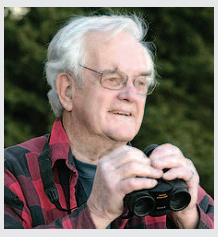

Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Helping the great sage grouse to survive

Who would ever have thought the once-huge populations of the king of Oregon's Great Sagebrush Sea, the greater sage grouse, would suddenly begin to vanish from its ancient domain, and be considered a candidate for listing as an Endangered Species?

What happened to cause this terrible decline? That is what wildlife biologists, range managers, politicians, birders, game-bird hunters and a lot of other people would like to know.

There were a few clues here and there when the first reports came from a wildlife biologist at Oregon State University. But when concerned field biologists began to look around them one huge factor became obvious: habitat destruction.

From 1988 to 1993, wildlife biologist Jan Hanf and a team of researchers from the Prineville BLM office conducted a sage grouse study on BLM lands that included the Millican ATV trails. As the study progressed it became all too obvious that trails used by ATVs ran right through a variety of sage grouse communities which included ideal nesting habitat.

It took time, and a lot of political mumbo-jumbo, but finally Hanf and her fellow researchers found a sound scientific and political base with which to close off use of the Millican ATV playgrounds and allow sage grouse to have their land back.

Recently, East Cascades Audubon Society (ECAS) members discovered other factors that may be affecting sage grouse populations — like West Nile Virus (WNV).

WNV has been previously documented in the sage-steppe of eastern Deschutes County, and one human case was documented in 2016, while one or more avian cases were confirmed in the Wildhorse Hunt Unit in years past. But no information has been collected on mosquito vectors (60 possible species) present on the High Desert.

Testing on stock water, dugout playa water storage areas, guzzlers, and other water sources could be done to see if WNV is present in levels which might inhibit grouse recovery. Some researchers feel that water sources concentrate grouse and carriers, and possibly serve as sites for WNV transmission. It seems that with newer modalities such as eDNA there is an opportunity to determine whether these water sources benefit or harm sage grouse reproduction and welfare.

WNV testing could also be conducted on wings submitted by hunters at check stations.

ECAS also considered predators, asking: Do open water sources serve as predator sinks for grouse? Ravens are seen utilizing water sources, including guzzlers, in summer — could their predation on chicks be significant? What is the role of hunter harvest in the low population of sage grouse, and what about poaching?

All these concerns boil down to one huge factor that's slipped past range managers and wildlife biologists: The onslaught of managing the Great Sandy Desert for cows that began in the '80s, and not taking into consideration the impact on sage grouse.

Tens of thousands of acres of native sagebrush, including Silver Sage, Artemisia cana — a plant that sage grouse cannot get along without — was destroyed and replaced with non-native grasses and the land made into grazing pastures. The land was sprayed with herbicides by the BLM and replaced by grasses for cows, which drove the sage grouse out to the fringes; they've been literally put out to pasture, which has left them no place to safely nest.

Perhaps it was all too easy to forget that one part of any ecosystem affects another part — removal of sagebrush allowed increased predation by ravens and other grouse-eaters, caused the birds to crowd into what habitat was left, and perhaps increased the risks of WNV infection. While the playas that became water troughs for cows also became habitat for mosquitoes that helped spread WNV.

All these factors have made it absolutely necessary that land managers collect every piece of data they can to make wise decisions for the future, and the Adopt-a-Lek program is supplying much of that missing data.

PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Sage grouse males dancing in a "lek" to attract females, who will lay more eggs and hopefully increase Oregon's sage grouse numbers.

If you would like to get involved in helping to find out what's going on, this is your Big Chance. Target count periods are March 18 through April 1, then April 2-15, and lastly April 16-30.

Adopt-a-Lek is not for the weak-at-heart — in some places the going is rough — but for those who take part there are rewards beyond description. Right off the bat volunteers will get to see parts of Oregon most people just dream about and often can be heard saying, "Boy! I'd like to go there some day!"

A "lek" is a large portion of wildlands located in the sagebrush country of Oregon's "Great Sandy Desert" where male sage grouse gather in spring to shake their fannies at their female counterparts — and each other — and literally get into the mating game.

Most volunteer lek-lookers park their vans, pickups, campers and pitch their tents far enough from the lek to see the individual birds clearly, but not be so close as to interfere with the dancing and strutting. The whole idea is to count noses — or in this case, beaks — and see what's going on.

The program is staffed by more than 50 dedicated volunteers. Volunteers drive rugged roads to establish isolated, primitive campsites, most without cell phone coverage, no weather radar information, or coffee shops. Some of the leks may require volunteers do a little hiking in the freezing dawn temperatures in order to get an accurate count.

The volunteers receive lek count protocol training

See **SAGE GROUSE** *on page 18*