

Sage-grouse Protectors



By Nigel Douglas

If Alberta's sage-grouse are ever going to receive a stay of execution, then the recovery process is not just something that will be led by scientists and environmentalists. It is going to require buy-in and support from a broad spectrum of interests including governments, industry, and ranchers. With the new Sage-Grouse Partnership (SGP) there is some optimism that maybe these diverse and sometimes competing groups do have it in them to work together to find common ground and make the changes to land-use practices that the species so desperately need.

If SGP members David and Ralph Heydlauff are anything to go by, then that optimism is well founded. The Heydlauffs ranch 13,212 acres of land in the far southeastern corner of Alberta and their property is one of the few places where sage-grouse are still hanging on.

The early years

There have been Heydlauffs living in this part of the province since before Alberta itself existed. "The ranch buildings are 5.5 miles from Saskatchewan and 5.5 miles from Montana," David informs me. Their grandfather Victor first came in 1903, two years before Canada created the province of Alberta. "The first grazing lease (on the land) was dated January 1, 1901 and we're still running the same lease today," he says. "The grazing lease is 11,400 acres; the total place is 13,212 acres."

"Our grandfather was the first to ranch the land," says Ralph. The conditions he had to face in the early part of the twentieth century are difficult for us to comprehend more than a century later. "In his first winter he built a log cabin," Ralph explains. "He put up a tent inside the log cabin, which wasn't finished yet. Snow between the tent and the cabin

kept him warm through the winter."

A reliable water supply was critical for a new ranching operation, both for ranchers and their cattle. "He had tried homesteading further west," says David. "Here he found a well he could get decent water from." That well lasted till the 1950s when David speculates "there was seismic activity in the area and it must have breached the aquifers because the whole thing went alkaline. "After that we didn't have good water." For a while they hauled water from wherever they could get it. Eventually, in 1965 they drilled a water well into the Milk River sandstone. "It went 1,170 feet down to the cap rock, 1,505 feet to the bottom of the well," David explains. "The water is salty. The cattle can drink it, but we distill it because it tastes bad." Ralph agrees: "The cattle like it but we don't."

In this dry corner of Alberta, the entire landscape testifies to the lack of moisture, from



Prairie farmers have always had to deal with extreme conditions, including violent prairie storms and even plagues of grasshoppers – the cloud of "dots" on the photo are grasshoppers. PHOTO: Heydlauff Family



The first home of William and Inga Heydlauff (Ralph and David's parents) PHOTO: Heydlauff Family

the drought-resistant sagebrush plants to the sandy soil specialists such as burrowing owls. Because the land is very dry the cattle stocking density is low. “Fully stocked, we have 180 animals,” says David. “It takes around 83 acres for a cow here.” To put that in perspective, such a stocking density would be one tenth of what might be found in the wetter foothills of Alberta. This low grazing pressure is, as David points out, “good for the habitat but not too good for a guy’s bottom line.”

This sensitive management – living well within the natural carrying capacity of the land – is also the reason that the Heydlauff’s land still supports such healthy populations of other wildlife. “Mountain plover, burrowing owl, sage thrasher, Sprague’s pipit, ferruginous hawk...” the Heydlauffs list off some of the many species-at-risk that call their ranch home. And their property is also one of the few remaining places in Alberta where endangered sage-grouse can be found. “We used to have two leks, both of them pretty big,” says Ralph. “We are down to one now. Last spring there were two roosters on the lek.”

The continued presence of sage-grouse is a direct result of the light grazing regime maintained by the Heydlauffs. “Through the years we’ve found out that what’s good for cattle habitat is good for sage-grouse,” says Ralph. “There is a movement to graze really heavy but that depends on the moisture conditions and here it doesn’t work.” At the same time it is important to maintain a certain level of grazing. “If you undergraze, the habitat goes

to pieces too,” Ralph emphasizes. “It’s a delicate balance. If you throw down a one metre square, you’ll find ten, twenty different kinds of plant. But if there is no grazing, after twenty years, you’ll find two or three species. Grass species start to take over and you lose the forbs.”

As well as the Heydlauff’s respectful stewardship, part of the reason for the continued existence of sage-grouse here when they have been lost from so much of southeastern Alberta is the lack of oil and gas activity. “Fish and Wildlife won’t let them have access,” says David. Access has been prevented for the past 15 to 20 years. “They let seismic lines come up to the fence and then cut them off.”

This lack of industrial activity is somewhat a mixed blessing to landowners and ranchers such as the Heydlauffs. When the government precludes industrial activity on a piece of land, then the landowner is cut off from the potential income that comes with that activity. Ironically, ranchers such as Ralph and David who for decades have managed their land in a sensitive fashion are expected to take a substantial financial hit to keep sage-grouse on their land. Landowners who care less and have already given in to the industrial machine are richly rewarded. “Guys in the city and environmentalists say we should do this,” points out Ralph, “but so far it’s all on our own nickel.” David agrees: “Environmentalists push for restrictions but there is no money for it.” Clearly, this lack of financial support for managing the land for wildlife is a fundamental flaw to the Heydlauffs.

“Whatever you do costs you and you don’t gain any,” says David.

Through its hosting of the Sage-Grouse Partnership (David Heydlauff is co-chair with AWA vice president Cliff Wallis) AWA is also working to try to ensure that wildlife-friendly landowners receive the financial support they deserve. However well it might be managed, one ranch such as the Heydlauffs’ can only go so far in sustaining sage-grouse populations in the long term. Changes will be needed on a much bigger, landscape level if the species is going to be saved and there will undoubtedly be a cost. “The Government of Canada needs to put appropriate resourcing behind (sage-grouse recovery) to ensure that existing commitments can be honoured through compensation or payments for ecological goods and services,” said Wallis in a recent news release. “The energy companies and ranchers are assisting with recovery efforts and we want to make sure they are not penalized for that.”

In other jurisdictions, such as the European Union, there are grants available for farmers to operate in a wildlife-friendly fashion but the Heydlauffs are suspicious of being beholden to grants: “You have to be careful; all of a sudden you are not running your own operation,” says David. Even conservation easements, which have allowed many ranchers in southern Alberta to protect the natural values of their land into the future, are not always the answer; the restrictions which come with those easements can seem onerous to some landowners. “Easements provide money now but down the road your property is worth less,” David stresses.

The lasting impression left by the Heydlauffs is of two men who are trying their hardest to do what they think is best – to manage their land in a fashion which is beneficial for cattle and for wildlife. The future of Alberta’s sage-grouse, and many other grassland species-at-risk, will depend upon the knowledge and the willingness of people like the Heydlauffs. But shouldn’t this behaviour be encouraged financially? It’s time for governments and industry to step up to the plate and finance responsible land-use. 🐾

BACKGROUND PHOTO: Heydlauff Family