

Place a Classified Ad

ELKO DAILY FREE PRESS



46
forecast...

**To View
Our Listings**

Click Here

HOME • NEWS • SPORTS • HEALTH • ENTERTAINMENT • SUBSCRIBER SERVICES • ARCHIVES • CLASSIFIEDS
JOBS • AUTOS • REAL ESTATE • BUSINESS • EDUCATION • OUTDOOR • MINING NEWS • ABOUT US

Top Jobs

**Cooks, Servers,
Hosts /
Hostess,
Bartenders
Wingers Grill
and Bar**

**Customer
Services
Representatives
Elko Daily Free
Press**

**Experienced
Drivers
Capurro
Trucking**

**Registered
Nurse
Home Health
Services of
Nevada**

More Top Jobs

Top Homes



Quality Built by Dave Bawcom



\$260,000.00
3 Beds, 2 Baths



\$\$349,000.00
6 Beds, 3 1/2 Baths

Thursday, October 27, 2005



Outdoor

Nevada rancher seeks better habitat for sage grouse, cattle

By SANDRA CHEREB - Press Writer
Tuesday, October 25, 2005 5:04 PM PDT

SMITH CREEK RANCH (AP)
- Sage grouse feed in a meadow at dawn, unperturbed as three young wranglers saddle their mounts nearby and head through the sagebrush for the high country of central Nevada, where cattle graze in the Desatoya Range.



For some, the notion that cattle and a bird that just escaped listing under the Endangered Species Act can share the same Western landscape and thrive is a contradiction.

At Smith Creek Ranch, manager Duane Coombs wants to prove otherwise - and, in so doing, protect a livelihood.

"We can do some things to enhance sage grouse populations so we have something here for our children in the future," he said.

Biologists and conservationists are welcome at this sprawling ranch, where a trip to the mailbox is a 30-mile round trip along a dirt road. Efforts to help grouse go hand-in-hand here with managing cows.

Many environmental groups blame livestock grazing for the bird's population decline over the past four decades. And while others blame

Smith Creek Ranch manager Duane Coombs talks about rehabilitating a section of Porter Canyon in the Desatoya Range east of Fallon July 25. Coombs has worked to improve ranch land to encourage Sage grouse habitation. Coombs, a third-generation rancher who holds a degree in range science from Utah State University, said most recommendations in government conservation plans make sense for livestock, sage grouse and other wildlife. (Associated Press)



\$259,900.00
4 Beds, 2
1/2 Baths



\$235,000
3 Beds, 2 Baths

[More Top Homes](#)

[Top Cars](#)

[More Top Cars](#)

[Top Rentals](#)

[More Top Rentals](#)

News

[Local News](#)

[World News](#)

[Court News](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Weather](#)

[Sports](#)

[Local/State](#)

[Features](#)

[Mining News](#)

[Outdoor](#)

[Business](#)

[Health](#)

[Education](#)

[Special Sections](#)

[Advertise With Us](#)

[Subscriber Services](#)

[Subscribe Online](#)

[Renew A Subscription](#)

[Make A Payment](#)

[Gift Subscription](#)

development, predators, hunting and climate changes, many ranchers equate sage grouse and environmentalists as enemies to a way of life.

"I know there's a faction that would love to see us off the public land," Coombs said. "What seems frustrating, if it's truly about the bird ... the rancher is one of the best tools they've got in their toolbox."

Loss of habitat is the biggest threat to the large game bird first observed by explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1805. Urban sprawl, highway traffic, communication towers, oil and gas exploration, off-road vehicles, wild horses, fences - all disrupt the bird's breeding instincts, degrade its habitat or provide lookout perches for its predators. Drought, disease, wildfires and invasive weeds also take their toll.

"Livestock grazing is one of the easiest to attack," said San Stiver, a sage grouse expert and former biologist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife. "But on the flip side, science doesn't necessarily back up anyone's position, pro or con."

The government estimates as many as 16 million sage grouse inhabited the West in the early 1800s. Populations, particularly in the past 40 years, have dropped dramatically. Some reports estimate only a couple hundred thousand may remain on an estimated 770,000 square miles in 11 states - roughly half the bird's historical range.

For years environmentalists have petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the bird as an endangered species. In January, the agency denied the request, saying conservation efforts among local, state, federal and private entities would work better.

But the plight of sage grouse remains a strong influence on the Western landscape. This summer a federal judge, ruling in a lawsuit filed by the Western Watershed Project, ordered thousands of cattle removed from nearly 1 million acres in southern Idaho. The judge said the U.S. Bureau of Land Management violated regulations when it authorized increased grazing without adequately determining the effect on grouse habitat.

Katie Fite, of the Idaho-based environmental group, said ranchers aren't meeting government recommendations for protecting sage grouse and sagebrush habitat.

"What we're seeing is resistance to having an accountability layer out there," she said.

Ray Hendrix, whose family owns the Smith Creek Ranch, bristles at categorical blame.

"There's always a bad apple, the ones who don't do a good job. We all get accused," he said.

"When the range is in good shape, everything benefits. You're not going to be there 50 years from now if you're not going to take care of the country."

Preston Wright, president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association, doesn't believe grazing should be blamed for what has happened to the sage grouse.

"I think there's something bigger going on than just too many cows," he said. "Having said that, I'd say basically all the ranchers nowadays are making changes to their grazing practices in order to improve certain habitat and environmental conditions.

"And it's necessary in many cases. It's something we've learned, and we've got to come around."

**Going On
Vacation****Need to Restart?****Address Change****E-Z Pay****Comments /
Concerns****Carrier
Opportunities****Single Copy
Locations****Newspapers In
Education**

Coombs, a third-generation rancher who holds a degree in range science from Utah State University, said most recommendations in government conservation plans make sense for livestock, sage grouse and other wildlife.

"Good sage grouse habitat is good cow country," he said.

On a late summer day, Coombs provides a tour of the 250,000-acre spread, where a vast valley of high desert and dry lake beds is a pedestal for towering mountain peaks. Most of the operation is on public land managed by the BLM, with about 3,000 acres on private, deeded land. The ranch runs roughly 900 head of cattle.

In the foothills, Coombs shows off Porter Canyon, where youth groups, volunteers and others have fenced off a spring and shored up stream beds to try to revitalize a choked meadow.

"We want to get the hydrology to come back, get some control over what's happening there," he said.

Pinyon and juniper trees are being removed to try to restore sagebrush habitat.

"We feel there's a strong correlation between the brood-rearing habitat we provide in the summer in those wet meadows and how good the birds do," Coombs said.

Sage grouse mate each spring on areas called leks, traditional courting grounds where males strut with spiked tail feathers and puff up their bright yellow chests to compete for females. Through the spring and summer they feed on insects and forbs. Sagebrush is critical for their survival, providing both cover from predators and a main food source through winter.

"In upper Porter Canyon, there's several active leks above the meadow," Coombs said.

Some of the work was funded by a \$5,000 grant the ranch received from the Nevada Rangeland Resource Commission, a panel created by the Nevada Legislature to promote the ranching industry.

"We purposely picked a site where there weren't sage grouse," Coombs said of the 160-acre abandoned homestead. "We wanted to show, as we bring agriculture back - controlling grazing, get some water - that they'll come and actually follow us back in there."

Two years into the project, sage grouse "haven't beat my door down yet," he conceded. "But we're seeing things start to happen," he added, noting the return of mountain quail.

Other efforts are more subtle, like keeping cattle out of areas inhabited by sage grouse at various times of year.

To that end, Coombs shuns what he terms the "Columbus" method - turning cattle out in the spring only to "rediscover" them in the fall.

One of his biggest fears is waning interest now that the immediate threat of a Endangered Species Act listing and mandated federal protection has passed.

"It's taken 100 years or so to degrade this," he said, scanning the vast valley that he calls home. "It's going to take some time to get it back."

Rose Strickland of the Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club agreed.

Community**Babies****Church
Directory****NIE****Engagement
Announcement****Wedding
Announcement****Anniversary
Announcement****Your Health****Medical
Directory****Visiting****Visitor's Guide****Restaurant
Directory****Hotel Directory****Printing****Commercial
Printing****Printing
Specials**

"People tend to pay more attention when we think our interests are being threatened," said Strickland, a member of Nevada's sage grouse conservation team.

"Conservation planning is exciting when you start, but as the months roll on, people lose interest, especially busy people," she said.

Funding also is a concern.

"In a lot of cases, we don't have the resources to actually implement the plans," Strickland said. "There's just a million things to be done and they won't all be done in our lifetimes."

Coombs acknowledges that his willingness to coordinate with conservationists was met with raised eyebrows from some fellow ranchers, and there is distrust of the government agencies involved.

"We've got a lot of people watching us," he said.

But while most ranchers aren't ready to join grouse protection groups, nevertheless they believe in protecting the range.

For them, the land is the thing. And that helps make Coombs optimistic.

"I think these people who are truly committed to healthy rangelands will define the West," he said.

 [printable version](#)  [e-mail this story](#)

Copyright © 2005 Elko Daily Free Press

[Back to Top](#)