

Dancing Sage-grouse and wildfire

By Larry Hyslop



Male Sage-grouse dancing on burned ground

Driving through the pre-dawn darkness, I wonder if this trip will be worthwhile. For the past eight years, I have volunteered my time counting Sage-grouse dancing on their leks. I do not mind paying the roughly \$100 each spring spent for gas to make six visits to six different leks. The worst part is the hour-long drive in the dark. I left the house at 4:30am, but have lots of company as workers make their early morning drives to Newmont and Barrick mine sites. After I leave the pavement, I will be shocked to see another car until I return to pavement.

This morning is my first spring visit to a lek the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) assigned me in the Maggie Creek drainage. The problem is this lek and two others had their vegetation burned off last September during the Indian Creek Fire.

Female Sage-grouse choose an area having good habitat for nesting, and then male Sage-grouse choose a lek site within 2-3 miles of the females. Males want an area with low sagebrush, grass or open ground that best shows off their dancing efforts. They also want tall sagebrush nearby where they can quickly fly and hide if a predator shows up at the lek site.

No one at NDOW was sure what I would find during this visit. Would the males be at the original lek site, although burned off? If not, how far would they have moved and would I be able to find the new lek site? Would they simply move to another, unburned lek and join that group of males?

By 5:30, the Eastern skyline was bright and it was just light enough to make out the surrounding sagebrush. This is my fourth year of counting this lek, so even in this dim light I know exactly where to park. Stepping from my pickup, I stop and listen carefully, and am relieved to hear the faint sounds of popcorn popping, always the first indication of nearby dancing birds. Using my binoculars I can make out moving, white dots on the lek site. By the time I walk the half mile to a low hill overlooking the lek, it is light enough to count dancing males and pick out skulking females visiting the lek to pick out a mate.

It took two more morning drives to count birds on all three leks, but males were on all three burned leks and the numbers of birds were as high as or higher than I have seen in past years. The Indian Creek Fire was typical in that it left unburned pockets and strips of sagebrush and these may have made the birds feel comfortable enough to return to their historical leks.

Sage-grouse are very faithful to the lek they have used during their lives and this no doubt helps account for their use of burned leks. On other burned areas, males have returned for a year or two, but as older males die out, younger males tend to move to an unburned site. It will be interesting to see what happens on Maggie Creek over the next few years.

Wildfires pose one of the greatest threats to vital habitat for Sage-grouse. Elko County's past, large wildfires, along with the spread of cheatgrass, are one of the main reasons why the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service may decide to list the bird as endangered. The Indian Creek Fire destroyed a little more Sage-grouse habitat and helped nudge the birds a little closer to being listed.

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