

## Endangered Greater Sage-grouse Hang On by a Thread in Alberta, Huge Declines in Saskatchewan

Every spring anxious eyes turn towards the greater sage-grouse mating grounds of southern Alberta (known as “leks”) to see whether or not Canada’s sage-grouse population made it through the winter. This year’s spring population counts observed only 13 males at Alberta leks, showing no improvement since last year. In Saskatchewan, the only other Canadian province in which sage-grouse persist, huge population declines were observed. Only 18 males were counted at Saskatchewan leks, a dramatic decrease from the 42 males recorded in 2010.

According to sage-grouse scientist Mark Boyce, 2012 lek counts (i.e.: 31 males observed in Canada) indicate that fewer than 100 birds in total now stand between sage-grouse being endangered and sage-grouse being extinct in Canada. The cause of this relentless decline is no mystery: sage-grouse are highly sensitive to habitat disturbance. Research has shown that when confronted with oil and gas development, sage-grouse actively abandon their leks and other habitats crucial to their survival.

Although it is disappointing to see no improvement in Alberta sage-grouse populations since last year, these numbers do not come as a surprise. What else can we expect given the lack of on-the-ground action from either the provincial or federal governments to protect sage-grouse habitat? However, as sage-grouse range continues to disappear in Canada, it is extremely troubling to see such significant declines in Saskatchewan.

Although the greater sage-grouse has been listed as *endangered* provincially since 2000 and federally since 1998, both levels of government have failed to take any effective action to halt this steep decline. In the last two years, the Alberta government has launched a translocation program using birds from Montana. But considering the main cause of species decline is habitat fragmentation and degradation through rampant oil and gas activity, population supplementation addresses only the symptoms, rather than the source of sage-grouse decline. At best the provincial government is prolonging the inevitable; at worst they

are delivering Montana birds to their death. Alberta's species at risk surely deserve more than simply spending every spring hoping for the best.

- *Madeline Wilson*