

Greater Sage-grouse: The Business of Building Relationships

By Nora Spencer, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



Once widespread across the prairies, the greater sage-grouse was designated as an endangered species by the *Species At Risk Act* (SARA) in 1998. Degradation and fragmentation of habitat and human disturbance (mainly industry) contributed to a greater than 90 percent decline of the species in Alberta and Saskatchewan since the late 1960s. Despite the endangered status of the species, sage-grouse numbers have continued to decline and there have been woefully inadequate efforts to protect and restore habitat and to prevent further industrial activity. Failed recovery efforts led to an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) that was put into place in December 2013. The protection order applies to specific critical habitat for greater sage-grouse on public land. Under the order no new industry is permitted; existing industry must make changes to when travel on roads takes place and reduce noise levels at sensitive times for sage-grouse.

Alberta Environment and Parks (formerly Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development) is implementing the recovery strategy developed and adopted in the spring of 2014. They have inventoried and started to remove abandoned structures, thereby reducing perches and residences for predators, while selectively reducing ravens and crows. They are also monitoring the birds that were translocated from Montana and know that they have had some success in reproducing.

AWA has also been busy since the EPO was put into place. AWA has focussed on working with the ranching community to create awareness and to help with the recovery effort for sage-grouse. We have been fortunate to partner with the Heydlauff family (one of the few ranches in southeastern Alberta where sage-grouse are still present) and are working with them to document the ecological history of their ranch. This document will help determine landscape and grazing patterns changes over time and help us better understand how these changes may have affected not just the sage-grouse but many other species at risk found in southeast Alberta. This step is helping AWA develop a ranch plan for sage-grouse management. This plan could become an important tool for ranches throughout Alberta where dedicated stewardship guides their place on the landscape.

AWA has also been reaching out and strengthening ties by attending a sage-grouse conference in Idaho with the Heydlauff ranchers and partners from Saskatchewan, Montana, and Idaho. As well, we have participated in a sage-grouse workshop at the

Calgary Zoo to develop a tri-jurisdiction directive to help manage the sagebrush areas in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana. AWA also led a tour through southeast Alberta and Saskatchewan to create awareness of what the emergency protection order meant, who was affected by it, and to introduce colleagues from the U.S. and funders to the area. None of these efforts by AWA would be possible without generous financial support from dedicated individual donors: the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association (CEPA), and Enbridge.

As Sean Nixon and Mark Boyce pointed out in the previous article, sage-grouse numbers are up Alberta and Saskatchewan. While we agree with them that the emergency protection order has contributed to these promising increases, AWA thinks it is also important to note that the warmer winter may have also increased their survival.

The emergency protection order looks very much like a good first step. But, there is still a lot of work to be done and there are no quick fixes. We need to protect the landscape, restore what habitat is there for sage-grouse, continue removing abandoned structures on industrial sites and ranches to help reduce predation, flag fences, and implement all aspects of the recovery strategy and EPO. There also needs to be a commitment from the federal government to provide funding for landowners and leaseholders to help with the recovery efforts. AWA plans to continue building relationships with ranchers, working on the ranch plan, and taking a field tour of the Heydlauff ranch this summer. ▲



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