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US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE TO REVIEW GREATER SAGE-GROUSE LISTING DECISION

In January 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that listing greater sage-grouse range wide as an endangered species was unwarranted. In that decision, former USFWS Director Steve Williams cited recent population trends and lauded the work of local sage-grouse working groups and other conservation partners in reversing declining trends. By mid 2007, 11 Utah local working groups had completed their conservation plans and were busy implementing them.

The USFWS was sued by Western Watersheds regarding this decision. In December 2007, Chief U.S. District Judge Winmill overturned the USFWS decision citing procedural errors. The judge remanded the decision back to the USFWS for reconsideration. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) is cooperating with other state, federal and private partners is assembling all available biological and program data to resubmit to the USFWS by June 23, 2008 for further consideration. In the next few weeks, we will be compiling all the efforts of local working groups into a report to submit to the DWR. This report will also be posted on our web site. Thanks to the efforts of Utah partners and the local working groups, their planning, project implementation, and monitoring efforts, we believe the future for greater sage-grouse in Utah will be assured.

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Sage-Grouse Local Working Groups Encouraged to Participate in Utah Partners Summit

In March of 2007, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Utah State University hosted Utah's Inaugural Sage-grouse Summit. The Summit was attended by 125 participants representing sage-grouse local working groups, public agencies and private organizations. Several participants at the Summit commented on the need to better integrate working group plans and efforts with Utah's Watershed Initiative. A few weeks later, Utah Partners hosted another meeting where similar sentiments were voiced by a number of participants.

To facilitate and achieve this integration, we are encouraging all local working group members to attend the 2nd Annual Utah Partners for Conservation and Development Summit. **The Summit will be held from 9:00am to 3:30pm, Thursday April 24, 2008** in Noyes Hall of Founders Hall, Snow College, Ephraim, Utah. The focus of this year's summit will be how to better integrate and communicate the efforts of Utah partners, the Regional Teams, and Utah's sage-grouse local working groups. The tentative agenda for this year's meeting will include agency updates, new funding initiatives, and presentations on strategies to better integrate project planning to address sage-grouse and other conservation priorities. There is no registration fee; breaks and a lunch will be provided. We have a limited number of scholarships available to help defray transportation costs to the meeting. To qualify for a possible scholarship, please contact Rae Ann Hart by e-mail at raeann.hart@usu.edu or by phone at 453-797-3974.

ENERGY DEVELOPMENT AND THE SAGE-GROUSE OF SEEP RIDGE

By Leah Smith, USU Graduate Student

Concern regarding the effect of energy development on greater sage-grouse has increased as the search for fossil fuel intensifies. Greater sage-grouse may be especially sensitive to energy development because they require large areas of sagebrush and a diversity of sagebrush habitat to complete their life cycle. The habitat available to sage-grouse inhabiting areas with increased energy development can be reduced directly by conversion of sagebrush to well pads and roads and indirectly by sage-grouse avoidance of structures associated with energy development. Some other effects of increased energy development on sage-grouse may include direct mortality due to collisions with infrastructure, reduced breeding success, altered habitat use, and the spread of weeds and predators. Hence, balancing the habitat needs of sage-grouse with increased energy demands will be difficult.

Based on leasing activity, the rate of energy development in northeastern Utah is expected to increase dramatically within the next five years. Seep Ridge, located approximately 45 miles south of Vernal, is one area where sage-grouse habitat and energy development overlap. Within this area, there are plans to construct 3,550 natural gas wells in an area that is currently occupied by a small, seemingly isolated sage-grouse population. Currently, little information is known about the survival, reproductive success, or habitat use of this population. The Uintah Basin Local Working Group, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, BLM, Anadarko Petroleum Inc, Enduring Resources LLC, the Ute Tribe, and other partners are working to collect this information and identify conservation measures that can be used to mitigate the effects of increased energy development on the Seep Ridge sage-grouse population.

In 2007, we began a study in order to address these questions. Eleven sage-grouse were captured in 2007 and additional sage-grouse will be captured and monitored in 2008. This research will provide a basis for comparison as energy development progresses, information to guide management decisions, and aid in developing mitigation measures to reduce the effects of energy development on the sage-grouse. For more information visit our web site at <http://utahcbcp.org/files/uploads/2007UBARM.pdf>.

UTILITY POLES, RAPTORS, AND SAGE-GROUSE: DO PERCH DETERRENTS WORK?

By Phoebe Prather, USU Graduate Student

Studies have shown that the increase of man-made structures, such as fence posts, utility poles, and windmills, has led to an increase of raptor and corvid (ravens, crows and magpies) visitation to areas that do not naturally support elevated perches. Thus in areas where elevated manmade structure abound, raptors and corvids may enjoy increased foraging and predation efficiency with the availability of perch sites as well as additional nesting and roosting sites. While this is good for raptors and corvids, it can be detrimental to sage-grouse.

A variety of deterrents have been developed for use on utility poles to deter raptors and corvids from perching on these poles. The effectiveness of these perch deterrents has never been compared in a field study. We have been studying the effectiveness of five different perch discouragers mounted on power poles along a 7.5 mile stretch of utility poles located within the range of the Gunnison sage-grouse population in San Juan County, Utah.

We have recorded seven species of raptors and two species of corvids in the study area. Golden eagles were the most common perching birds. Other species recorded included Bald eagles, Ferruginous hawks, Rough-legged hawks, Red-tailed hawks, Northern harriers, Merlins, Black-billed magpies, and common ravens. Seven of the nine species recorded in the area were observed perching on the study power poles.

We are presently completing our second year of field data collection. Based on our preliminary analysis, it appears that none of the perch deterrents evaluated have been effective at deterring raptors or corvids from perching on the study poles. The photographs accompanying this article show a golden eagle perched on some of the deterrents evaluated. This type of perching behavior was observed in other raptors that inhabited the area. For more information on this study, visit our web site at <http://utahcbcp.org/files/uploads/2007SWOG.pdf>.



Managing sage-grouse in conjunction with energy development can be a difficult task. Little information is currently known.



By Chris Perkins, USU Graduate Student

The Castle Country Adaptive Management Local Working Group (CCARM) was formed in 2006 to address concerns regarding local sage-grouse populations in Carbon and Emery Counties. Little is known about greater sage-grouse that inhabit the Wildcat Knoll and Horn Mountains. Previous data collection efforts have been limited to monitoring male lek attendance. However these counts have been inconsistent because of limited accessibility during the early spring months.

CCARM recently partnered with Canyon Fuel Company (CFC), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the Utah Division of Wildlife to learn more about the populations and the factors affecting their productivity. This information need was identified by the group in their recently completed greater sage-grouse conservation plan. The USFS and CFC have built wildlife guzzlers on the Wildcat Knoll plateau located above the CFC SUFCO coal mine. CFC is also proposing to develop a water system on Wildcat Knoll to improve livestock grazing distribution and benefit sage-grouse. This study will begin in the spring and run through 2010. It will help the partners to determine how habitat conditions, in particular water availability and the presence of wet meadow or wetland sites, and land use activities (i.e., grazing and subsurface mining) affect greater sage-grouse habitat use. The results will provide working groups, local managers, and agencies with critical information on sage-grouse ecology in the region, including population estimates, distribution, annual habitat use, and habitat conditions. This study will also provide critical breeding locations and information on how current land uses affect greater sage-grouse ecology.



VOLUNTEERS SCOURING THE COUNTRY SIDE FOR NEW LEKS

By Todd A. Black, USU/EXT

You have heard the old saying, “spring and love is in the air.” This is also appropriate for Utah’s grouse populations because spring is the mating or ‘strutting’ season as us “grouzers” like to call it. As you sit peacefully in your office or home reading this newsletter and enjoying your favorite beverage volunteers from across the state are searching high, low, and everywhere in-between for new grouse ‘lekking’ sites.

In 2007 Utah State University Extension (USU/EXT) and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) implemented a pilot project with volunteers enrolled in Utah’s Dedicated Hunter program to count leks and visit historical leks in Northern Utah. The project yielded mixed results. While some new areas were visited and volunteers did an excellent job and collected great data others struggled with weather, directions, and morning blues. As a result some areas were over looked. “This year we are approaching this a bit differently” said David Dahlgren, USU/EXT, who is working with wildlife officials and coordinating volunteer efforts. Dave met with DWR biologists and past volunteers to identify specific geographic areas that they feel have a need to be searched. This effort also completes an action identified by Utah’s greater sage-grouse local working groups who expressed the need for identifying all sage-grouse lekking areas in Utah.

USU/EXT and DWR personnel are holding training meetings throughout March and into April to train the volunteers how to look for leks and what to do if they find one. Volunteers will be searching for greater sage-grouse in Wayne, Piute, Box Elder, Rich, Tooele, and Cache counties and for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in Box Elder, Cache, Weber, and Rich counties from now until the end of April. We estimate over 50 volunteers will log over 500 hours to search these areas.

Dahlgren also pointed out how huge this effort is and that it may take several years to search these areas. “To be effective you might only be able to cover one to two square miles in a given morning and we have already mapped out over 100 square miles. That’s a lot of time.” With this increased search effort underway officials and volunteers hope to find birds where there is habitat to support them. For more information about this effort or to participate in the project contact Dave Dahlgren 435-881-1910 dkd@cc.usu.edu or Todd Black at 435-770-9302 tblack@cc.usu.edu



If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.



UTAH'S WILDLIFE ACTION PLAN

By Joan Degiorgio, Northern Mountains Regional Director, The Nature Conservancy, jdegiorgio@tnc.org

The Utah Wildlife Action Plan, created in 2005, was a major step forward in the protection of Utah's wildlife. It identified the wildlife species of greatest conservation need and key habitats, as well as general threats and potential conservation solutions. While the Utah Wildlife Action Plan provides a valuable starting point, crucial work remains to be done in order to make the Plan a practical tool for protecting the state's native species and habitats. To take the next step towards implementation, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources joined forces with the Nature Conservancy and Utah State University Extension to apply the Nature Conservancy's strategic planning tools to identify the highest priority areas for conservation action. Once the "Action Areas" throughout the state are identified, a conservation action plan (CAP) for select areas will be prepared. These "CAPs" are biologically driven and will result in a set of local place-based strategies that address the greatest threats to at-risk species and habitats. State, federal, and local agencies, conservation and sportsmen's groups, local landowners and many others will be involved in the development of the project.

A state Wildlife Action Plan, with detailed and place-specific strategies will offer an unprecedented solution for Utah. The Plan will serve as a guide for those interested and responsible for Utah's most sensitive wildlife and the habitats, providing a clear, actionable, information-driven blueprint for statewide conservation success. For more information or a copy of the original Plan, visit <http://wildlife.utah.gov/cwcs/>.

"The enhancement of Utah's statewide Wildlife Action Plan is crucial to the future of our native species and to the protection of our natural resources. I encourage everyone to participate in this new process, and to help make the coordinated action strategy a reality."

Jim Karpowitz,
Director, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources