse will also feed on grains such as wheat, corn, and barley. Chicks feed primarily on insects including ants, crickets, moths, grasshoppers, and beetles.

Migration: Winter migration and movements depend on snow. Birds may migrate to higher elevations than breeding habitat if woody riparian cover is available.

Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse was petitioned for listing as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1995. In 2000, the US Fish and Wildlife Service completed a 12-month review of the status of the species and concluded that the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse did not warrant range-wide protection at that time.