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Predation Management for Utah's Sage-grouse (part 2)

By Michael Bodenchuk, State Director of
USDA Wildlife Services

Predation management needs to be integrated in any sage-grouse plan where populations are performing at less than desired levels. To be successful, predation management should be implemented when and where it is effective. Killing coyotes in November, for example, will not benefit nesting sage-grouse, but may provide for safe use of certain crucial habitat areas. An integrated approach is necessary to prevent additional problems in wildlife management.

Red fox are generally considered invasive in most of Utah and sage-grouse never evolved with adaptive strategies for red fox predation. In mountain val-

leys, red fox can reach high densities. As habitat becomes fragmented, red foxes can effectively hunt the remaining portions. Red fox predation, in some cases, has been shown to be limiting sage-grouse populations.

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Michael Bodenchuk, Director of USDA Wildlife Services in Utah.

Sage-grouse Hunting in Utah (part 2)

By Dean Mitchell, UDWR Upland
Game Program Coordinator

Unlike other upland game birds, sage-grouse are more susceptible to over-harvest because they have longer lives, lower reproduction, and lower annual mortality rates. Therefore, sage-grouse should be hunted more conservatively than these species. Some research indicates hunter harvest may slow sage-grouse population recovery, and this effect is likely to be most pronounced in highly fragmented habitats or in dry areas that are close to human population centers.

Hunters provide funds for management of sage-grouse through their purchase of hunting licenses and permits. They pursue sage-grouse because their flesh is a unique game meat and the bird's elusiveness provides a unique or traditional challenge to hunters. However, sage-grouse hunting opportunities throughout Utah have diminished as local populations have declined.

In 2000, sage-grouse experts published management guidelines that included

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Hart Mountain, one of the SageSTEP research sites in Oregon.

“The purpose of the SageSTEP project is to conduct research and provide land managers with improved information to make decisions in an adaptive management framework about restoring sagebrush rangelands.”

A sageSTEP in the Right Direction for Adaptive Management in the Great Basin

By Summer Olsen, sageSTEP Coordinator, USU

A new sagebrush research project is beginning! Sagebrush Steppe Treatment Evaluation Project, known as SageSTEP, is an interdisciplinary, 5-year research program that will explore ways to improve the health of sagebrush rangelands across the Great Basin. The project is funded by the federal government’s Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP) and is a collaborative effort among Oregon State University, University of Idaho, University of Reno-Nevada, Utah State University, Brigham Young University, USDA Agricultural Research Service and Forest Service, and USDI Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Geological Survey.

SageSTEP seeks to address the rapid loss of healthy sagebrush rangelands in the Great Basin due to invasion of cheatgrass, severe wildfires, and expansion of pinyon and juniper woodlands. The purpose of the SageSTEP project is to conduct research and provide land managers with improved information to make decisions in an adaptive management framework about restoring sagebrush rangelands. Land man-

agement treatment options, including prescribed fire, mechanical thinning of shrubs and trees, and herbicide applications will be used to learn how healthy and diverse plant communities can be created that will be more resilient to fire and resistant to weed invasion.

Two experiments will be conducted across a regional network of sites in sagebrush communities. Sites are located in Utah, Idaho, Nevada, California, and Oregon. This regional network will allow us to understand the thresholds between healthy and unhealthy sagebrush communities over a broad range of conditions across the Great Basin. Collection of baseline data will begin this summer and treatments will begin in the fall.

The SageSTEP project is fully interdisciplinary, with ecological, economic, and social components. Results will provide resource managers with improved information to make restoration management decisions with reduced risk and uncertainty. For more information, please visit our website, www.sagestep.org. If you would like to be on our e-mail list, please contact Summer Olsen, 435-797-8455 or Summer.C.Olsen@usu.edu.

Sage-grouse Hunting, continued

recommendations for sage-grouse hunting. Utah adopted the hunting management recommendations provided in the guidelines in 2002 when Resource Advisory Committees and the Utah Wildlife Board approved a Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse.

Per the Strategic Management Plan, sage-grouse are currently hunted only in those areas where there is a minimum breeding population of at least 500 birds over a running 3-year average.

There are only 4 areas in Utah where Greater Sage-

grouse are currently hunted: western Box Elder County and all of Rich County in northern Utah; Blue and Diamond Mountains in northeastern Utah and Parker Mountain in south-central Utah. The Gunnison Sage-grouse has not been hunted in Utah since 1981.

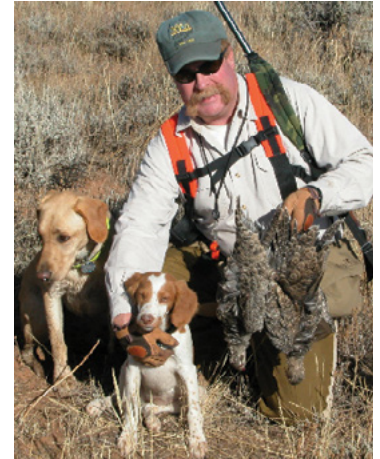
In each of these areas, no more than 10% of the estimated fall population is harvested. As a result of the implementation of this strategy, Greater Sage-grouse hunting permit numbers are limited by areas open to hunting. Hunting permits are issued on a first come-first served basis until all permits are

issued. Season length is 9 days and hunters are allowed to harvest only 2 birds per season. Utah is one of the most conservative states in providing sage-grouse hunting opportunity.

There is little evidence to suggest hunting has caused sage-grouse population declines. Restrictions on hunting should not be viewed as a remedy for all sage-grouse population problems. Sage-grouse hunting has been prohibited for many years in Washington, Alberta, and Saskatchewan but populations have not recovered as a result.

In Utah in 2002, a total of 653 two-bird permits were issued and 511 birds were harvested. In 2003, a total of 954 two-bird permits were issued and 1,017 birds were harvested. In 2004, a total of 1,450 two-bird permits were issued and a total of 1,450 birds were harvested. In 2005, a total of 1,436 two-bird permits were issued. The number of sage-grouse hunting permits issued annually is derived based on spring strutting grounds counts.

This is the second half of a two-part series. The first half appeared in the January 2006 issue of *The Communicator*.



Dean Mitchell after a successful Utah sage-grouse hunt.

Predator Management, continued

Red fox removal should target areas critical to sage-grouse with special emphasis on pre-nesting (and pre-whelping) periods to minimize the impacts they can have.

Ravens are effective nest predators and can kill sage-grouse chicks if they discover them at an early age. Ravens have increased greatly in the past, with current populations about 300% higher than recorded levels in the late 1960's. Access to human food sources, as well as protection from hunting pressure, has led to raven increases. Because a large percentage of the raven population exists as non-breeding birds without any territorial affinity, raven control must be exerted throughout the nesting season to provide full protection. Because ravens are protected by federal law and treaties, USDA-WS conducts raven removal under permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service using toxicant treated eggs in critical areas. These eggs, when placed weekly, kill those ravens actively hunting for sage-grouse nests.

Other predators exist, including golden eagles, striped skunks (very abundant now that rabies is suppressed) and raccoons (another invasive species

in sage grouse habitat). When the decision is made to conduct a predation management program, the potential influence of these predators must also be considered. To date, none of these predator species has been implicated in sage-grouse declines.

One last benefit from predation management is that it can support habitat programs. Private landowners may be more apt to sign up for CRP or other habitat programs if they can be assured that the sage-grouse will not be fed to more predators. Habitat treatments which integrate stands of sagebrush in various successional stages can be a death trap in the first few years without some predation management efforts. Sage-grouse may be more apt to pioneer back into remnant habitat if they do not encounter predation pressure when they get there. Predation management, by itself, may be a band-aid for sage-grouse, but when combined as part of an active management plan, predation management can help support healthy sage-grouse populations and productive rangelands.

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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.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.

Perspectives on Success: Why Questar Believes in Community-Based Conservation in the Uintah Basin

By Stephanie Tompkinson, QEP

Questar Exploration and Production Company (QEP) participates in the Uintah Basin Adaptive Resource Management (UBARM) Local Sage-grouse Working Group because we recognize the benefits of working together with all stakeholders in developing an adaptive plan to better manage the Greater Sage-grouse and their habitat. This requires a cooperative effort among all stakeholders, continued involvement in developing and implementing strategies for sage-grouse and habitat management, and monitoring their effectiveness. QEP appreciates the opportunity to participate in this process.

QEP feels that locally developed plans that address the concerns of the community will be more representative of the needs of the area. Our participation with UBARM allows us to share the techno-



logical and practical requirements of oil and gas development and gain insight into similar considerations of other stakeholders. QEP hopes to encourage the continued use of recent scientific data and multiple use management practices.

Questar's mission statement asserts that "we respect and protect the environment; and we contribute to a better quality of life in the communities where we operate." QEP plans to be a long-term partner in the Uintah Basin community. We intend to continue our involvement in organizations like UBARM which support the use and gathering of scientific data and encourage cooperation among all stakeholders. As industry, agencies, academia, private land owners and others in the community work together, we will gain a better understanding of each other's concerns and will be able to find solutions that will address all.