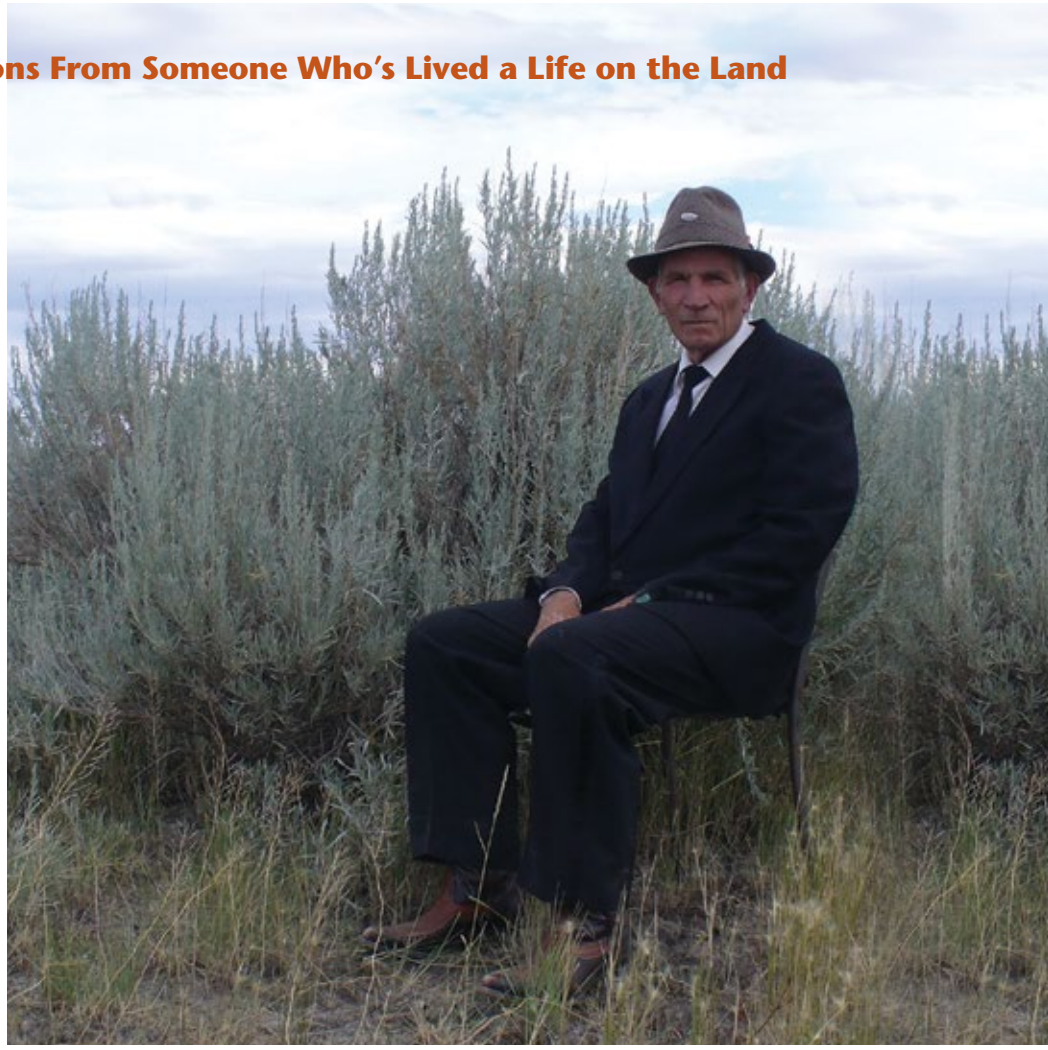
Recall of the Wild

Greater Sage-Grouse: Reflections From Someone Who's Lived a Life on the Land

By Ralph Heydlauff



Ralph Heydlauff and Healthy Silver Sagebrush (Artemisia cana)

The Past

Fifty years or so ago when I was a bit younger many of the low level flats had sage that looked like the photo accompanying this note. Ranchers who lived in the area held most of the leased area at that time. These flats had been protected due to the fact that, particularly during late fall storms, they offered both the best protection from the weather and grazing opportunities. About that time the provincial government decided that seasonal occupation of much of this area was a better way to manage a large portion of this area. Grazing reserves and community pastures were established. Cattle are trucked in from outside the area and the pastures are not grazed in the latter part of the year.

Management practices reflected the fact that these flats were no longer essential to survival of the patrons. A shorter grazing season resulted in higher densities of cattle and a different view toward these taller sage areas. The higher cattle densities meant more of the sage was grazed. It did not cause the sage to die but over the years it became shorter over a large portion of the area. Dividing pastures into smaller fields and putting even more cattle on them for short periods of time accelerated this change to the sage. When this is done it becomes critical that the cattle are moved as soon as the grass reaches the desired level. Even a day or two delay in moving them causes the cows to eat more of the sagebrush. To complicate it even further the management of these pastures seems to have changed fairly regularly. I have noticed through the years that it seems to take about 5 to 10 years to fully gain an understanding of a micro-climatic area. As the climate can change in as little as 10 to 20 miles the patrons of these areas who generally live well outside that area are living in a different climactic zone.

Present

Over time these community pastures and grazing reserves have become the model for good range management. They are perpetual entities and are very unlikely to go away. The good news, however, is if the patrons and managers of these areas recognize the value of the sagebrush habitat these areas will restore themselves. I have noticed a significant recovery in one pasture in the last few years. Also in one area at home where the sage was getting short we accelerated its recovery by putting in a water pipeline that drew the cattle away from that area.

Rangeland agrologists are vital but the advent of geomorphology has tended to reduce their numbers and their effectiveness. They are however the ones who can do the greatest good or the greatest harm. The traditional rancher who lives on his or her land and must

care for the environment because his existence depends on it is more of an endangered species these days. Absentee leaseholders and faraway investors who hire someone else to look after the individual areas are replacing the traditional rancher. The information that has been passed down through generations of ranch families has been for the most part either lost or discredited. The people who maintained these habitats well in the past are leaving the business because they find it difficult to make a living in the cattle industry on the primary cow calf level.

Opinion

I believe that the height of the sage is an indicator of its health. I am skeptical of those who have told me the sage is as healthy today as it ever was because the number of plants today is close to the same as it was years ago in many areas. A study conducted during relatively low snow years found that the sage grouse wintered in a relatively small area near the lek. Studies done elsewhere indicated that some populations migrate to where they can find feed. I think that areas of taller sage supplied vital feed in the deep snow years. I know that I have seen them in these areas in late fall and early winter. Pronghorn also come to these areas in the winter competing for the same diminishing food supply.

In times of crises, like the greater sage-grouse faces today, society will spend a lot of money and resources on studies trying to find someone to blame. We are all grasping at straws. I personally like to blame new predators in the area, such as the red fox and the raccoon, along with the perception that the raptor and coyote populations are out of balance and the quality of the remaining habitat is diminishing. Others will blame the swift fox and of course everyone blames the oil and gas industry. It may be thought that recreation has little impact since one is only in the area for a short time. However there may be a cumulative effect as the numbers seem to keep growing. Studies in times of diminishing sage-grouse populations supply vital data but may be an added stress. Urban people tend to blame the rancher. In reality we are probably all partially correct.

Can anything be done to reverse this degradation of habitat and decline in the species. I would like to think so. As science and the public in general seems to want to isolate specific parts of an ecosystem the focus is now on the sage grouse. It may be too late to save this species on this rangeland but we will not know unless we try. We need to change our focus from finding the cause of the problem in order to promote co-operation.

As the traditional rancher has disappeared in favour of the distant investor and absentee leaseholder day to day management of the land becomes more difficult – difficult, not impossible. The new manager cannot rely on memory therefore the sharing of information becomes very important. Average conditions become the main guidelines. Averages can be deceiving as natural occurrences may be to the extreme and within the given area of the sage grouse habitat there may be many mini-ecosystems. It is essential for the leaseholder to develop a good working relationship with the local agrologist who will have the best records of each operation especially if the many mini-ecosystems are taken into account. Another reason for sharing information is to remember that many ideas have been tried but did did not work. Excessive stocking rates did not work, stopping all grazing did not work, and Allan Savory's Grazing Method (Holistic Range Management) did not work.

Other considerations, such as reducing oilfield activity and building fewer structures, also need to be made – especially given how low the sage-grouse population is today.

Ralph Heydlauff and his brother David are themselves part of an increasingly rare breed – people who live on the land and care for it passionately every day. It has been a privilege for the staff and board members of AWA to meet and work with them on the Sage-grouse Partnership.