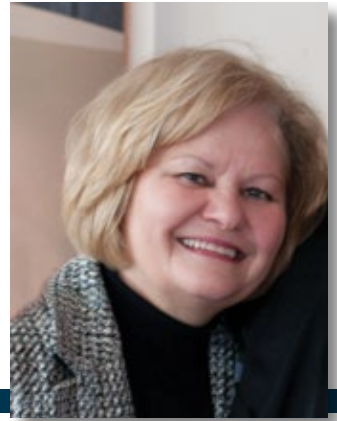


Sage-grouse in Alberta – are they turning the corner on extirpation?



By Christyann Olson, *AWA Executive Director*

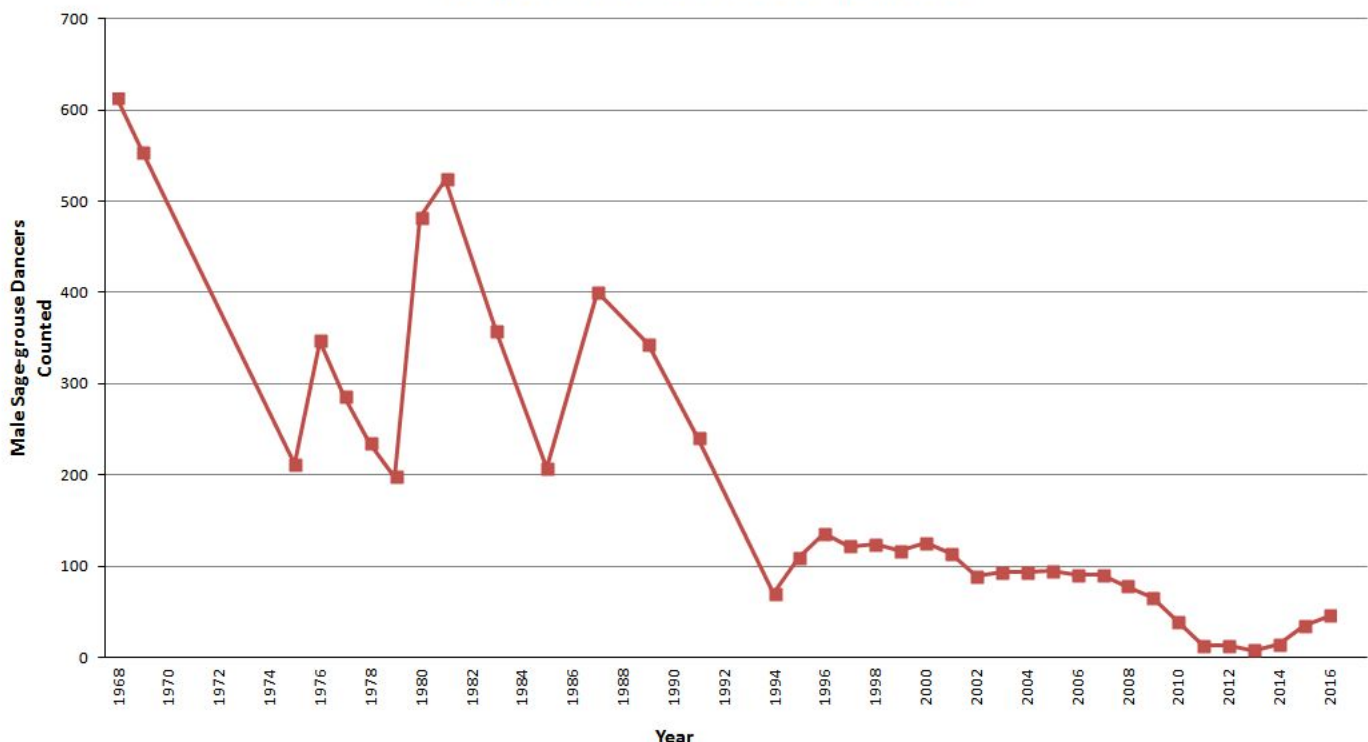
We hope so! As our readers know greater sage-grouse are in desperate trouble in Alberta. With just 14 males recorded on leks in 2012, they continued what seemed like an inevitable slide towards extirpation in Alberta. Though the cause was clear – industrialization of their habitat – provincial and federal governments refused to take action to protect habitat. That only changed after several years of legal challenges by AWA and our environmental colleagues. Then, in December 2013, the federal government issued an Emergency Protection Order (EPO). The accompanying graph shows how desperate the situation is for this iconic prairie bird.

The goal of the Emergency Order is to “achieve the best protection for the greater sage-grouse, while minimizing impacts on landowners and agricultural producers.” The order’s prohibitions only apply to habitat on federal and provincial Crown lands in southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan. Private land is not impacted by the order.

The total Canadian population of sage-grouse has increased and is estimated to be 340 birds this year. This includes 38 females imported from Montana earlier this spring. This is less than half of the 777 birds estimated to have made up the total population in 1996. But in 2014 the total population was estimated at only

100 birds. Alberta’s 2016 spring count observed 46 males on 3 leks (display grounds) but one formerly active Alberta lek didn’t attract any males. It appears we may be helping greater sage-grouse take a step back from the brink. In 2013 only eight males were counted in Alberta while in 2014 14 males were observed and in 2015 35 male sage-grouse were counted on leks. The Saskatchewan count this year only recorded two active leks. Both leks were located in the protected lands of Grasslands National Park. Thirty-three males were counted, nearly twice as many as the 18 males recorded in 2012. AWA hopes that we have halted the trajectory of decline and that the successful recovery

Decline of Alberta's Greater Sage-grouse



of greater sage-grouse has begun. The on-the-ground actions from the Emergency Protection Order that we think have started this recovery include removing predator perches, leveling abandoned buildings, flagging fences, instituting seasonal noise and traffic reductions, and increasing significantly the education and awareness of the sage-grouse predicament and what may be done to correct it.

Why AWA Cares

- The sage-grouse is an iconic species, entirely dependent on its sagebrush grassland habitat. Where habitat is protected, sage-grouse may recover, but if this critical habitat continues to be lost to agriculture and industrial activities, then the species' decline should be expected to continue.
- Protection of sage-grouse habitat also will benefit a host of other endangered species which share that habitat. These species include burrowing owl, sage thrasher, mountain plover and Sprague's pipit.
- In a poll published in the *Medicine Hat News* on December 2, 2011, 89.8 percent of all respondents said they were

extremely concerned that sage-grouse may soon disappear from Alberta.

- The greater sage grouse was designated an At Risk species in Alberta in 1996. The provincial status was changed to Endangered in 2000. Saskatchewan identified it as a Threatened species in 1987 and changed that status to Endangered in 1999. Federally, it was listed as an Endangered species in 1998. Listing, without actions to help the species recover, didn't prevent the sage-grouse decline from continuing unchecked in both Alberta and Saskatchewan until now. Acting now to protect such a charismatic species may bode well for future efforts to maintain and/or restore biodiversity in Canada.

The greater sage-grouse story is one where we are reminded that our good intentions may have undesirable, unintended consequences. Perches have been placed throughout the prairies to help the return of birds like ferruginous hawks. I always



The ferruginous hawk is one predator that takes advantage of human-created perches to hunt greater sage-grouse. PHOTO: © C. OLSON



*Male greater sage-grouse
PHOTO: © C. OLSON*

thought that was an unambiguously good thing... until I learned that those perches become perfect predator hunting platforms. Prey like sage-grouse, their eggs, and their nests have no defence. The more we try to help species, the more important it becomes to ensure we don't create unintended consequences. 🐦