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UTAH'S GREATER SAGE-GROUSE REVISED 2009 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PLAN GOING TO RACs FOR REVIEW

Jason Robinson, Upland Game Project Leader, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources

Greater sage-grouse populations have declined range wide, and Utah is no exception. Many of you may know that greater sage-grouse have been petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act several times by several organizations. The species is currently undergoing a 12-month review process. In response to the decline and concerns for sage-grouse the Utah Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse was completed in 2002 and implementation began even before the ink had dried. Much research has been conducted in Utah and range wide on sage-grouse since the 2002 Plan was completed. Thus we now know more about sage-grouse ecology, distributions, and response to management than we did in 2002. In response to better information and changing threats to sage-grouse within Utah, the 2002 Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse is in the process of being updated.

To revise the 2002 Plan, a committee of 15 individuals assembled as an advisory group by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) began meeting in September 2008. The committee represented a diverse group of interested parties to include sage-grouse local working groups, land management agencies, researchers, oil and gas groups, private landowners, sportsmen, NGOs, the Utah Wildlife Board, Farm Bureau, and UDWR. The committee has completed their regular meetings, and has had the opportunity to provide comments and feedback to UDWR regarding the Utah Greater Sage-grouse Management Plan 2009. This plan is currently in its final draft form. Several changes have been made from the original 2002 plan. This plan, along with all UDWR plans, will go through the Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) in each of the five UDWR regions within the state. The public is welcome to come and ask questions and provide comments (details provided below). These meetings are scheduled to take place in May 2009. After the public meetings, the plan will then be presented to the Utah Wildlife Board for approval; this is scheduled to take place in June 2009. Upon approval from the Utah Wildlife Board, the plan will begin implementation.

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RAC REVIEW MEETINGS

May 12 SR RAC Meeting begins at 7 pm in Fillmore

May 13 SER RAC Meeting begins at 6:30 pm at the John Wesley Powell Museum (1765 E Main Street, Green River)

May 14 NER RAC Meeting begins at 6:30 pm at Western Park Room #1 (302 E 200 S, Vernal)

May 19 CR RAC Meeting begins at 6:30 pm at the Central Region Conference Center (1115 N Main Street, Springville)

May 20 NR RAC Meeting begins at 6 pm at the Brigham City Community Center (24 N 300 W, Brigham City)



Photos courtesy of Todd Black

1 SAGE-GROUSE, 2 SAGE-GROUSE, 3 SAGE-GROUSE; GETTING BETTER AT COUNTING SAGE-GROUSE

David K. Dahlgren and Terry A. Messmer, Utah State University, Community Based Conservation Program

As you read this newsletter, greater sage-grouse are well into their breeding season. Male sage-grouse began strutting their stuff in late March on strutting display grounds or leks throughout Utah in anticipation of attracting the interest of female grouse. These leks are typically located in open habitat near sagebrush cover. In addition to facilitating breeding, this annual lekking affords biologists an opportunity to count strutting males. Biologists then use these counts as an index for estimating populations and tracking trends. Sounds like a pretty convenient way to track changes in sage-grouse populations; or is it?

Unfortunately, two key components are missing for biologists to truly extrapolate male counts to reliable population estimates. First, male lek attendance rates on a given day are relatively unknown and may vary by population. Second, population sex ratios are unknown, and may also vary by location. In addition, research has shown that other factors such as disturbances, predation pressure (mainly coyotes and golden eagles), and/or weather conditions can influence lekking behavior of greater sage-grouse, and therefore, possibly lek attendance rates and ultimately population trend estimates.

Traditional lek counts have been used to estimate greater sage-grouse populations for decades. Population trends based on current methods of counting suggest the sage-grouse numbers have declined range-wide. These declines have led to local and range-wide petitions to federally list this species as threatened or endangered. To address threats to sage-grouse, many western states have organized local working groups (LWGs). State agencies and LWGs in their sage-grouse conservation plans have identified obtaining better estimates of population trends and documentation of species response to management actions as one of their highest priority information needs.

To address these concerns, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Utah State University, and other partners are embarking on a 2 year project to study greater sage-grouse lekking behavior. The objectives of this research are to determine: 1) the lek attendance probability of male sage-grouse; 2) environmental factors, including predation pressure, that impact these probabilities; 3) lek count error rates; and 4) to obtain population level sex ratios.

Counts of strutting sage-grouse males on leks have been used to estimate population size and trends. These counts are often affected by environmental factors and may not be true representations of populations.



By obtaining better male lek attendance rates, counting error rates, and sex ratios, valid population estimates can be obtained for better management of this federal candidate species. This research is in cooperation with range-wide sage-grouse conservation efforts, and will contribute to sage-grouse conservation here in Utah and range-wide.

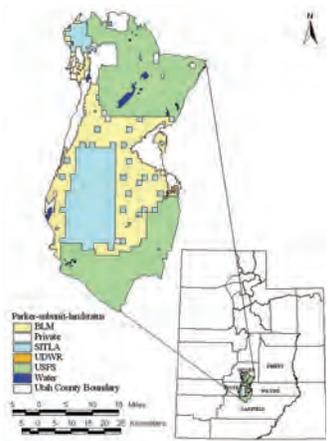
PARKER MOUNTAIN NAMED IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

Wayne Martinson, Utah Important Bird Areas Coordinator, National Audubon Society

Parker Mountain is now recognized as a Global Important Bird Area (IBA). The world population of greater sage-grouse is estimated at 150,000. To meet global criteria for this species a site needs to regularly support 1% of the population or have 40 breeding pairs. Parker Mountain easily meets these criteria. The Parker Mountain IBA consists of approximately 592,400 acres. Two other areas that are recognized as Global IBAs due to the numbers of greater sage-grouse are Desert Land & Livestock Ranch and Upper Strawberry Watershed. A San Juan County IBA is recognized as a Global IBA due to the presence of Gunnison sage-grouse.

The Utah IBA program requires landowner permission before an area is recognized as an IBA. Being an Important Bird Area does not obligate or restrict management by a landowner in any way whatsoever. Hopefully Utah and Global IBA recognition can help landowners and others with conservation of these areas.

There are currently 21 Important Bird Areas in Utah. Ten of these are recognized as Global IBAs. More information is available at www.audubon.org/bird/iba/utah.



Lorien Belton, Utah State University, Community Based Conservation Program

The final summary report for the range-wide needs assessment study of sage-grouse local working groups will be available online in mid-April. This report presents results from the mail survey and case study interviews, as well as summary recommendations. Topics addressed include:

- Participant profiles
- Reasons for joining and leaving
- Assessments of group process and atmosphere
- Measures of success
- Challenges and barriers to success
- Information needs
- Information format preferences
- Funding priorities
- Threat perceptions
- Levels of trust
- Impacts of possible changes
- Recommendations for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other agencies involved in LWGs



Drawing courtesy of Brian Maxfield

Funding for this research was provided by an NRCS Fish and Wildlife Conservation Grant. In addition to the longer Technical Report, an upcoming 6-page NRCS “Wildlife Insight” publication will highlight the NRCS-related recommendations, and will be available to the public later this spring.

Both the Technical Report and the Wildlife Insight publication will be made available for download in pdf format at the Web site of the Institute for Social Science Research on Natural Resources, <http://sswa.usu.edu/reports.html>, as well as the Utah LWGs Web site, hosted by USU Extension, <http://www.utahcbcp.org/>. The Technical Report will be provided to NRCS biologists and state wildlife agencies in states with sage-grouse. Questions can be addressed to Lorien Belton at 435-770-2413 or Lorien.Belton@usu.edu.

SOUTHERN UTAH SAGE-GROUSE FIELD TRIPS

Nicki Frey, Utah State University, Community Based Conservation Program

This spring I was lucky enough to host two field trips to watch greater sage-grouse strut, one in the Color Country and one in the southwest desert region. First, the Southern Utah chapter of the Audubon Society took their 2nd annual field trip to visit Color Country’s sage-grouse. This year I took the group, led by Kevin Wheeler to a lek just south of Panguitch. We had participants from as far as Flagstaff, AZ. We arrived at site just as the sun rose across the valley. It was a clear, beautiful day for watching males perform on the lek. Sagehen hollow is one of the larger leks in southern Utah, with more than 60 attending males each year. On this day we counted at least 50 males in two areas of this widespread lek. Across the valley we could see more sage-grouse flying to and from another sight. As the sun rose, there was that moment (anyone that has seen it, knows the one) when the sun hits the grouses’ breast like a reflector beacon. Suddenly we could count twice as many birds as before. The group was duly impressed. Then we saw the pronghorn on the crest of the hill. And then five more. We watched them walk across the landscape, behind the performing grouse. About that time, one of us in the group noticed something moving on a distant hill -- a herd of elk. We watched as about 100 elk moved over the crest of the hill, down the slope and into the valley. To complete the picture, imagine the horned larks flitting in and out investigating the group. It was definitely an idyllic morning; a memorable field trip to see a beautiful site. It definitely makes the early morning drive worthwhile!



Photos courtesy of Nicki Frey

Next, I brought the Southern Utah University Ornithology class out to a ‘new’ lek. This lek was found by an initiative of the Southwest Desert Local Working Group. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) coordinated with Jim Guyman, a retired biologist, to investigate historical leks that hadn’t been visited in a while. As a result, six ‘new’ leks were found that are now being monitored by UDWR. “Lost Spring” is a smaller lek, with only five males attending. Yet, in an area where leks blink in and out, this one is consistent. About 12 students braved the brisk spring wind to view this lek. As a reward, one male came around the bushes and appeared to pose and strut just for the class. We discussed the natural history of Greater sage-grouse, threats to the populations, and what was being done in the area to improve grouse habitat and populations. It was another great day!



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 E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.

www.utahcbcp.org

UTAH PARTNERS TO HOST ANNUAL MEETING, APRIL 28

The Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD) are holding their annual meeting on **April 28th** in Richfield, at Snow College. Because sage-grouse habitat projects often come before the UPCD groups, you may be interested to participate in this meeting. It will be an excellent opportunity to provide feedback and thoughts about the UPCD process. The CBCP staff will also be providing an update on LWG project implementation as it relates to the Watershed Restoration Initiative. If you are interested in attending and have not already RSVP'd, please contact Rory Reynolds at roryreynolds@utah.gov as soon as possible to register.

WDARM and the Central Region UPCD will have a summer field tour May 27, 2009. Watch the Web site for more details. Contact Lorien Belton at lorien.belton@usu.edu to RSVP.



Utah's Watershed RESTORATION INITIATIVE

Snow College, Richfield Campus
 Conference Center
 April 28, 2009 9:00-4:00

Draft Agenda

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 9:00 a.m. | Welcome-Review Agenda/Meeting Goals/Introductions | Rory |
| 9:15 a.m. | Opening remarks | Mike Styler Utah PCD Directors Rory |
| 9:30 a.m. | Watershed Program- Implementation and Returns -Locally led regional teams -Leveraging investment & intellectual capital -Roles and responsibilities -Making decisions -Project selection | Rory |
| 10:00 a.m. | BLM Statewide Watershed Restoration Strategic Plan | Curtis Warrick |
| 10:15 a.m. | Break | |
| 10:30 a.m. | Web based planning tool & HUC 8 assessment | Nathan & A.J. |
| 11:30 a.m. | Watershed tie to Local Working Groups | Terry Messmer |
| 11:45 a.m. | Lunch | |
| 12:30 p.m. | Forestry connection | Tim Garcia |
| 1:00 p.m. | Monitoring update | Jason Vernon |
| 1:30 p.m. | Small group breakout What needs to be done differently? What are we not doing but should? | Rory and A.J. |
| 2:00 p.m. | Break | |
| 2:15 p.m. | Small group breakout-continued | Rory and A.J. |
| 2:45 p.m. | Teams report out | Teams |
| 3:30 p.m. | Action items | Rory and A.J. |

