

Greater Sage-Grouse

What is the Greater Sage-Grouse?

Greater Sage-Grouse are large ground-dwelling sagebrush obligate birds native to the sagebrush steppe ecosystem of the American West. These birds are highly dependent on sagebrush for food and cover. In western SD, the birds are on the far eastern edge of their range.

What is their “status”?

The Greater Sage-Grouse is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Candidate species are those for which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has sufficient information to list as threatened or endangered.

Candidate species receive no legal protection under the Endangered Species Act, that is, there are no legal prohibitions under the federal Endangered Species Act against taking candidate species.

The NRCS works with USDA program participants to implement conservation actions for candidate species that may eliminate the need to list the species as threatened or endangered.

Where in S.D. do they call home?

This species occurs in grassy cover containing Wyoming big sagebrush and occasionally silver sagebrush. This bird mainly occurs in Butte and Harding Counties in northwestern SD from Belle Fourche north to the North Dakota state line and west to the Wyoming and Montana state lines. The species may occasionally be seen in Fall River County in southwestern SD.

The NRCS and others have developed a map identifying key areas of the state as Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. The bird is present in these areas year round. A copy of the map is found on this publication.

Where am I most likely to see this bird?

Greater Sage-Grouse are closely associated with Wyoming big sagebrush and exclusively use the plant for food in the winter.



USFWS

In SD, nesting, brood-rearing, and over-wintering habitats occur in the same general area.

Nesting and brood-rearing habitat typically is sagebrush plant communities located within 3 miles of an active lek (approximately 85% of nesting occurs within 3 miles of an active lek.) A “lek” is an area with little vegetation and a large field of view where multiple male birds display (dance) to attract watching females.

An active lek is a location where at least 2 males are seen dancing for 2 out of 5 years. Or, if a lek has not been surveyed frequently enough to determine lek status then at least 2 displaying males were observed during any of the previous 3 years

Riparian areas and other moist areas with silver sagebrush and forbs are thought to be especially important for brood-rearing because these areas attract insects, an important source of protein for growing chicks.

What are the threats?

- Habitat conversion, degradation and fragmentation
- Loss of Wyoming big sagebrush.
- Grazing that decreases plant health and increases non-native species.
- Woody plant invasion and invasive plant species.
- Structures, including fences, placed in too close proximity to leks.
- West Nile Virus.
- Road construction and mining/exploration.

What are the opportunities?

The SD NRCS provides technical and/or financial assistance to landowners to address threats to this species that may occur on their land.

Stop in and ask the local NRCS office to assist you with preparing land management plans which will achieve your objectives and help this bird.

Several specific actions landowners can take are:

Improve Open Landscapes:

- Convert cropland or hayland to native cover by establishing native rangeland species including big and/or silver sagebrush.
- Maintain and improve sagebrush grasslands.
- Remove, relocate or mark with reflectors problem fences within ½ mile of an active lek.
- Remove all trees that have invaded sagebrush grasslands.
- Remove or bury overhead utility lines.
- Remove dugout spoil piles, tall (6 feet high or taller) gate posts, old buildings, junk piles, culverts, or other obstructions within sagebrush grasslands that may benefit sage-grouse predators.
- Avoid installing new windbreaks and/or shelterbelts in native grassland or within 3 miles of an active lek.

Maintain and Improve Healthy Grazing lands:

Grazing maintains grassland habitats. However, preferred plants may disappear and excessive litter buildup may occur if grazing does not occur in a manner that sustains grassland plants. Ensure that a sustainable grazing system is developed and implemented that addresses both livestock and bird needs. Several grazing ideas are outlined below:

- Manage the intensity, frequency, timing, and duration of grazing to provide for adequate

recovery time for plants by: Limiting the amount of forage removed (7-9 inches of residual grass height remains at the end of the grazing season; or 40% utilization depending on growing conditions).

- Maintain or enhance existing height and canopy cover of big sagebrush and silver sagebrush. Avoid grazing the same pasture during the same period of the growing season in consecutive years.
- Implement yearly grazing land monitoring to evaluate how vegetation, livestock and wildlife are responding to management.
- Defer grazing on 20% of available nesting habitats to allow complete growing season deferment in year 1 continuing through the end of the nesting season in year 2 (April 1st in Year 1 through July 15th in Year 2).
- Defer riparian areas until late summer or fall, or only utilize these areas lightly in the spring. Avoid grazing mesic or riparian areas in June and July and manage annual grazing utilization along mesic areas for 50% or less (take half leave half). This could be achieved by “flash grazing” 20% or less in May or earlier, remove the livestock and then return after August 1; or begin grazing after August 1 with a less than 50% overall utilization at end of year.

The NRCS can help develop a grazing system that maintains and/or increases plant health and forage production while providing grassland nesting bird habitat.

To learn more contact your local NRCS office, or go to www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov.

