

The Crooked Creek Effort: A Cooperative Project for Sage Grouse Management

By Matt Miller, Director of Communications, The Nature Conservancy of Idaho



At first they emerged just as blobs, even through the binoculars. As the predawn light increased, the shapes became more distinct, and members of our group began pointing at shapes: One grouse. Two. Ten. Thirty.

By early morning, fifty Greater Sage-Grouse, all males, strutted before us in one of nature's most memorable spectacles.

I was in the Medicine Lodge country of eastern Idaho with writers Steve Bodio and Ted Kerasote to watch this profusion of grouse. For us, it was a dramatic event, seeing all these grouse in great country. But those who knew the area well recognized a late start to the lekking season due to heavy snowfalls. Usually, in late March, 200 or more birds used this lek.

There are not many places in the West where you can still find a 200-bird sage grouse lek. It takes only minutes in the Medicine Lodge area to realize how important this country is to these birds and to the sagebrush ecosystem.

That's why the North American Grouse Partnership of Idaho (NAGP-ID) and The Nature Conservancy of Idaho (TNC-ID) are forming a partnership to protect an important piece of this habitat, using management practices that can provide a model for Greater Sage-Grouse and sagebrush-steppe ecosystem conservation throughout the West.

Using an anonymous donation, The Conservancy purchased the Crooked Creek Ranch in July 2001. The ranch, with 2600 deeded acres and nearly 70,000 acres of grazing allotments, was recognized by TNC-ID for its outstanding wildlife habitat. The ranch provides breeding, nesting, brood rearing,

and winter habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse in one of Idaho's few remaining strongholds for the species.

It was also recognized that even here, in this place where grouse appear to thrive, the species faces increasing threats. Looking out across the landscape nearby, one sees irrigated agriculture claiming more lands. While the grouse populations on the Upper Snake River Plains may seem high, they are not even close to historical levels.

Fortunately, there is still time. The TNC-ID/NAGP-ID Partnership will make the Crooked Creek Ranch a model for sage grouse management throughout the West.

According to NAGP National board member and Idaho State Chapter Chairman, Kent Christopher, the time has come for such a model project. The declines in sage grouse populations are no longer a secret, with the issue attracting a steady buzz of media attention in the last year. Conferences, local working groups, and piles of press releases have been successful in raising awareness. Publications from *National Geographic* and *High Country News* to small agricultural weeklies have all reported on the significance of sage grouse declines.

"Everyone is talking about sage grouse, but we need to get beyond that and get working on a solution," says Christopher. "Crooked Creek Ranch can be a model project for grouse conservation. By implementing long-term conservation practices on the ranch, we can provide an example for neighbors and others who want to improve sage grouse populations on their lands."

The project begins with an assessment of habitat conditions on the property and the development of a conservation plan. The project will then focus on the implementation of improved grazing practices, restoration of depleted upland and riparian habitats, institution of wildlife friendly farming practices, and development of an efficient and sound biological monitoring system that measures progress toward meeting conservation objectives.

Conservation and restoration of Crooked Creek depends on long-term effective implementation of a plan that results from our initial two years of efforts and adaptive management. The primary outcome will be a healthier landscape that supports a flourishing population of grouse and other sagebrush-associated wildlife species in perpetuity. Annual sage-grouse lek counts, permanent riparian bird monitoring plots along Crooked Creek, and incorporation of all vegetation and wildlife data into a relational database linked to a geographic information system (GIS) will help us to measure success.

Alan Sands, leader of the project for the Conservancy, believes that such efforts will benefit the entire sage-steppe ecosystem in the area. "We want to conserve and restore an ecological system that is intact so that it can withstand insects, fire and drought," he says. "Healthy native plant communities can better fend off such factors. Our management plan seeks to restore the area to the full representation of shrub-steppe associated plant and wildlife species, in an abundance that would have occurred naturally."

Crooked Creek, of course, does not exist in a vacuum. The birds that use the area are part of a larger sage grouse pop-

ulation that inhabits and depends on the region. Effective conservation will depend upon cooperation among the many landowners of the area, including other private ranchers, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the State of Idaho.

The cooperative work between the Conservancy and the North American Grouse Partnership is an important step in conserving sage grouse throughout this region. The project will demonstrate how all those interested can work together to achieve grouse conservation.

"We hope to demonstrate how working together can benefit everyone," says Sands. "There's no question that this is a core area for grouse, and we're fully anticipating there will be improvements in bird populations with improved management and restoration actions. It has been a pleasure working with NAGP. They're thoughtful, and they know what it takes to get something done for conservation. Working together, we can provide a showcase for sage grouse management."



One-day-old sage grouse chick radio attachment
Photo by Nathan A. Burkepille

Crooked Creek landscape photos
by Kent L. Christopher

