

Ravens and Sage-grouse

By Larry Hyslop



The Common Raven is a Sage-grouse Predator

Raven population numbers are elevated and they pose an increased risk for nesting Sage-grouse. This is according to Pete Coats, Wildlife Biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. This information comes from a presentation Pete gave to Nevada's Greater Sage-grouse Advisory Committee and published research he helped conducted along U.S. 93 north of Wells.

Raven populations are up 300% across the West and 600% in the Great Basin. They have a definite, grave effect on Sage-grouse nesting success by eating the eggs and young. Predation by Ravens and other predators account for 94% of all nest losses and predation can be a limiting factor for Sage-grouse populations.

Raven populations have not increased due to the availability of Sage-grouse eggs, but because we help them out by providing food and prime nesting sites for the raising of their own young. Open dumps, road kill, and dead livestock provide enough food for increased raven numbers, which then take more Sage-grouse eggs and young. We build tall structures such as power line poles where Ravens can nest away from their predators and worse, where they can scan the immediate area for Sage-grouse nests. Research has shown that Sage-grouse nesting success drops when nests are located near tall structures.

Sage-grouse nesting success is greater when the nests are in an area of fewer ravens. It also increases when Sage-grouse nests are located among better habitat. The Sage-grouse's defense against predators such as Ravens is to nest beneath concealing brush such as sagebrush. The vertical cover provided by brush is more important than the height of the brush. They need good grass and forb cover between sagebrush plants to hide the nests from the side.

Ravens search their surroundings for visual clues in order to spot a nest. Sage-grouse hens must leave the nest twice a day to feed, defecate and exercise and this offers Ravens a chance. The Sage-grouse hens creep away from their nest, going in a different direction each time, before flying off. Just seeing a Sage-grouse hen take to the air alerts a Raven to a possible nest location and it will then continue searching that area for more clues, until it eventually finds the nest location.

Pete's research has found that more nests are destroyed early in the nesting season which lasts from March through May. This may be because Ravens have fewer other food sources in March than later. It may also be because Ravens pick off the easily found nests early. Later, they do not find the better concealed nests.

As part of any plan to protect Sage-grouse populations, Raven predation will have to be considered. However, it is much more complicated than simply going out and poisoning a few thousand Ravens. Research has shown that removing Ravens from an area, just allows other Ravens to move into the area.

Raven management must also remove some of the available food and nesting sites we offer Ravens. We must cover open dumps, remove road kill, bury dead livestock and make power poles inaccessible.

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