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**To:** Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee Members

**From:** Rebecca Ricord

**Date:** January 16, 2024

**Included in your packet for the Wildlife Conservation Strategic Committee Meeting:**

January 17, 2024 Agenda

November 15, 2023 Draft Minutes

2024 Lek Access Application and attachments- Seth Owens

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE**  
**REGULAR MEETING AGENDA**

**DATE: Wednesday, January 17, 2024**

**PLACE: Planning Commission Meeting Room, Blackstock Government Center OR via Zoom meeting, Meeting ID: 859 9849 7601 (see Teleconference Information below)**

1. 10:00am
  - Call Regular Meeting to Order; Determination of Quorum; Verify Public Notice of Meeting
  - Agenda Approval for January 17, 2024 agenda
  - Approval of November 15, 2023 Meeting Minutes
2. 10:10
  - Committee Member Comments/Reports
3. 10:50
  - Lek Access Photography Application(s)
4. 11:05
  - USFS Forest Plan Revision Update
5. 11:30
  - Stewardship Award Presentation
6. 12:00pm
  - Lunch
7. 12:20
  - Public Comments
8. 12:25
  - Future Meeting
9. 12:30
  - Adjourn

NOTE: This agenda is subject to change, including the addition of items up to 24 hours in advance or the deletion of items at any time. All times are approximate. Regular Meetings, Public Hearings, and Special Meetings are recorded and **ACTION MAY BE TAKEN ON ANY ITEM**. Work Sessions are not recorded and formal action cannot be taken. Two or more Gunnison County Commissioners may attend this meeting. For further information, contact the County Administration at 641-0248. If special accommodations are necessary per ADA, contact 641-0248 or TTY 641-3061 prior to the meeting.

**Teleconference Information:**

**Zoom meeting, Meeting ID: 859 9849 7601**

**Passcode: 754099**

<https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fus06web.zoom.us%2Fj%2F85998497601%3Fpwd%3DZUxSVE1zY1IPV2wwYXFXaGZvaFo3Zz09&data=05%7C01%7Caleshia.rummel%40cco.nacdnet.net%7Ce0bedb66aff04d97923108dbb3c721e4%7Ced5b36e701ee4ebc867ee03cfa0d4697%7C1%7C0%7C638301440063443156%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljojMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzliLCJBTiI6Iik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=r7ytE13e2VcUU5isTjkhYF0CrSGvUZMJO1KEnNkHkbo%3D&reserved=0>

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**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE  
UNOFFICIAL PUBLIC RECORD MEETING MINUTES  
November 15, 2023**

The November 15, 2023 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was conducted in the Gunnison County Blackstock Government Center, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room, located at 221 N. Wisconsin #D, Gunnison, CO, 81230. The meeting was also available on Zoom.

**Committee Members Present:**

**Voting Members:**

Liz Smith, Vice-Chairperson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)  
Greg Peterson, Gunnison County Stockgrowers  
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large  
Tim Kugler (Gunnison Trails)  
Patrick Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)  
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)  
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)  
Jon Kaminsky, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)  
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)  
Matthew Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)  
Brandon Diamond, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)

**Non-Voting Members**

Kathy Brodhead, BLM

**Others in the Audience:**

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies  
Liam Duggan, USFS  
Bella Biondini, Gunnison Times  
Cheryl Cwelich, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD)  
Sophia Reggiani, WCU  
Phoebe Roberts, WCU  
Gina Phillips, BLM  
Leah Waldner, BLM  
Pete Simic, Happy Habitats  
Paul Rivera, WCU Center for Public Lands  
LADY BEHIND NATHAN DARNELL @24:06

**Staff Members Present:**

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District  
Rebecca Ricord, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department  
Misty Castillo, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department

Others present as listed in text.

**CALL TO ORDER:** Vice-Chairperson Smith called the November 15, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:01 AM.

**DETERMINATION OF QUORUM:** Smith confirmed that a quorum was present.

**AGENDA APPROVAL:** Added WCU student research proposal overviews. **Moved:** by Blair and seconded by Navy to approve the November 15, 2023 agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

**APPROVAL OF SEPTEMBER 20, 2023 MEETING MINUTES:** **Moved:** by Blair and seconded by Navy to approve the September 20, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

## **COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS**

Nathan Darnell introduced himself as the new Western Colorado Supervisor. Blair expects the cheatgrass mapping products from Open Range Consulting this week. The USFWS will begin follow up work with Tarantino to work on a cheatgrass treatment prioritization tool. Blair also is planning another RIS workshop in February or March to work on CED updates.

Magee asked for nominations for the I&E Sub-committee's Stewardship Award by December 5. Magee also said he attended the The Wildlife Society (TWS) conference in Louisville, Kentucky and he thought there may be upcoming opportunities to share accomplishments of the Strategic Committee and Gunnison Basin in future TWS meetings as a demonstration of a landscape-scale habitat restoration collaborative. Magee also explained that a former student in Washington was working on reducing predation by terns and cormorants on salmon with a laser system. Magee contacted the company to learn more about if the laser system would be a good potential system to use at the landfill to reduce raven populations. Diamond said a raven in Gunnison recently tested positive for high prevalence avian influenza (HPAI), although it had been recorded in mountain lions in Gunnison.

Brodhead updated that the BLM did publicly release the draft EIS for the Gunnison Sage-grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment (GUSG RMPA). The BLM planned a large cheatgrass treatment this summer and it was put out for contract and they received one low bid that they had to accept, but the contractor was unable to complete the work. The BLM did do smaller scale treatment projects and follow-up. They did road decommissioning, removing exclosures, other fencing improvements (with Backcountry Hunters and Anglers), and wet meadow treatments.

Simic updated that the USFWS funds went to private lands cheatgrass treatment, working with 30 landowners to treat over 100 acres (mostly from Simic, with help from Wigginton and the conservation crew). He hopes to expand next year. The conservation crew also did treatments on BLM. There was mention at the IMAGINE workshop that the application of sugar can successfully improve the soil biome for the native plant community to compete with cheatgrass, but it would be impractical to use that much sugar across the landscape.

## **WCU GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH PROPOSALS**

Roberts presented on her proposal for her M.S. at WCU. She is working with the BLM and is a Fellow with HCCA. She is looking at long-term changes in plant fossils (phytoliths). This will involve soil cores and carbon dating to determine what kinds of vegetation were present a thousand years ago. She will also look at soil charcoal analysis to examine past fire regimes in sage-grouse habitat. She will test carbon isotopes to determine historic water use efficiency (frequency and intensity of past droughts). Management implications can include botanical species that may be subject to climate change and which species might therefore be useful for seed mixes, historic fire regimes, and how droughts impact the landscape and how wet meadow treatments impact the landscape.

Reggiani also presented on her proposal for an MS at WCU. She is looking at the difference in insect community and diversity in wet meadow treatments and controls. Wet meadow restoration has been shown to increase vegetation cover, and she is hypothesizing that there will likely be an increase in insect abundance and diversity. She expects 5 paired treatment/control sites. She will use pitfall traps and malaise traps and compare insect communities. She expects to find more carnivorous insects in untreated wet meadows, and expects to find more herbivorous insects in treated locations given the increased abundance of herbaceous plant material. Cwelich said they intend this to be a long-term, more robust study than some of the preliminary insect comparisons for the wet meadow treatments. Reggiani also plans on looking at historical community composition.

## **BLM GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT UPDATE**

The public meeting will be December 5, 2023 at 5:00-7:00 pm at the Gunnison Public Library, and a virtual session on December 12 2:00 – 3:30 pm. Waldner went over the GUSG RMPA Draft EIS. The draft EIS is available on the ePlanning website. Volume 1 is the EIS, and Volume 2 has the appendices and maps. The EIS includes all BLM surface and subsurface federal mineral estate (about 2.8 million acres) in Colorado and Utah. There are occupied habitat management areas (OHMA) with suitable continuous habitat; unoccupied habitat management areas (UHMA) with areas outside occupied habitat that were likely formerly occupied and may contain some appropriate habitat; linkage-connectivity areas (LCMA) that have potential for connectivity and movement between populations; and adjacent non-habitat which includes areas within a 1-mile or 4-mile buffer (depending on which alternative) that are not contributing to the annual life-cycle of GUSG. The 1- and 4- mile buffers were chosen related to the distances to nests. The majority of birds nest within 4 miles of occupied habitat so it would be more conservative, whereas the 1 mile buffer would protect some use. 57:42left

There are 5 alternatives. Alternative A is current/no action alternative, which includes the 11 existing Resource Management Plans and consultation process with the USFWS. Alternative B excludes threats in the decision area including livestock grazing and would include the designation of all proposed Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). Alternative C includes minimizing threats to varying degrees rather than eliminating uses primarily in occupied habitats, and no ACECs would be designated. Alternative D is the preferred alternative and would provide a more balanced approach of resource uses. This would exclude, avoid, and minimize threats within occupied habitat, and avoid and minimize threats in unoccupied habitats. They would improve linkage-connectivity habitats. They would include a subset of ACECs. Alternative E is specific to the Gunnison Basin and reflects the Candidate Conservation Agreement, and would only apply to occupied and unoccupied habitat in the Gunnison Basin.

The RMPA preferred alternative would include a disturbance (removal of vegetation/ loss of habitat) cap of 2% in OHMA and a separate 3% disturbance cap in UHMA. There would not be a density cap on energy infrastructure (currently or with the preferred alternative, but is included in Alternative B), which was not considered to be a primary threat in Gunnison. There were disturbance timing limitations from March 1- July 15. Buffers for authorized uses would be 1 mile to 3.1 miles. Livestock grazing would be continued and evaluated with permit renewals to evaluate the duration of use and threshold habitat objectives (grass cover, forb diversity, sagebrush cover). Salable minerals (except existing gravel pits), non-energy leasable minerals, wind energy, and solar energy would be 100% excluded from OHMA areas with the preferred alternative. The BLM will close many areas to leasing in OHMA, and would also have no surface occupancy (NSO) overlapping many of these areas.

There were 15 ACEC nominations. There were several in the Gunnison Basin that moved forward in consideration, including an existing GUSG ACEC for the Crawford population, Dry Creek Basin (San Miguel Population), Sapinero Mesa, Sugar Creek, and Chance Gulch. Alternative D (preferred) would have 4 new designated ACECs and 3 existing ACECs with updated management (South Beaver Creek, Antelope Creek, and the Crawford ACEC).

The public comment period is November 9 through February 6. The next step will be to release the final EIS in summer 2024, followed by a 30-day protest period and a Record of Decision/Approved RMPA in fall 2024. Kaminsky explained that the final EIS may not include the draft alternatives exactly as outlined today; the final EIS may include a combination of parts of proposed alternatives. Phillips explained that substantive public comments would provide relevant information and rationale, and vague questions or preferences will not be incorporated.

## **WET MEADOW RESTORATION UPDATE**

Cwelich reminded the committee that 80% of wildlife use wet meadows but only 2% of the Basin is currently wetland. The Nature Conservancy and other partners in the valley started the wet meadow projects 10 years ago. This year they focused on doing site prioritization in the last year, and they had the multi-jurisdictional conservation crew through BLM, CPW, and UGRWCD that accomplished wet meadow

treatments (96 site assessments for future prioritization, over 200 wetland assessments, and 30 spring assessments). They also did cheatgrass treatments, seeding, road decommissioning, and juniper removal. Wet meadows partners will meet on December 6 to review site assessments and consider prioritization for the next 5-10 years. They also completed 127 structures (36 on CPW, 30 on tribal lands, 61 on private lands). They also did maintenance on 160 existing structures. The BLM is supposed to have a new hydrologist by the end of 2024, and the USFS is considering hiring a new hydrologist and is moving to hire a new wildlife biologist. They had 5 volunteer days with HCCA, CPW, WCU, and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. They did 14 workshops to teach how to do wet meadows restoration and the benefits.

Cwelich went over grants and said each structure cost approximately \$500-600. There were remaining funds in several grants.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

None.

**FUTURE MEETINGS:** Future meetings will occur in the Gunnison County Blackstock Government Center, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room and by Zoom online meetings, unless changed for a specific reason.

12-20-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
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The December meeting will be cancelled. January 17, 2024 will be the next meeting.

**ADJOURN:** The November 15, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:57 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District

# Gunnison Sage-grouse Lek Access Application

Gunnison Basin

Spring 2024

**Application deadline: February 1, 2024**

Name:

Street Address:

City:

State:

Zip code:

Phone:

E-mail Address:

Request Type:    Photography    Video    Audio recording    Other (specify)

Applicant Type:    Commercial User    Non-commercial User

Project Name:

1. Project Goals.

2. How will your project contribute to Gunnison sage-grouse conservation efforts?

3. Justify why you need original photographs, audio recordings, or other products? (Many of these resources are available for public use, contact Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) at 970-641-7060)

4. Explain your qualifications and experience related to this project (please attach examples of your work).

5. Explain your approach for reducing impacts on Gunnison sage-grouse when you are on or near the lek.

6. A protocol was developed for lek activities including the number of days you will be allowed to access the lek. Please indicate dates you are available between April 1 and May 15.

7. Are you willing to share the products you secure with the Gunnison community?

8. If you are working on a conservation related book, please provide information about the book (for example what is the timeline for completion, what is the conservation message you are trying to communicate to readers, etc).

9. If working on a conservation related book, are you open to providing sample text to the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee for review and recommendations?

10. If working on a conservation related book, have you secured a publisher or formal contract?

11. Are you willing to share a blind with a Strategic Committee representative to ensure no violations of the lek viewing protocol occur?

12. Please explain how you will prepare yourself for potentially negative degree weather while sitting motionlessly in a cold blind.

13. Explain any special needs you might require.

Additional Comments

List two professional references

## Frozen Fingers and Frosted Feathers

“I hate the cold...”

“I hate birds...”

I mutter these words as I give the final tug to my backpack straps, cinching it firmly against my back. I blow steamy air against my knuckles, shove them into my mittens, and plod down yesterday’s trail. The rhythmic *swish, thump, swish, thump* of my snowshoes on the crusted snow provides a cadence for my forward movement. Each of my exhales rapidly condenses into an expanding cloud before floating off or frosting the hair on my face.

After enough *swishes* and *thumps*, I reach my GPS point and dump my pack onto the snow. My bare hands, freshly de-mittened, lose their dexterity as the warmth is stolen by the pre-dawn breeze. I empty my backpack, assemble my blind, and crawl in. The steely claws of cold have stolen the heat from my extremities. I lay inside my blind and shove my hands inside my jacket. My chest, protected by my multiple core layers, slowly transfers warmth and returns feeling into my brick-numb hands. With the tingles of blood returning to my fingertips, I prepare my camera gear and wait for the first fingers of daylight to reach across the sky.

“I hate the cold...”

Time travels differently when you’re waiting for the sun to rise. This morning, time melted, and dripped like water off a spring icicle. The liquid of time mirrored the pooling rose gold that poured over the edge of the eastern horizon. The morning had shown up, but the grouse had not.

I enjoy watching the liquid colors of dawn ripple throughout the heavens, but this was not today’s goal. Thoughts of what I had done wrong creep tendrils into my mind, and I convince myself to be patient. The liquidity of time had refrozen. Ten minutes of waiting felt like an hour.

“I hate birds...”

I convince myself to stay for five more minutes. A squall of chatter, rapid-fire stomping, and guttural hiccups and coos fill the air. Our featherweight fighters are arriving at the icy arena. The galliform gladiators gather. Male sharptail grouse display, dance, and duel, viciously defending their stake on the lekking grounds. Hundreds of these leks are contested each spring morning across the great plains, each male is dedicated to showing his valor and courage to the onlooking hens. When the females arrive, the presence of an audience is quickly noted. The hens strut throughout the lek, seemingly unimpressed by those contesting for her hand. The males’ ferocity blazes. Where once there were simply squabbles and a few rounds of roughhousing, now

fully-fledged fights have broken loose across the lek. Wings swing violently at their opposition and clawed feet tear through the air toward the enemy.

The sun is well up by now, and the breathy vapor that leaves my lips is picked up on the drafting breeze that runs through my blind. I have completely forgotten about the frigid environment that I am immersed in. I simply am, I exist as an observer.

By becoming an observer, not only have I distanced myself from my bodily discomforts and human stresses, but I have also rippled the liquid surface of time. I hold witness to an extraordinarily ancient event, a primal battle for genetic continuity. Only the most impressive winged warriors will be given the opportunity to father the next generation, and they know that failure is to end a bloodline. Their fervor and fury provide perspective on the cruelty and competition which is omnipresent in nature. Only the strongest males will be successful this spring

I am entranced by the rhythmic drumroll of feathered feet on frosted snow and awed by the brutal battles of these brawlers. I am amazed by the scene that occurs each spring morning on prairies and grasslands across North Dakota, my home.

A sudden silence washes across the battleground. All is still. Nervous chatter is emitted by a spectating female, and she explodes from the ground, narrowly avoiding her raptorial reaper. Panic spreads throughout the prairie as dozens of grouse rocket into the air. With a few rapid flaps and a long glide, the sharptail have distanced themselves from their hunter, a Northern Harrier, who lazily floats above the snow hoping for a straggler of the morning's battles.

The gray ghost moves on, and the sharptail have scattered. I, listening to my frozen fingers and rumbling stomach, use this as an opportunity to depart the prairie for the morning. I pack up my gear, strap up my snowshoes, and listen to the *swish, thump, swish, thump* once more. By the time I reach my vehicle, the grouse have returned to finish the morning's battles.

“I love birds.”

*Go Get Lost.*

*Seth Owens*

*Education and Outreach Coordinator for North Dakota Pheasants Forever*

*Photography Social Media - [instagram.com/stuff.seth.sees](https://www.instagram.com/stuff.seth.sees) or [www.facebook.com/stuff.seth.sees](https://www.facebook.com/stuff.seth.sees)*

*Contact- [sethowens25@outlook.com](mailto:sethowens25@outlook.com)*

## Pollinators and Wildflowers Stitched Across North Dakota's Prairies

Before dawn, as the sun paints the horizon with strokes of indigo and purple, the prairies of North Dakota awaken to a symphony of life. Amidst the rustling grasses and the whispering wind, intricate interactions unfold between pollinators and wildflowers, setting the stage for nature's harmonious collaboration.

In this web of life, pollinators play a vital role as they flit, buzz, or crawl from flower to flower, orchestrating the essential act of pollination. Among the ensemble of six-legged locomotion, we find an array of common pollinator insects, each contributing their unique notes to the prairie's symphony.

One of the most familiar performers are the honeybees, diligently collecting nectar and pollen from the vibrant prairie wildflowers. With their golden stripes glistening in the morning light, these industrious workers facilitate the cross-pollination necessary for the reproduction of various plant species. Hovering nearby, the Eastern tiger swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio glaucus*) gracefully dances among the blossoms, its vivid yellow wings and bold black stripes adding a touch of elegance to the prairie's tableau.

As the sun ascends higher in the sky, the prairie comes alive with a medley of colors. Blankets of purple coneflowers sway gently, beckoning the attention of bumblebees and solitary bees. These fuzzy visitors, with their tireless buzz, collect pollen with utmost efficiency, ensuring the continuation of these resilient prairie plants.

Amidst the floral congregation, the delicate petals of the wild bergamot attract the admiration of the vibrant hummingbirds. Their iridescent feathers glinting with shades of emerald and ruby, these tiny avian gems become nature's aerial acrobats, zipping from one nectar-filled bloom to another with unmatched agility.

But what significance do these pollinators and wildflowers hold beyond their intrinsic beauty? The answer lies in the interconnectedness of ecosystems, where every player has a role to play. Just as the dancers on a grand stage depend on each other for the success of their performance, so do these prairie inhabitants.

Prairie pollinators, through their tireless efforts, ensure the reproduction of wildflowers, sustaining the delicate balance of the ecosystem. And in doing so, they provide vital food sources for upland gamebirds, such as pheasants and grouse, adding yet another layer to this intricate tapestry of life.

For the Pheasant, the prairie wildflowers serve as both a visual feast and a pantry of insects. As pheasant chicks grow, they rely on the abundance of protein-rich insects found among the petals and leaves. Similarly, the Sharptailed Grouse finds nourishment amidst the prairie's floral bounty, sustaining their populations and contributing to North Dakota's upland gamebird community.

I frequently walk through these prairie landscapes, with my senses immersed in the sights, scents, and sounds of this enchanting symphony, I can't help but marvel at the intricate web of life that unfolds before me. Every pollinator and every wildflower holds a vital role, a small, but crucial, thread that weaves together the prairie's tapestry

The heartbeat of North Dakota's prairies thrives in this delicate balance, where pollinators and wildflowers intertwine. So, we must embrace the beauty of this quilted landscape, and ensure that these precious ecosystems and their charismatic inhabitants perpetuate a legacy for generations to come.

For those fortunate enough to witness this grand performance, it becomes an everlasting connection to the land. These experiences instill a profound appreciation and deep connection to the wonders of our natural world.

Venture forth, like explorers in the sea of grass, guided by the melodic whispers of the prairie wind, and forever cherish the magnificence of our prairie pollinators and wildflowers.

Winter sucks, especially one that was as long and brutal as this last one. Winter eventually ends, and, as the last few snowdrifts melt out from the tree rows in May, spring finally settles across the North Dakota prairies and it brings a rebirth of color, sounds, and smells to the state's grasslands.

As the space between sunrise and sunset lengthens, prairie grouse across the state echo their displays towards the expanses of frosted grassland. With a small population of Greater Prairie Chicken in the east, a smaller population of Greater Sage Grouse in the west, and a vast patchwork population of Sharp-Tailed Grouse filling the grasslands state-wide, the spring lekking season has begun. The ancient behaviors and displays of North Dakota's most common grouse species, the Sharp-Tailed Grouse, are far underappreciated and often unknown. Starting at the end of February and early March, large numbers of male sharptail congregate on lekking grounds. These grassland dancefloors are small swaths of trampled prairie grass that male grouse will use to impress a scrutinizing hen. With wings held low and wide, feet rapidly stomping, and purple air sacs filled, male sharptail compete with each other for the title of "Best Prairie Dancer." Only the best males will find a female, the ones with two left feet won't be so lucky.

Grouse leks occur throughout most of the state, where there are sharptail populations, there must be leks to display on in the spring. With a few early mornings, calm air, miles on backroads, and patience, you can locate a lek and be the audience to the prehistoric ballet that takes place across North Dakota's grasslands.

(If you'd like to experience a grouse lek next spring, stay tuned for year two of our lek viewing opportunities in spring 2024)

Though their displays may not be as athletic, pheasants also are crowing across the state. Around dawn and dusk, it's not uncommon to hear the two-part crow with a *Kraah-Krak!* that echoes across their territory. If you're close enough, you'll hear the thumping of wingbeats following their declaration of ownership on that select spit of prairie. If they are challenged, a flurry of red and gold is soon to follow as two roosters duke it out.

If the male is an especially good fighter or just exceptionally loud, it won't be long until he finds a few hens to escort. The male's maroon breast, blue-green head, scarlet face, and long golden tailfeathers may make him more obvious, but a second look will often reveal a straw-colored hen or two slinking through the wheat stubble.

Songbirds, waterfowl, shorebirds, and others have returned from their warmer winter ranges. The grasses and forbs that create the foundation of our entire prairie ecosystem are also starting to return to life as the landscape shifts from shades of beige to a variety of greens. The whitetail and mule deer does that made it through the winter may also be waddling through a

field, looking like they are about to pop. Fox vixens are working hard to tend to several rough-and-tumble kits, wrestling and playing just outside of their dens. Blue-winged teal hens are likely attended by at least a few drakes as they rummage through the abundant ditches for aquatic invertebrates.

It won't be long until you catch the glimpse of a hen escorting chicks through a labyrinth of mixed grasses. Wildflowers will soon speckle the prairie, filling both your eyes and nose with the sights and scents of spring. It won't be long until you see little golden ducklings taking their first dip into the filled wetlands. Soon you'll see the speckled brown coat of a whitetail fawn jump into the trees as its mother gives a snort and a foot stomp of distrust toward you. Soon you'll hear a chorus of songbirds, one on nearly every fencepost, cattail, tree, and stiff blade of grass, each pouring their heart into their song echoing across the expanse. Orange and black monarchs will soon lay their eggs on a milkweed plant, the first home, and meal for their striped caterpillars. It won't be long until you see a jewel of a dragonfly alight onto a reed, hunting an unlucky mosquito. The paintbrush that colors the prairie works in the mediums of sound, smell, and color. Spring's artist works off the snowy canvas of last winter.

Winter does often suck, but the payoff for patience and resilience is evident as the snow melts, ice thaws, grasses grow, and life blooms across North Dakota. Winter's water has recharged the habitat that shelters our spring observations and fall quarries.

I encourage you all to get out on a backroad and observe spring, firsthand. It's the best reward for tolerating each brutal North Dakota winter. After all, spring will turn to summer, summer to fall, and then we'll all be shoveling snow again. So take advantage of it while spring is here!

I'm often frustrated by that prehistoric, instinctual, fight-or-flight response that all humans have in the 21st century. Not because it was crucial to our ancient ancestors, who were constantly at risk of being preyed upon by a big animal with pointy teeth, but because of the sinking pit in our stomach that we feel when anxious or excited. Here I was, walking through a sea of swishing sagebrush, feeling like I was about to vomit, and I couldn't tell if it was from the excited apprehension or the 2:00 a.m. gas station breakfast burrito.

The prairies look different before daybreak. That gnarled old fencepost that you keyed your location on melts into the inky pool of darkness that exists just outside of your flashlight's glow. In between GPS checks and sweeps of my headlamp, I did find my fencepost. I also found my camouflage belly-blind about 10 yards west of it. I kneeled down into the layer of prairie dust, slung my pack from my shoulders, and quietly set up my camera gear.

The first whispers of dawn dusted the clouds in shades of rose and amber contrasting the endless prairie sky. Time feels slower at daybreak, each second must pass through a drop of pine pitch to pass into eternity. I took every moment, watching the rising sun breathe life into the land. The sun splashed its color onto the summit of an opposing butte, and the signal fire was lit for the morning's show to begin.

A resounding explosion reverberated off the distant valley walls, and several male Sage Grouse thundered over the sagebrush prairie, landing within a stone's throw of the front of my blind. Their winged descent sent dust billowing below them. Sparing no time for socialization, these goliath grouse quickly began the morning's displays.

I've heard the machine-gun foot fire of Sharp-tailed Grouse, and I've encountered the resonating booms and hoots of Greater Prairie Chicken, but nothing could have prepared me for the churning and popping sounds of the Greater Sage Grouse. Tail feathers shook, stretched, and stood tall, and a dark star haloed their impressive stature. Their feathered chests billowed and expanded, like a giant prairie thunderhead. At maximum capacity, no lightning was emitted, but two large yellow air sacs thrust forward and exploded with sound.

*Swish-wala-WOOMP*

*Swish-wala-WOOMP*

After each chest shot sound across the prairie landscape, each male momentarily rested. A nearby bird, finishing up his first round of displays, paused and stood still. He gasped in air, the same way you or I would gasp to hold our breath as we sunk underwater. With each desperate inhalation, his chest swelled, and yellow air sacs began to sink lower. He puffed his chest forward, strutted a few steps closer, and repeated his display.

*Swish-wala-WOOMP*  
*Swish-wala-WOOMP*

This symphony of several avian timpani drummers continued through the morning, only interrupted periodically by possible threats, which were often me coughing or sneezing. About an hour and a half after full sunrise, the displays began to slow. The steady drumbeat that set the cadence at dawn was ending. The fervor was replaced by hunger as the males began picking stems, leaves, and seeds from the ground instead of constantly throwing their air-filled chests. The prairie's winged mercenary, a massive Golden Eagle, soared overhead, slowly descending on monstrous wings. The fearful tension in the remaining grouse finally snapped, and the heavy birds erupted from the sagebrush, once more thundering across the open plains. One by one, they dropped into the taller vegetation of an adjacent field. It was incredible how this colossal grouse disappeared into the grass, not to return to their lekking grounds until tomorrow morning.

That Golden Eagle, frustrated with his lack of breakfast, lazily floated on the morning's breeze in search of less vigilant prey. As if in sync, my stomach let out an annoyed grumble, convincing me that it was time to make tracks. It took mere moments to pack up my blind and my camera gear and to sling my backpack, containing my whole life for the week, onto my back, and I walked back to my vehicle. A rumble reminded me of my hunger. I snatched the granola bar from my waist pocket and snacked with a smile as I recalled the morning's show.

The churn of that ever-reliable Honda engine escorted me from my two-track path through the prairie to a gravel county road and eventually onto the asphalt, where bumpy and noisy sounds were replaced by the whine of rubber on pavement.

"A real breakfast would be good," I told myself as I opened my second granola bar of the morning. I headed to the nearest cafe with an SD card full of photos to share and a brain full of memories that I get to keep with me for the rest of my life

*(For Northland Outdoors Newspaper)*

Lying flat and motionless across the frozen grass of the Red River Valley doesn't exactly seem like a fantastic way to watch the first fingers of daylight reach across the sky, but this is where I find myself. As dawn breaks, a flurry of wingbeats stirs up the dusting of snow.

My alarm goes off promptly at 4:40 am. I turn it off and contemplate my genuine desire to get out from under my warm blanket. It never ceases to amaze me how difficult it can be to fall asleep, but at the moment that obnoxious klaxon goes off, suddenly sleep is there, greeting you like a friend. My second, "snap-to-reality" alarm goes off at 4:42. I annoyedly toss the blanket off of my bed, inadvertently covering Tanka, my Red Lab puppy, and swing my feet over the edge. A misplaced toy screeches under my foot, and suddenly, at 4:43 am, it's playtime. In between tosses and retrieves, I was able to dress, brew coffee, assemble gear, and lace up my boots.

The soft thump of a stuffed fish, half eviscerated from the week's games of tug-of-war, alerts me to a four-footed presence behind me, a sullen look crumpled across his wrinkly face. "Dad's going hunting," He must think, "and he's leaving me behind."

I sip coffee on the elevator ride down. Three floors isn't that much, but with about 30 lbs of gear, an expensive camera, hot coffee, and the sweet song of slumber still singing in my head, I wasn't in the mood to gamble by taking the stairs. My SUV, Bessie, held together by duct tape, prayers, and spite of death, shudders awake. Hazy yellow beams illuminate my path.

I was early, recent sunshine had burned off some of the ice on the roads, and I was able to lay the pedal down and move quickly before the world woke. I down my remaining mouthful of coffee, feeling the warmth settle down into the center of my being and slowly radiate to my extremities. As the last waves of hot, bean-fueled, energy reach my fingers and toes, I've got my snowshoes secured and backpack strapped. I flip on my headlamp, pull on my last mitten, and plod down yesterday's trail to my belly blind.

I've always noticed that the moment the sun breaks over the horizon, there is a subtle temperature drop. Where there was once a thin vapor that left my lips, now a small cloud of steam escapes my exhale. It is quickly carried out my shooting window on the breeze that drafts through my blind. It causes a glazed blade of brome to quiver.

The morning's sunbeams play across the prairie, casting all in a rosy-golden hue. An avian explosion echoes across the empty expanse of open grassland as beige birds

settle on the trampled turf. One by one, the galliform gladiators gather. A squall of chatter, rapid-fire stomping, and guttural hiccups and coos fill the air. Nearby shrubs, mostly the alien Russian Olive, form a loose ring around the Sharptail lek. Our featherweight battles of dawn begin to attract attention. Hens begin to alight across the branches, and, upon the sight of an audience, the male's ferocity blazes. Where once there were simply squabbles and a few rounds of roughhousing, now fully-fledged fights have broken loose across the lek. Wings swing violently at their opposition and clawed feet tear through the air toward the enemy. From a distance, it may appear that two chicken-like birds morph together into rolling and stumbling tumbleweeds as the avian warriors fight to the death.

The sun is well up by now, and the battlegrounds are brightly illuminated. The white bellies and rumps glare like a flag of surrender. The white beacons and the sounds of war draw in a gray ghost carried on slender black-tipped wings, a male Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*) selects his prey.

A nervous chatter is emitted by a spectating female, and she explodes off of her perch, narrowly avoiding her winged reaper. The panic quickly spreads throughout the prairie as dozens of sharp-tailed grouse rocket into the air in moments. With a few flaps and a long glide, the sharptail have distanced themselves from the hunter, who lazily floats above the tall grass and snow hoping for a struggling survivor of the morning's battles.

The gray ghost moves on, the sharptail, scattered, won't return to the lek for quite some time, and I, listening to the rumbling in my stomach, head home. I was not looking forward to explaining my morning absence to the dog...

Go Get Lost.

A Sharptail Spring. - Seth Owens (@stuff.seth.sees)

Before dawn, the grasslands are nearly silent. Silent, but for the crunching of grass beneath my feet and the melancholy chorus of distant coyotes. Illuminated by naught but the moon, I silently stride through the remnant patches of tallgrass prairie that streak through eastern North Dakota. With how saline the soil is, it's no wonder that the prairie sod had never been broken and developed into farmland. Though this land is unproductive for cash crops like corn and soybeans, it holds a wealth of wildlife that takes advantage of this quilted patchwork of agricultural land and prairie.

My destination is an area of trampled grasses and forbs, somewhat resembling Hollywood and New Mexico's crop circles. Little green men did not create these zones, but they were created through means that have become alien to many living across North Dakota's prairies. As the first sign of dawn creeps quickly across the horizon, I reach the lek.

The dancing of Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) ("Sharpie") is prehistoric and primal. There's something about the rhythmic drumroll of feathered feet, guttural 'hiccupy' call, and the flash of violet that places me, and many others, into a near trance-like state. Though the visual vibrance and subtle saturation of a Sharpie may pale in comparison to a rooster Ring-Necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), their yearly dances are something that I look forward to every year.

Within minutes of my arrival, I am bellied out under a ghillie blanket on the edge of the lek, camera in position. Now, as the orange sun rays begin to pierce the indigo-purple gradient of the sky behind me, the waiting game begins. I've always noticed that the moment the sun breaks over the horizon, there is a subtle temperature drop. Where there was once a thin vapor that left my lips, now there is a small cloud of steam that escapes my exhale. It is quickly carried away on the breeze that causes the frosted blades of grass to quiver.

A sudden explosion is heard overhead as the first grouse of the morning stakes his claim on a section of sod. Soon after, several others join him. Within minutes of the first light, the once silent prairie is now inundated with the spring sounds of Sharptails. Chatter, stomping feet, and hiccups fill the air, a desperate call from the males into the rapidly illuminating sky to attract a mate. Their pleas seem to work, as a female grouse, with face absent of the bright yellow eyebrow of males, alights onto the branch of a nearby shrub. Realizing the attention of a potential mate, the males quickly increase the intensity of their displays. Where once there was only sound and squabble, now the lek has turned into a gladiatorial coliseum. Rival males drive out their competition, and, when push comes to shove, battles break out and loose feathers begin to litter the ground. More females join the committee of judges, only adding to the ferocity of the

fights and the desperation of the dancing. Our galliform gladiators only slow when their audience departs, unimpressed with what they had seen. Perhaps they were hoping to find their Sharptail Spartacus, but this lek was lacking.

With the displays declining, I pack up my gear and prepare myself for the burn of blood returning to my cold extremities. More than satisfied with my experience for the morning, I depart the prairies with the promise of coffee at home.

If I had the power, I would make it mandatory for every student that graduates from a prairie state, high school or college, to visit a Sharpie lek. It may only take but a single morning of their lives, but I truly believe that it will create a connection to the land that will last the rest of their lives. I firmly believe that my first experience on a grouse lek changed the course of my life and has led me to be directly where I am now. As the North Dakota Education and Outreach Coordinator for Pheasants Forever, I am extremely lucky to be able to facilitate opportunities to share this incredible event that occurs in our regional backyards. I hope to inspire the next generation to be passionate about the wonders of the world that happen within five miles of home.

I hope to encourage them to go get lost.