

# THE COMMUNICATOR

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## UTAH'S LOCAL WORKING GROUPS ACHIEVE A DECADE OF SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION

By Terry Messmer

In 2009, the Utah Community-based Conservation Program (CBCP) and Utah's Adaptive Resources Management Sage-grouse Local Working Groups (LWG) will pass a milestone that includes a decade rich in conservation planning. Subsequent to the organization of Utah's first LWGs in 1998, the Utah Wildlife Board approved Utah's Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse. This plan mandated the organization of a comprehensive sage-grouse LWG process to develop and implement conservation plans in Utah. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources in cooperation with Utah State University Extension, and representatives from state and federal agencies of land and resource management, non-governmental organizations, private industry, local communities, and private landowners have worked together to prepare LWG sage-grouse conservation plans. Plan recommendations and guidance are voluntarily being implemented by all LWGs. The LWGs continue to meet regularly to review actions and are now being empowered to adopt plan conservation strategies and actions. In 2008, greater emphasis was placed on identifying population and habitat conditions and issues specific to each LWG conservation area. The LWGs plans, past activities, and a summary of their actions completed in 2008 can be found on line at [www.utahcbcp.org](http://www.utahcbcp.org) (Fig. 1).

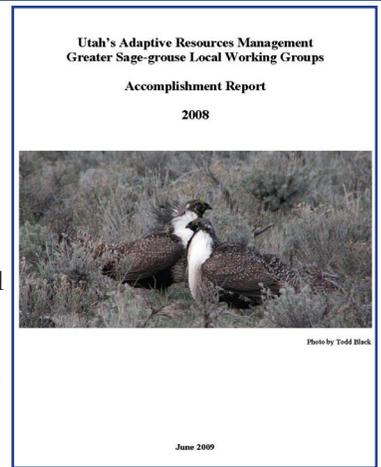


Fig. 1. A copy of LWGS 2008 accomplishments can be found online. To access the report click on the title page found on the Web site.

**IN THIS ISSUE**

- UTAH'S LOCAL WORKING GROUPS ACHIEVE A DECADE OF SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION.....1**
- GOT SAGE-GROUSE? NEED HABITAT? .....1**
- UPDATES FROM THE FIELD.....2**
- VOLUNTEERS CONTINUE TO PROVIDE THE GRASS-ROOTS ORGANIZATION OF SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION IN UTAH.....3**
- WEST DESERT FIELD TOUR BRINGS MANY GROUPS TOGETHER.....4**
- CBCP MISSION STATEMENT.....4**

## GOT SAGE-GROUSE? NEED HABITAT?

By Terry Messmer

In Utah, sage-grouse inhabit sagebrush habitats of the Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin geographic regions between 4,000 to 9,000 feet in elevation. The largest populations are found in Rich County, the Park Valley area of Box Elder County, on the Diamond and Blue Mountains in Uintah County, and on the Parker Mountain in Wayne County. Pioneer journals indicate that sage-grouse were abundant throughout Utah in the early 1800s. However, sage-grouse in Utah may occupy less than 50 percent of their previous habitat. These declines have been largely attributed to lost habitat. One bright spot is that about 50 percent of the remaining sage-grouse habitat and populations are on private land.

**GOT SAGE-GROUSE ?**

**Need Habitat ?**

[www.utahcbcp.org](http://www.utahcbcp.org)

Because sage-grouse occupy diverse landscapes, each exhibiting dif-  
*Continued on page 2*



*Natasha Gruber*

By Todd Black

Graduate students from Utah State University play an integral role as participants in Utah's Adaptive Resources Management Sage-grouse Local Working Groups (LWGs). The students often work long hours, under extreme conditions, conducting the research needed to evaluate the effects of LWG management actions on sage-grouse and other wildlife. Their research provides the data and information needed by LWGs to guide future conservation decisions. Here is what some of the students have been reporting this field season.



*Hen with radio collar. Photo courtesy of Chris Perkins.*



*Eric Thacker*

Natasha Gruber is currently working on the Anthro Mountain as part of the Uintah-Basin LWG to evaluate the effect of translocating birds from Parker Mountain on sage-grouse productivity. Of the 30 radio-collared hens released, 8 have died, 1 went to Range Creek, 1 to Emma Park (but has since returned to Anthro), and 3 are missing. Natasha was also able to capture and radio-collar 8 resident hens and 4 males on Anthro. Of the 30 released birds, 15 hens initiated nests and one re-nested, resulting in 16 nests (4 of the nests were abandoned, 4 depredated, and 8 hatched). Five of the resident hens initiated nests (2 were depredated). Natasha also sutured transmitters onto 35 chicks (10 broods and has one more brood to suture). Currently only 5 of the 35 chicks are still alive due to high predation rates (mainly coyotes and raptors).



*Michael Guttery*

Eric Thacker is working in Grouse Creek to evaluate management actions implemented by the Box Elder LWG. This season, spring rains have made Grouse Creek unbelievably green. Eric started the season with 16 radio-collared hens and had 75% of the hens initiate nests; 58% of nesting hens had nests predated; 31% of nesting hens hatched at least 1 egg; Brood survival (at least 1 chick lives to 42 days within the brood) is 50%; and he has reported 2 hen mortalities for a mortality rate of 13% since April 2009.

Michael Guttery is working on Parker Mountain to evaluate management actions implemented by the Parker Mountain LWG. He is evaluating sage-grouse and vegetation response to sheep grazing treatments and studying nesting ecology and chick survival. It has been a tough year for field work because of daily spring rains. Parker is greener than it has been in a long time, and the grouse seem to be responding accordingly. Here are some numbers: nest initiation is over 80% and nest success is 50%. He has radio-collared 57 chicks from 9 broods. By the time he is done he will have marked over 70 chicks. Chick mortality has been fairly high for low elevation broods. He reported finding a chick transmitter in a pile of coyote scat. So far survival is fairly high for the higher elevation broods.



*Chris Perkins*

Chris Perkins is working on Horn Mountain and Wildcat Knoll as part of a project to document the ecology of sage-grouse inhabiting these areas for Castle County LWG. All together this year he collared 20 hens between the Wildcat and the Horn. He reported 18 of the 20 hens initiated nests. On the Horn, all 9 hens initiated, and 2 have been depredated (with the suspect predator being coyotes). Here are a few numbers from the Horn and Wildcat: Overall nest initiation: 95%; Horn initiation: 100%; Wildcat initiation: 91%; Horn nest success: 56%; Wildcat nest success: 60%; Horn adult survival: 94%; and Wildcat adult survival: 56%.

### GOT SAGE-GROUSE? NEED HABITAT? CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ferent land ownership patterns and issues, management in areas where sage-grouse occur must be viewed as being unique. In addition, land uses are extremely variable across these areas thus requiring site-specific management information to address population declines and community socio-economic needs. To assist landowners and other land managers implement projects to benefit sage-grouse, the Utah Community-Based Conservation Program (CBCP) has launched the GOT SAGE-GROUSE – NEED HABITAT Initiative. The initiative identifies managers who live nearby and are willing and able to assist private landowners in the planning, funding and implementation of habitat projects. To provide landowners and others a daily reminder of these opportunities, we are distributing hundreds of refrigerator magnets that carry this conservation message and provide a Web site link with contact information for the sage-grouse manager nearest them. Got Sage-grouse – Need Habitat!!!!

# VOLUNTEERS CONTINUE TO PROVIDE THE GRASS-ROOTS ORGANIZATION OF SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION IN UTAH

By S. Nicole Frey

The Utah Community-based Conservation Program (CBCP) is a “grass-roots” organization. While this term is often used with politics to describe a candidate’s political machinery, I think the term aptly applies sage-grouse conservation in Utah. As the mainstream online encyclopedia “Wikipedia” states, the fundamental basis for a grass-roots organization is that the group supporting it is natural and spontaneous. Furthermore, the power of the group is at the local level, with many volunteers in the community giving their time and resources to the support a common cause. Without community, as its name suggests, the CBCP would fail. Each community knows what is best for that region, and when given the reins, guides the program to reach its fullest potential.



*Joy Heaton taking her first helicopter ride to scout for new grouse leks. Thank you, Joy, for all your support.*

Many people wondered what Utah’s Adaptive Resources Management Sage-grouse Local Working Groups (LWGs) would do after they finished writing the conservation plans and if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that listing sage-grouse was not warranted. Would the LWGs rest on their laurels and stop meeting and let their plans gather dust on shelves? How would the CBCP and LWGs keep the community interest going once the threat of a listing disappeared? Would the LWGs still work to implement their plans?

It has been a couple of years since the plans were written, and these questions have been answered. The LWGs did not disband and community interest and support for implementing the action steps in their plans continues to grow. Here are a few examples of grass-roots efforts by local community members that I’ve witnessed in the Color Country (CCARM) and the Southwest Desert (SWARM) LWGs. These are efforts that were unprompted and spontaneous – actions that members took because they were interested in the CBCP and the success of the local working groups. Similar efforts are occurring throughout the state.

A major project in Color Country has included monitoring greater sage-grouse in the southern-most population, located around Alton, Utah. Each year members of CCARM volunteer their time and resources to help trap grouse for the radio-telemetry study. Night after night, they volunteer their time and their equipment to look for and trap sage-grouse. Because of their efforts we’ve maintained a 4-year research project and answered important questions about grouse habitat use, movements and treatment effects in southern Utah.

Conducting the research project requires young technicians to walk the landscape in search of grouse, often in remote areas, hours away from the home base. Out of concern for the safety of our technicians, the Heaton family of Alton graciously took on the role of point-of-contact for the techs while they were in the study area. They’ve even provided sleeping quarters for technicians, to reduce their travel time. On one occasion, I received a phone call about a truck with a flat tire stuck in the mud. In a few minutes, the Heatons were in their trucks and headed out to help the tech. The care and dedication toward technician safety illustrates the Heaton’s dedication to our research and our mission to increase our knowledge of grouse in southern Utah.

Continually getting the word out to the public about the LWGs is often a challenge. Members come and go, email and post addresses change, and it is a constant task to make sure that the LWG process continues to be a public process, not an agency process. To this end, local newsletters and newspaper articles are invaluable. Several of our members in SWARM and CCARM are great writers, and graciously put their skills to good use. These articles are presented in the region newspapers, and often highlight challenges and success of our different efforts. Additionally, these newspaper articles help to notify the public about upcoming activities such as field tours and open houses. Local groups, such as Utah Farm Bureau Federation and Utah Area Conservation Districts, also report upcoming events and LWG successes in their newsletters. There is no better show of support for a program than exposure and word-of-mouth testimony from its members.

Many of our actions can be limited by funding, especially in our current economic climate. LWGs members have also demonstrated innovation and creativity in fundraising. Many LWG members have years of experience living and working in southern Utah, and consequently have a large social network. They have tapped this network to identify new avenues of funding, writing and/or personally supporting grants to help fund LWG efforts. For example, one LWG member had the great idea of using the Dedicated Hunter program to help with our advertisement project. So far, this idea has been fruitful, and when it is complete, it will be a fantastic example of how far our limited resources can go when we get creative.

These examples are a few of a countless stream of how grassroots of conservation grow in a community. Because of their commitment and initiative, the communities within the LWGs in southern Utah have successfully expanded their influence. Consequently, the conservation effort has grown larger and had more success in its decade of implementation than many expected. When the community comes together to support its local programs, there is no limit to what it can do.

## *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.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

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[www.utah.cbcp.org](http://www.utah.cbcp.org)

### WEST DESERT FIELD TOUR BRINGS MANY GROUPS TOGETHER

By Lorien Belton

On May 27, three natural resource coordination groups came together for an informative field tour near Vernon. The West Desert Adaptive Resources Management (WDARM) Sage-grouse Local Working Group, the Central Region Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD), and the Squarrose Knapweed CWMA held a joint field tour to visit a variety of sites. The tour included juniper lop-and-scatter, chaining, Dixie harrow, reseeding, and weed treatment project sites. At each the partners shared their experiences, both successes and challenges. The tour stopped at several sites to view planned, recent, and several year-old sites being rehabilitated for early-season sage-grouse use. As expected, forb production in the older sites was notably better than in the first-year site, and the group appreciated the chance to see and understand what areas look like early on before "success" has been determined.



*Field tour participants. Photos courtesy of Lorien Belton.*

Plant identifications by Renae Bragonje of the U.S. Forest Service and Mark Farmer, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR), helped everyone in the group better identify squarrose knapweed in the field, in addition to many of the newly seeded grasses and forbs. Over lunch, Alan Mitchell, a local landowner and WDARM co-chair, shared his perspectives on local land use and changes he has observed.

One notable stop near the end of the tour was at a privately owned field where native grass seeds are grown for sale to DWR and others for reseeding projects like those the group visited. The chance to see native seed sources in commercial production was an eye-opening experience for many, and generated discussion about the challenges of reseeding, from availability and durability of various species, to the difficulty of controlling invasive weeds like cheatgrass that compete with native grasses in the commercial setting, just as they do in the natural setting.

Over 70 individuals attended the tour. In addition to the Utah participants, natural resource managers from Idaho and New Mexico came along to learn more about how the Utah Partners program works. The tour provided an excellent opportunity for on-the-ground learning and discussion.