Voices of the Sage

Conversations from the High Plains on saving Greater Sage-grouse and a treasured landscape
In the fall of 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the landmark decision that the greater sage-grouse would not be listed under the Endangered Species Act. The decision marked a defining moment in how America would manage not only species in need of conservation, but the land that is their home. The decision not to list came after Westerners from the public and private sectors worked tirelessly for more than a decade to craft specific, meaningful conservation measures to protect the bird and its habitat. Subsequently, the Bureau of Land Management, with input from state and local stakeholders, unveiled individualized conservation plans that cover 11 Western states. These unprecedented efforts should be hailed as a great victory and an exemplary conservation model. These efforts, however, are just the start of the work required to ensure the vitality of this bird that is found nowhere else on earth. We must now shift to fulfilling the on-the-ground conservation promised in the plans. The sagebrush steppe that sage-grouse occupy provides key habitat for numerous important wildlife species such as elk, mule deer, pronghorn, sage thrashers and golden eagles. More than 350 species and the vast sagebrush sea they need to thrive will benefit from these plans, leading to healthy, sustainable populations of sage grouse and other species across Western landscapes.

Westerners are uniquely aware of the beauty and value of the sagebrush sea. Their voices tell the story of an oft-forgotten, yet invaluable landscape in dire need of help. Unfortunately, some politicians want to block these historic conservation efforts and ignore the need for action. Their route would completely derail years of on-the-ground conservation efforts and invite the prospect of having to list the sage-grouse in the future.

Westerners know the time to act is now. These are their voices, the Voices of the Sage.
For Jason Baldes, the effort to conserve the greater sage-grouse and its habitat hits home—literally. Baldes, a member of the Eastern Shoshone tribe, grew up in sagebrush country on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

“The sage country is a big part of my life, growing up on the reservation there,” he says. “My father is a retired wildlife biologist. Growing up, I spent a great deal of time in the outdoors, hunting and fishing and gathering.”

The tribe uses sage plants in its ceremonies, dances and sweat lodges.

“The sage itself is central to our Shoshone people, our Shoshone culture,” says Baldes, a member of the National Wildlife Federation’s tribal lands advisory council.

He supports the ongoing work by public and private interests to save the greater sage-grouse and the decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service not to place the sage-grouse on the Endangered Species List.

“I am supportive of protections and conservation measures that ensure survival and habitat availability, however adding the sage-grouse to the Endangered Species List may have undermined existing measures by multiple interests, and effective collaborative efforts in the future may be more important than simply listing the bird.”
Robert Gaudet

Robert Gaudet moved from California to Nevada more than 45 years ago after spending several weekends fishing with a buddy in the Silver State. After taking up residence in Las Vegas, he started hunting big game and traveling throughout eastern Nevada. For more than 25 years he has volunteered with the Nevada Department of Wildlife to help teach others about hunting, fishing and archery.

Gaudet, the Nevada Wildlife Federation president, has spent many years roaming sagebrush country exploring, camping, hunting, fishing and becoming familiar with trails and historical points of interest. His passion for the land has made him capable to talk at length about the flora and fauna. The hard-core outdoorsman keeps a camera handy at all times so he can document the desert’s many wildflowers.

"Sagebrush country is absolutely beautiful in full bloom," Mr. Gaudet marvels. "That’s why I love it when it rains, as it washes away all the dust, and makes it fresh and clean. When you’re out there after a rainstorm, you smell the pungent aromas of sage and creosote. Then you get excited because in a couple weeks there are going to be blossoms of every color pushing up through the desert floor."

He and other Nevada Wildlife Federation members have worked diligently for years to conserve sagebrush habitat. It’s time to carry out the conservation plans by the Bureau and Management and the U.S. Forest Service, he says.

“We’re trying to drive these plans into motion by monitoring the state agencies’ progress,” Gaudet adds.
Janet Marschner

When it comes to the sagebrush steppe, it was not love at first sight for Janet Marschner. She wasn’t around a lot of sagebrush growing up in her native North Dakota, and when she visited Wyoming, she spent most of her time in the mountains.

But for Marschner, who now lives in Cheyenne, familiarity with sagebrush lands has bred respect and awe. After taking a hunter’s education course in 2011, she started hunting and spending more time in the Wyoming landscapes and there she discovered the breadth and diversity of the “sagebrush sea.”

“I spend most of my time in the sage in Wyoming, just thinking about what an amazing ecosystem it is and how many animals live there,” Marschner says.

More than 350 animal and plant species are dependent on sagebrush habitat for food, shelter and nesting. Proof of its importance was driven home for Marschner when she happened upon a doe pronghorn and two fawns, one of which hid under a big sage plant while the other stayed close to its mother.

“If it weren’t for that sage brush, these animals may not survive. That’s why we need to take care of it, respect it, and see the beauty in it. I think most people probably dismiss it too quickly.”
Jim Posewitz

“I think sage-grouse will survive, but only if people want it to survive and take action to help it survive.”

That is Jim Posewitz’s assessment of the greater sage-grouse, the chicken-sized bird with the elaborate mating ritual. The longtime Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist and well-known author and conservationist offers a perspective honed by years of observing and participating in the science and politics of natural-resource management.

Posewitz, whose book “Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting” is a staple for many outdoor enthusiasts, is optimistic about efforts to rebuild sage-grouse populations – with a caveat.

“If it’s just a proclamation or words on paper that does not include boots on the ground, monitoring their strutting grounds and whatever other criteria we want to use to measure birds’ health and abundance, then it’s just sort of a human exercise,” he says.

Perhaps, Posewitz adds, conservation organizations can help by monitoring the bird’s progress as the state and federal conservation plans are carried out. There’s hope, he says, and points to the ongoing restoration of bison to the northern plains and the work by sportsmen, environmentalists and politicians in the last century to restore fish and wildlife populations that were devastated by westward expansion and unregulated exploitation.

PHOTO: STEVE WOODRUFF
Walt Gasson

Walt Gasson and his family have lived, worked and recreated in western Wyoming’s sagebrush country for six generations. And as he says, “It’s really part of the core of our being.”

His father’s family moved to the Cowboy State to raise sheep in the 1870s, settling on Big Sandy Creek, a tributary of the Green River.

“From the time I was born, there was never any question about if I would hunt and fish. There was never any question about where I would hunt and fish. The sagebrush country is as much a part of me as the very air I breathe,” Gasson says.

He recalls heading out in his father’s ’61 Chevy pickup to hunt sage grouse in the early fall.

“It was amazing, on a bad day we’d see a hundred birds. I look back on that now and it was just magical.” Gasson hopes the greater sage-grouse populations will rebound and his nine grandchildren will feel the same magic. And he hopes the work to save the bird expands to save the sagebrush landscape, which is just as critical for elk, mule deer and other wildlife as it is for sage-grouse.
The sagebrush country that Doug Waggoner spends a lot of his outdoor time enjoying couldn’t be more different from the green, tree-covered Connecticut where he grew up.

“It took me some time to get used to it, that’s for sure. From the air it looked flat and bland,” says Waggoner, who moved to Colorado’s Routt County in 1967. “But once you get out in that country and get into that terrain, it opens up.”

By early spring, the sportsman and climber likes to escape the snowy Steamboat Springs area and venture into the sagebrush steppe.

“It seems like hunting on the West Slope for deer, elk, or grouse, we always spend a good deal of time in sagebrush and scrub oak. I am always amazed at how much cover and food the sagebrush terrain provides for game and predators,” he adds.

Waggoner believes the greater sage-grouse is a bellwether for the health of the diverse habitat and other wildlife.

“We should protect this valuable ecology by continuing to provide habitat for the sage grouse and mule deer.”

PHOTO: AARON KINDLE
I’m here to tell you that those very same elk and mule deer that we value so much in the treed country and those very same trout that we value in the mountain ranges, they rely on these sage lands, too. We’ve got to get together as a people and quit fighting and find solutions. — Walt Gasson, Wyoming

SOME SPECIES OF THE SAGE:

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE
The greater sage-grouse is a chicken-sized bird that subsists on sage brush, forbs, grasses and insects. It is known for its showy mating ritual on mating grounds, called leks, where males puff out yellow sacks on their chests to make noises.

ELK
During winter, elk migrate from higher elevations to sage lands where they can find food, including sage brush, in shallow snows. Elk also use the sage steppe ecosystem to calve in the early spring where food is available much earlier in the season.

MULE DEER
Mule deer live throughout the West although their numbers have declined in recent years. They use the sage steppe year round, and similar to elk, rely on sage during winter to access forage when the high country is too snowy.

GOLDEN EAGLE
Golden eagles are one of the largest birds found in North America and formidable predators, although they would prefer to find carcasses and scavenge. Golden eagles prey largely on species found in the sagebrush ecosystem.