

## Sage grouse hurting, though latest survey numbers are up

Biologists are still weighing whether to translocate more birds to the valley as soon as this spring.

By [Mike Koshmrl](#) Feb 26, 2020



Grand Teton National Park wildlife biologist John Stephenson, park Chief of Science and Resource Management Gus Smith and Teton Raptor Center Research Associate Allison Swan search for sage grouse Feb. 18 as part of an annual midwinter survey of the species near Gros Ventre Junction. While their survey areas turned up just a handful of the chicken-size birds, a healthy population was found farther to the northeast. West of Kelly Warm Springs, 143 grouse were counted spread out over about 1 square mile.

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A survey crew on skinny skis poled and glided off into the powder, hopeful of finding flocks of sage grouse that had proved sparse all morning in the birds' usual winter haunts in southern Grand Teton National Park.

A bluebird and pleasant afternoon, the park's new chief of science and resource management took it all in.

"If I were a sage grouse, I'd be out today," Gus Smith said during the early afternoon of Feb. 18. "I'm sure I'd show my face."

As a recent transplant from Minnesota's Superior National Forest, Smith was still learning the ropes and listening to what his colleagues had to say about sage grouse and their behavior and habitat. Park wildlife biologist John Stephenson, who led the outing, explained how the crew chose this spot for the sagebrush shoots poking through the snowpack.

"That is their only food in the wintertime: sagebrush," Stephenson said.



Grand Teton National Park wildlife biologist John Stephenson glasses the snow covered sage flats along the Gros Ventre River corridor for signs of sage grouse.

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The midwinter survey focuses on about 17,000 acres of the valley, spread over six areas, where sagebrush plants are typically tall enough to stick out of the snow. Those areas are primarily in the sage flats circling Blacktail Butte, near Jackson Hole Airport and up in the lowlands of lower Spread Creek.

This year's operation was especially important, because the isolated sage grouse population in Jackson Hole is smaller than it has been since reliable record-keeping started decades ago. Biologists have been plotting a sage grouse lifeline and weighing whether to bring in more birds to ensure the population persists.

Avian experts surmise there's a double-whammy explanation for the species decline, which reached a nadir a year ago when just 40 male grouse were counted strutting on their Jackson Hole leks come springtime. First, a fire near Blacktail Butte in 2003 scorched 5,200 acres of traditional winter habitat. The slow-growing sagebrush plants in that zone are still stretching up to a height that surpasses the average snow depth to give grouse cover and food. Second, Jackson Hole has been hit by several severe winters since 2016-17, which has done no favors for grouse already dealing with marginal, limited habitat.

The two crews skiing around Feb. 18 verified just 11 sage grouse in the morning hours, a group of 10 by the National Elk Refuge boundary and another lone grouse. The low number was perhaps somewhat concerning for the biologists, managers and volunteers — Smith, Stephenson and the Teton Raptor Center's Bryan Bedrosian, Allison Swan and Steve Poole.

The breakthrough came in early afternoon, when Bedrosian hit the sage grouse mother lode west of Kelly Warm Springs.

"We found 'the' group," Bedrosian told the rest of the bunch while rendezvousing. "It took a few hours of skiing to find it, but we were able to get up on it."



A sage grouse looks for food and cover in a well-picked shrub.

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Tallying that dispersed group with Poole, he came up with 143 grouse in segregated bunches of males and females spread out over about 1 square mile. Assessing a similar area last year, they counted 98 of the chicken-size birds.

“That’s good,” Bedrosian said. “It’s great. It’s exactly what we were hoping for.”

A state wildlife biologist aloft in a helicopter last week to count elk, moose and other critters also saw sage grouse tracks near Elk Ranch Reservoir, but when crews set out on foot they didn’t locate any birds. All told, the sage grouse surveyors laid eyes on 154 birds last week.

Because surveyors looked in more areas and conditions differed from last winter, that higher number doesn’t evaporate concerns for the valley’s sage grouse population.



Back on Jan. 30, the Jackson Sage Grouse Technical Team gathered for its first-ever meeting at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department offices on North Cache Street. The formation of the group was triggered by the terms of Wyoming’s Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy, which sets in motion planning processes when thresholds are hit signaling localized population crashes.

Geneticists and specialists who teleconferenced in to advise the team perceived a grim future for the valley’s population, which they worried had begun spiraling toward the brink. Sage grouse numbers are typically highly cyclical, but locally for the past five years they’ve gone only one direction: down.

Last spring’s count of 40 males was just 24% of the long-term average for the lek sites attended, which suggests an overall population of perhaps 150 birds based on expected sex and age ratios.

The outside experts’ recommendation was to augment the population, even if it means

altering a gene pool that may be especially adapted to the high-elevation valley.

“Particularly when you have a population that’s declining and declining and declining, at some point if you do nothing they will go extinct probably anyway,” U.S. Geological Survey research geneticist Sara Oyler-McCance told the team. “Then you’ve lost whatever genetic variation was there to begin with. I think it’s not necessarily a bad idea to move birds in there, from a genetics perspective.”

As the valley floor disappears beneath the snowpack, sage grouse are forced to find areas where sagebrush — the animal’s only source of food during winter months — still protrudes above the surface. The shrub also provides protective cover for the bird.

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Utah State University professor Dave Dahlgren also advised the team to be cautious. A sage grouse restoration effort he's assisting with in North Dakota was originally supposed to augment the population, but it's turning into more of a reintroduction.

"Based on what I saw today in the data, you should be concerned," Dahlgren said. "You're getting really low on the number of birds in the population."

The local Sage Grouse Technical Team has discussed a prospective sage grouse infusion at length and expressed a desire to have plans signed off on and be ready to move grouse come the nesting season.

Bedrosian said finding a few dozen more birds in Jackson Hole's southern sage grouse winter range didn't abate his own concerns.

"I think it's encouraging, but I still think we should be coming up with a good plan in the event that the population declines," Bedrosian said. "I would rather have a plan and be prepared."

Jackson Hole's sage grouse may not yet be out of the woods, but that doesn't mean there was no room for momentary celebration. As Bedrosian motored back from coming upon 143 birds on survey day, he parked at Gros Ventre Junction to debrief the group. Strolling up, Stephenson greeted him with one word: "Congratulations."



Bryan Bedrosian, the Teton Raptor Center's research director, shows Stephenson on a map where he counted more than 100 sage grouse during the survey in Grand Teton National Park.

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