The Gunnison Sage-grouse –Together we can help them thrive

As dawn breaks on crisp spring mornings in the sagebrush hills of the Gunnison Basin, the Gunnison Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus)* perform their ancient mating ritual. Ever vigilant for signs of danger, the male sage-grouse dance, drawing their mates to their lek, or mating ground. One by one, female birds appear, attracted by the males displaying their beautiful tail feathers, yellow air sacs, long "pony tails" and alluring voices. Species survival is their goal.

What is this special bird?

The Gunnison Sage-grouse ~~(*Centrocercus minimus*)~~ is a breed apart from other sage-grouse, as their genetic makeup, tailfeather pattern, mating call and smaller size attest. The chicken-sized birds inhabit the sagebrush hills up to about 95~~2~~00 ft. in elevation. Once plentiful in several western states, Gunnison Sage-grouse have been declining since the 1950s. While small populations exist in several other areas, the largest ~~remaining~~ population is in the Gunnison Basin. Landowners, resource managers, and conservationists are concerned about ~~declining~~ overall numbers and finding ways to reverse the decline.

Multiple needs, multiple concerns

Habitat is critically important to the Gunnison Sage-grouse. Their requirements are very specific, and human intrusion has made an impact on their terrain. Sage-grouse need sagebrush, riparian areas, and in winter, south facing slopes. Reservoirs (such as Blue Mesa), roads and housing developments have taken away some of their all-important leks, nesting, brood rearing and wintering habitats. Grazing by wild and domestic animals has affected sagebrush and grasses, which serve both as food supply and hiding cover. Powerlines provide raptor perches for eagles and hawks. Weather patterns, especially drought, have great bearing on habitat health. These and other patterns of human land use have created a predicament for the sage-grouse.

What is being done?

Since 1995, community efforts have been focused on the Gunnison Sage-grouse. Representing government agencies, ranchers, biologists, environmentalists, land developers and concerned citizens, the Gunnison Basin Sage-Grouse Strategic Committee is committed to improving habitat and minimizing future impacts to sage-grouse. The *Gunnison Sage-Grouse Rangewide Conservation Plan* (2005) and the Gunnison Basin *Gunnison Sage Grouse Conservation Plan* (1997) provide guidelines toward appropriate actions. In 2014, Gunnison County adopted updated regulations that seek to minimize development conflicts with sage-grouse.

Some of the actions supported by the conservation plans are:

- Improving research and monitoring techniques for more accurate science
- Initiating conservation easements to protect habitat in perpetuity
- Pursuing range management practices that protect and enhance sagebrush habitat
- Closing certain roads and areas during spring mating season ~~to protect leks~~ to reduce disturbance to birds on leks
- Providing guidance to developers and builders for projects in sage-grouse habitat.

An important part of the process is informing people about the Gunnison Sage-grouse and its special place in our environment. We believe that informed people will play a part in helping the sage-grouse thrive ~~again~~.

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How You Can Help the Gunnison Sage-Grouse

Protecting an imperiled species is challenging, but there are some simple things residents and visitors can do to help the Gunnison Sage-grouse remain an integral part of its ancestral habitat.

- Recreational activities can impact these sensitive birds. When hiking, biking and driving in sage grouse habitat, remember to stay on trails or roads, leave gates as you found them, and keep pets close to you and under control so as not to disturb or injure grouse.

- Observe the morning mating ritual only at the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site. Arrive while it is still dark, remain in cars and make no noise until after the birds have left the lek. (See siskadee.org for detailed viewing protocols.)

- Respect seasonal road and area closures. Wildlife managers have identified key areas important to sage-grouse breeding and nesting. Closures are an effective way to minimize our impacts during these critical seasons.

- When designing and building your dream home in sage-grouse habitat, be sensitive to the needs of the sage-grouse. Following recommendations of Gunnison County and Colorado Parks and Wildlife will help conserve wildlife and you will be rewarded in the knowledge that your property is being used to provide valuable, quality habitat.

- If you are fortunate to own acreage in sage-grouse habitat, consider placing it in a conservation easement or other conservation agreement. These customized agreements allow for your continued enjoyment while helping sage-grouse and other wildlife thrive.

We can all be encouraged by the number of species being brought back from the brink of extinction by the concerted efforts of diverse people and agencies nationwide. Local efforts are important! If all of us do our part to raise the awareness of our neighbors and friends, the Gunnison Sage-grouse will be better off, and we and future generations will be richer in a world inhabited by the beautiful Gunnison Sage-grouse.

For more information, visit the Gunnison Sage-grouse website at:
www.western.edu/academics/undergraduate/biology/gunnison-sage-grouse, or contact:

Bureau of Land Management— 970-642-4940, www.blm.gov
Colorado Parks and Wildlife— 970-641-7060, www.cpw.state.co.us
Gunnison County Wildlife Conservation Coordinator— 970-641-7604, www.gunnisoncounty.org
Natural Resources Conservation Service— 970-641-0494, www.co.nrcs.usda.gov
High Country Conservation Advocates— 970-349-7104, www.hccacb.org
Sisk-a-dee— 970-641-3959, www.siskadee.org
National Park Service – 970-641-2337 ext. 205, www.nps.gov/cure
US Forest Service— 970-641-0471, www.fs.fed.us
US Fish and Wildlife Service— 970-243-2778, www.fws.gov

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