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The Yakima Training Center and Sage Grouse

The Sage Grouse is the largest Grouse bird in all of North America. It has been around since colonization, and was distributed across the west by European settlers. The bird is not only an icon of the American West, but is also a key player in keeping a sustainable habitat alive for many other animals that inhabit the area (Copeland, 1). Sagebrush is what the bird mainly relies on for food, among many other species, and over the past 50 years has been greatly depopulated by conservation efforts from numerous companies, burned to no return by wildfires and grazed over by various military training facilities. The two biggest training facilities in the state of Washington are the US Army Training Facility and the Yakima Training Center. Ironically, these two military facilities have been near some of the largest and most populated Sage Grouse mating areas, or leks, for some time now, and have been in constant flux with people who are concerned for the bird, and the legislation brought forth that might hinder some of their conservation efforts on the habitat which would ultimately hinder some of their training. The Sage Grouse is under attack by habitat destruction, and will continue to be depopulated until more people get involved. This bird is very important to the future of environmental legislation. Why? Because it will set forth what the values and actions of government and those who ultimately make the decisions to keep the habitats alive will be for future issues concerning habitat loss. The Sage Grouse is not what is most important here. If we want to look at the bigger picture, it is ultimately the Sage Brush which is getting grazed over that is most important, because it is a huge habitat recourse to many western animals. Continued damage of Sage Brush and disrespect put forth toward the Sage Grouse and the rest of the habitat that sustains other life will ultimately wipe out the bird and other species in the area. There is a controversy surrounding this bird. One of the biggest and most interesting things that has to do with the bird is that it was not put on the endangered species list due to a sudden rise in population. But the organizations that helped the bird repopulate were tied to the institutions that would have to cut costs if the bird was signed.

The Sage Grouse, like previously mentioned, is the largest Grouse of its kind. And is definitely a peculiar one at that. The Sage Grouse belongs to the "Phasianidae" family, which is a fancy word for the pheasant like bird family it comes from. The Grouse was distributed throughout much of the western states (2, Stinson, Hays, Schroeder) along the southern border and three western Canadian provinces. Sage Grouse were found in southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, western Oklahoma, northern New Mexico and Kansas. They also followed the distribution of the Sage Brush around those areas. Currently, the greater Sage Grouse occur in 11 states- Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, South Dakota, and North Dakota along with 2 Canadian provinces- Alberta and Saskatchewan. About 2% of the Sage Grouse population occurs in Canada with the remainder in the states. Adult males range in size from 66 to 70 cm and females from 48 to 58cm. The bird itself has patterns of brownish gray and black on the upperparts, and a black belly and white underwing coverts and a long pointed tail. Males are larger than females with a black throat and bib and a white breast with white breast feathers which conceal 2 large yellowish-green balloon like sacs which inflate during mating displays. Females are more colorful with grayish white upper throats and the white tips of the under tail coverts that extend part of the way down to the feather rachis. They are very chubby, round bodied birds with a small head and a long tail.

Their nutrition consist of various grasses, forbs, cheat grass, shrub steppe, and insects along with the biggest one, Sagebrush. Sagebrush is the largest part of a Sage Grouse's intake, consisting of 60-80% of the yearly diet. Sagebrush also supports many different species around the west such as Pygmy Rabbits, Sagebrush voles, Sagebrush lizards, Golden Eagles, Pronghorns, Mule Deers and Elk. Many of these species found around Sagebrush cannot be found anywhere else in the world, so the probabilities of them surviving and staying around Sagebrush areas after major depletions is very unlikely.

We first saw depopulations in Sage Grouse in the late 1800s to early 1900's from the same reasons that it has suffered most recently-habitat conservation and overgrazing. You were also legally allowed to hunt the Grouse back then. Hunting regulations were implemented in the 1920's after population declines were seen. As their population rose, they were abundant enough to supposedly be damaging alfalfa and potatoes in the

Badger Pocket area of Kittitas County where hunting then resumed in 1950. The recovery was very temporary though, after shrub-steppe in the surrounding area was converted into agriculture. Sage Grouse populations stayed at low levels in the late 20th century and continued to decline most likely due to big reductions and deteriorations in habitat, and isolation and small size of the remaining populations. We have seen three big players in the loss of Sage brush: urbanization and associated infrastructure development, Sagebrush damage and vicious cycles of wildfires and fire adapted to invasive grasses.

The two biggest populations of Sage Grouse are in Douglas County and the Yakima Training center. In Douglas county most of the land in the county is very poorly suited for agriculture, and in Yakima because the US military prevented agricultural conversion and most other development when first implemented. The Yakima Training center has about 241,000 acres of sagebrush, and about 124,000 acres have been accompanied by the Sage Grouse. “ The survival of Sage Grouse in Kittitas and Yakima counties for the foreseeable future depends on the maintenance of shrub-steppe habitat on the YTC and elsewhere. This requires management of the military activities in critical areas, and the prevention and successful suppression of fires. Maintaining sage grouse habitat where mechanized training exercises occur is different, but a goal of Army Regulation 200-3 is the systematic conservation of biodiversity on army lands within the “context of training”. That could mean anything they want it to mean. Sagebrush levels on the YTC are low when compared to studies from other states, and the destruction of sagebrush on the training center likely affects the sage grouse population(Stinson, Hays, Schroeder, 49).” The military is very aware of the situation with the bird, and has imposed certain regulations to conserve it

The habitat would not be completely destroyed without someone saying something about it. But that isn't to say that the military doesn't continue to put the bird and its habitat in danger - “the most obvious impact of training is the damage to sagebrush cover. An exercise conducted in October 1995 damaged approximately 14% of the big sagebrush occurring in the primary sage-grouse habitat, and probably had negative impacts on the sage grouse population (Cadwell et al. 1996). The combined impacts of exercises in 1995 and 1996 resulted in shrub cover being lost on 11% of the affected area. Exercises such as these definitely had

negative impacts on the populations of Sage Grouse, who's numbers only continued to go down at pretty drastic rates.

In the fall of 2015, US secretary of the interior Sally Jewell said US fish and wildlife service's determined that the Sage Grouse would not require protection under the Endangered Species Act. This was a decision that was a bit of a controversy. In as late as April of 2015, efforts to sign the Grouse to the Endangered Species act was brought to the attention of the Yakima Training Center, among other institutions. The Yakima Center in particular, was not fond of the listing. "protecting the birds would restrict the availability of training lands, limit the size of training lands and ranges' and restrict the use of firing points; and impose restrictions on future development and construction (Geranois,1)." All of a sudden, the Sage grouse was something that didn't meet the agenda anymore, regardless of conservation regulations. " 'This administration's restrictive regulatory interpretation reveals misplaces priorities' Newhouse said ;Unnecessary environmental rules should not take priority over national security and military readiness. (Geranois,1)". " The U.S. fish and wildlife Service has a Sept. 30th deadline to decide whether to propose the greater sage grouse for federal protection (Geranois, 1)." This signing of the Endangered Species list posed a threat to institutions who made money off of grazing the sage brush and conversions of the habitat. There was also a concern for the bird by activists and landowners alike who had recruited various biologists and social workers to start the Bi-State Action Plan which was implemented in 2004. The plan was ultimately to save the grouse and replenish its population with many northwestern states involved including Washington. "Thanks in large part to the extraordinary efforts of all the partners in the working group to address threats to greater sage grouse and its habitat in the Bi- State area, our biologists have determined that this population in longer needs ESA protection' said Jewell. 'What's more, the collaborative, science-based efforts in Nevada and California are proof that we can conserve sagebrush habitat across the West while we encourage sustainable economic development". While encouraging "sustainable development". This concern for the preservation of the bird was also supported by the land owners who would ultimately have to pay the price if the ESA was signed anyway, meaning that since the bird would be under regulation then landowners would have to be restricted on certain land they could own regarding the Sage Grouse habitat. Sure, stabilizing populations over the last 10 years was a good idea and plenty of honest and integral people

were involved, but it seemed as though it was started in order to have the bird out of the list for further economic measures.

The Government had also gotten involved as the US department of the interior Bureau of Land Management as well as the US Forest Service created plans on how to conserve the habitat for the Grouse. "The Bureau of Land Management (BLM and the US Forest Service (USFS) have finalized land use plans that will conserve key sagebrush habitat, address identified threats to the greater sage-grouse and promote sustainable economic development in the West." The BLM and USFS had essentially said the same thing that the US Department of the Interior said about conservation - while still being concerned about the habitat and at the same time allowing continued economic developments. One might ask themselves if you can have both actions in place at the same time without an eventual imbalance. Only time would tell.

Environmentally speaking, collaborative conservation is our best bet at this point for the Sage Grouse. The US Fish and Wildlife Services' website says that the Sage Grouse has been saved and that no one needs to care about its habitat any longer, adding countless reassuring slogans that express that the Sage Grouse is back to normal in population. But the thing is, we need to fight for it now more than ever in order to keep its habitat alive for the rest of the ecosystem. Land developers can still keep intruding on the ecosystem since there isn't a bill concerning the bird, and wildfires along with cheat grass (an invasive species that wipes out sagebrush) are still very serious realities that are currently at war with the sagebrush in the west. Those of us that are still aware of the dangers of the ecosystems that we all rely on in the west need to band together in order to keep this habitat alive for future generations. Although there are legitimate organizations that are said to be involved in protecting the habitat for the Sage grouse, there is little legislation protecting this bird.

We are currently seeing battles in the legislative sector over land use for the Sage Grouse. The War is far from over. Just this past week, the state of Utah has sued the federal government for the protections it put in place to preserve grouse habitat. Utah's stance is that the safeguard will prevent the state from using vast tracts of land for mining or agriculture.

Spatial Scientist and Land Ecologist Holly Copeland wrote an article on Natrue.org expressing what actions must be taken in order to strive for conservation of Sagebrush and the Sage Grouse for the years to

come, along with her overall opinion of the situation. Her stance on Sagebrush habitat shows us that we're not out of the dark just yet. "Make no mistake sagebrush country is in *great* peril. The scientific weight of evidence is overwhelming. Sage-grouse numbers are a tiny fraction of historical counts, and populations of other species that live in this habitat, such as mule deer, pronghorn, and pygmy rabbits, are down as well. These numbers are low because the entire system is slowly converting to one overrun by invasive species, rampant wildfire, and little refuge from the presence of humans (Copeland, 1)." She also mentions what the possibilities are if congress doesn't support the Science behind it all – "The 'not warranted' decision for sage grouse was based in part upon the Bureau of Land Management, other federal agencies, and states being able to take action to implement protections written in the sagebrush habitat conservation plans they submitted previously (Copeland, 1)". She then expresses what must need to be done at the bottom and the top—"We desperately need an all-hands –on-deck approach where those who work with these lands daily – largely ranchers and federal land managers – are critical partners that understand the danger, believe that they can succeed, and have backing at the highest levels of government to make decisions that support sagebrush health (Copeland, 1)". Copeland expresses how we aren't out of the dark just yet, and intact still have a huge battle ahead of us, or at least those of us who still are aware of the real situation for the shrub-steppe habitat.

This battle represents what the future could look like for many other battles for conservation efforts around the globe. Big business and continued conversions of land into technology will always take place until we put a hold on it, at least before it's too late.

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