

Sage Grouse Myths

Enviros champion another phony cause.

By J. Wayne Burkhardt, Ph.D.

DISPLAYING SAGE GROUSE COCK © DIANA L. STRATTON, TOM STACK & ASSOCIATES



Environmental activists and many agency biologists are working relentlessly to make the sage grouse the spotted owl of the Intermountain West. If they succeed in getting sage grouse listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), they will likely effect sweeping change over traditional land use in the West. That is their goal. Ironically, this "sage grouse conservation effort" is based on the fraudulent claim that many millions of these birds inhabited the sagebrush country of the West prior to European contact but this claim is without factual basis.

The historic record indicates that the first European explorers to visit the West did not have frequent encounters with large numbers of sage grouse as purported in the petition to list the birds as endangered under the ESA. In fact, encounters were very few until the late 1800s. While the listing petition claims that the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1805) "repeatedly describe the birds as present in great abundance," it neglects to disclose that these birds were not sage grouse, but were prairie chickens or prairie grouse. The expedition only noted encounters with sage grouse at the head of the Missouri River and

mouth of the Snake River.

Later explorers traveling extensively through northern Nevada, southern Idaho, northern Utah and eastern Oregon (Peter Skene Ogden, 1824 to 1829, and John Work, 1830 to 1831) describe near starvation of their parties and a similar condition among the native tribes in areas that now support sage grouse populations. While Ogden and Work both traveled often through the heart of known sage grouse habitat, there is not a single

reference to sage grouse or sage chicken in any of their detailed journals. The following are only a few of the many examples of journal entries from Ogden's and Work's journals depicting the dire conditions they encountered:

"Monday 2nd. Our hunt this day amounts to 74 Beavers & a Pelican also taken in the traps it was rather a Strange Sight to us all to see one of the latter in these remote quarters for in fact with the exception of a few Bustards, we have so far not seen Birds or Fowls of any kind Save & except Ravens & crows in abundance & as for insects we have no Cause to Complain Fleas Wood lice Spiders & crickets by the millions."—OGDEN, 5/2/1825, NEAR PRESENT-DAY McCAMMON, IDAHO

"If we do not soon find animals we shall surely starve.... Did not see the trace of an animal and as the cold increases, I feel very uneasy regarding food. As the beavers do not lay up a stock of provisions for the winter, as is the case in cold countries, I hope the cold spell will soon pass; other wise how can they exist, as we well know without food we cannot."—OGDEN, 12/22/1825, NEAR PRESENT-DAY DAYVILLE, ORE.

"This country has a bare appearance. Not

an animal except a chance antelope to be seen."—WORK, 5/31/1831, NEAR PRESENT-DAY CHARLESTON, NEV.

"The best hunters were out but as usual did not see a single animal of any sort. One of the men P. Bernie was under the necessity of killing one of his horses to eat. Thus are the people in this miserably poor country obliged to kill and feed upon those useful animals the companions of their labours. We passed a small Indian camp, but the poor frightened wretches fled on our approach and concealed themselves among the wormwood."—WORK, 6/25/1831, NEAR PRESENT-DAY BEOWAWE, NEV.

These quotes are only a few of many such entries in these explorers' journals. An exhaustive review leads to the obvious conclusion that the region of the Intermountain West was generally devoid of sage grouse in 1824-1831.

The journals of other early 1800s' explorers in this region—Jedediah Smith (1827), Milton Sublette (1832), and John Fremont (1843)—all describe serious lack of game to support their men. They were often reduced to eating their horses to survive. They describe the native people occasionally encountered as impoverished, starved people living on insects, rabbits, lizards and plants.

Historic records indicate that by the late 1800s, rapid increases in sage grouse populations were occurring in the Intermountain West and that the birds were spatially plentiful in many locations by the turn of the century. Hayden (1872) reported, "We found sagehen quite numerous in the Salt Lake basin thence northward to Henry's Lake, also in the Teton basin and on the Snake River."

Coues (1874), Wheeler (1875, 1879) and Ludlow (1876) all report frequent encounters with sage grouse and these observations occurred widely across the Intermountain West. Sage grouse were certainly common or even abundant by the early 1900s, continuing until the 1960s. It is generally recognized by biologists and hunters alike that population levels of these birds began to decline significantly in the late '60s and then somewhat stabilized by the '80s to the levels we see today. This decline has certainly driven the sage-grouse listing debate of the past decade. However, the debate has raged without any apparent recognition that today's sage grouse population levels are greater than those of the pre-European contact period.

These remarkable changes in the grouse population of the sagebrush steppe were most certainly a response to changing habitat conditions that occurred with the initial

European settlement. Significant rangeland livestock grazing in the Intermountain West started about 1860 and by the mid-1880s the range was fully stocked.

Livestock grazing set in motion significant habitat changes that initially favored sage grouse and mule deer. Heavy livestock grazing in the late 1800s and early 1900s essentially fireproofed the range, allowing the establishment of sagebrush and other shrubs. The open, grassy areas that early explorers saw became increasingly brushy or shrubby.

These new stands of browse created favorable mule deer and sage grouse habitat. Aldo Leopold in 1950 concluded that the historic irruption of mule deer populations in the Great Basin was directly related to secondary brush succession. It also seems plausible that the vast flocks of sage grouse observed in the region during the late 1800s and early 1900s also were the result of these same habitat changes.

Most of the scientific literature and all of the environmental press dealing with the decline of sage grouse populations assume those declines are primarily the result of negative livestock impacts on grouse habitat. Yet, no creditable research has demonstrated a negative relationship. Depending on the type and degree of livestock grazing, it is possible that the impact to habitat could be either positive or negative to grouse. Studies on the



Illustration shows Lewis and Clark getting help from a Native American.

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge show summer sage grouse broods preferred the forage on moderately grazed meadows more than on ungrazed meadows.

The supposed adverse relationship between livestock grazing and sage grouse populations that is claimed in the petition to list is certainly at odds with the historic trends in

livestock grazing on public lands and sage grouse population trends. The actual AUMs (animal unit months) of livestock use on the public domain lands prior to the creation of the Grazing Service in 1934 (later known as the Bureau of Land Management) is not known, but estimates suggest that there may have been 20 million AUMs of livestock (cattle, sheep and horses) grazing pressure in the early decades of the 1900s. Since that time, there has been a continual reduction in livestock grazing pressure. Currently the BLM authorizes about 10 million AUMs. (See chart, which is a graphic representation of livestock grazing trends on BLM-administered lands from 1953 to 1998.)

Sage grouse population trends closely parallel the trend in livestock grazing pressure. Historic journals and other records indicate relative scarcity of sage grouse in the Intermountain West during the early 1800s' period, with apparently vast flocks of sage grouse from the 1870s to the 1960s. From the 1960s

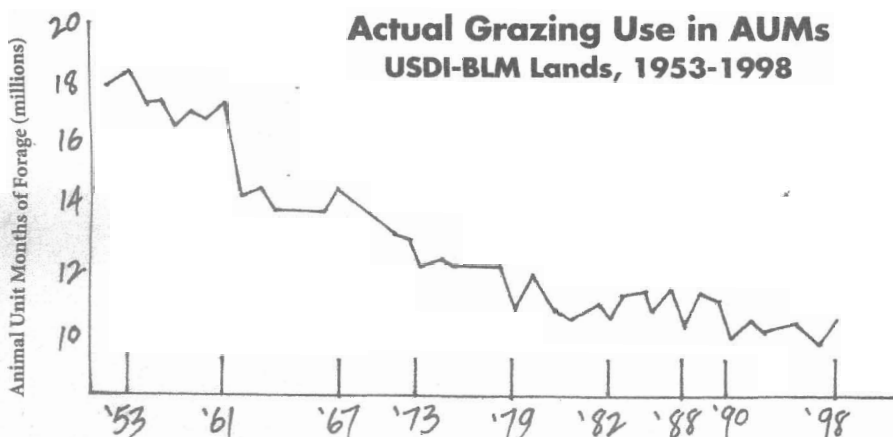
to the 1980s there was a major decline to the present population levels.

Another factor favoring sage grouse populations (although casually dismissed by environmentalists and biologists) would have been predator control employed in defense of livestock operations. Predator control has been part of range livestock operations from the beginning. What started as predator hunting and trapping by livestock people eventually grew into predator-control programs. Livestock boards, local game boards, county commissions, state and federal wildlife agencies all became involved in predator control. Bounties, poison baiting (1080), coyote-getters (M44s), and aircraft eventually became tools in the war on predators.

It hardly seems coincidental that there is a parallel between increasing sage grouse populations (1870s-1960s) and the growth of predator-control programs during this period. Certainly, predator control along with livestock-induced habitat changes would have favored sage grouse population irruptions. Even more notable, however, is the parallel decline during the 1960s and 1970s of both the predator-control programs and sage grouse populations. Environmental opposition to predator control resulted in removal of bounties, outlawing 1080 poison and M44s (1972) and a major cutback of federal and state wildlife agencies' involvement in predator programs. In addition to the curtailment of predator-control programs, vast areas of sage grouse habitat became less productive, due in part to aging or decadent stands of sagebrush and rampant wildfires in winter habitat. All three of these have had a profound effect on grouse populations.

The evaluation of changes in sage grouse population from presettlement times and changes in their historic range must carefully consider the factual historic record. That record clearly shows that the birds were not abundant in the early part of the 1800s and were relatively scarce to absent over much of the range they occupy today. It is safe to say that human occupancy and development in the West has had both negative and positive effects on sage grouse and their habitat. However, current populations and occupied habitat is significantly greater than during presettlement times, indicating a net positive outcome. ■

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Source: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, BLM Grazing Data Administrator, National Resources Science Center, Denver, Colo., Oct. 1999. This data is published annually in public statistics, USDI-BLM. AUM or Animal Unit Month is the amount of forage necessary for the sustenance of one cow or its equivalent for a period of one month. Data as of Sept. 30, 1999.