

# STEELHEAD SHORTAGE

■ The number of steelhead returning to the Grande Ronde River and its tributaries is the lowest recorded in the past 10 to 15 years

By Kaleb Lay  
The Observer

ENTERPRISE — Following a trend set in recent years, anglers fishing the Grande Ronde and its tributaries for steelhead can expect a season of sparse returns and a disproportionate number of uncut fins this season.

“It’s been pretty tough,” said Jeff Yanke, district fish biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Enterprise. “Steelhead returns are still at the lowest levels we’ve seen in the last 10 to 15 years, slightly better returns than last year but not by much. Catch rates have been pretty low.”

Steelhead entered the Grande Ronde river system during Sep-

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— Jeff Yanke, fish biologist, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, talking about the steelhead run on the Grande Ronde River and its tributaries

tember and October and have been awaiting a rise in water levels before making their journey upriver. The winter storm last weekend may well provide that boost.

But even if higher water levels do lure fish upstream, Yanke said steelhead returns are expected to be disappointing this season.

“We’re expecting about 1,500 to 1,600 hatchery steelhead returning to



Brandon Yanke poses with a wild Grande Ronde River steelhead before releasing it back into the river.

Jeff Yanke/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

the Grande Ronde and Willowa fisheries this year,” Yanke said. “It’s one of the lowest we’ve observed. And as far as the Imnaha goes, we’re expecting about 1,200 to 1,300 hatchery returning to the Imnaha system this year.”

Hatchery-raised steelhead, easily identified by the smooth nub along

the spine where their adipose fin was removed, have been returning in even more dismal numbers this season than their wild-born brethren, Yanke said.

“For about every four fish caught down there, only one has been a hatchery fish, and three have been

wild,” Yanke estimated. “For those anglers that want to be keeping steelhead, it hasn’t been a great year. But if you like catching and releasing just wild steelhead, your catch rates are a little bit better.”

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# Pursuit and conservation of a western icon: the sage grouse

An icon of the western U.S., the wary, spike-tailed adult males of the greater sage grouse boast the endearing nickname “bombers” due to their large size and lumbering lift-off. An obligate inhabitant of the high sagebrush, greater sage grouse are as quintessential to the range as pronghorn and mule deer.

A spectacle to behold, my first encounter was in southern Idaho on a late September elk hunt.

Riding an abysmally rough BLM road back to camp, I spotted “geese” in the sagebrush off to my right.

“Why are geese out here in the sagebrush?” I asked myself. It seemed plausible to find geese along the Pahsimeroi River, but not in the shrub-steppe.

“Those aren’t geese, genius. They’re sage grouse!” I blurted out in elation. A half-

dozen robust, feather-legged fowl eyeballed me warily as I bounced past, ensuring they need not unnecessarily expend the energy of lift-off.

Sage grouse once numbered around 16 million across western North America, pre-settlement.

Currently, estimates of approximately 200,000 birds remain range-wide, their significant decline attributed largely to habitat loss. Following their decline, the species was proposed for listing as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act until a 2015 status review identified that listing was not warranted.

The decision was made partially due to the efforts of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), which began in 2010, pushing to conserve precious sagebrush habitat across the sage grouse range. Sage grouse and the SGI are both captivating in their own right; the birds for their size



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

A male sage grouse displays for the ladies on the lek.



**UPLAND PURSUITS**  
BRAD TRUMBO

*“The sage grouse courtship is something to beyond. Males have spiked tail fans and snow-white breast feathers with two yellow air sacs that they inflate during the ritual.”*

and behaviors, and the SGI for its incredible cooperative nature among landowners, nonprofits and government agencies.

Currently, there are four protected, fragmented populations in Washington. A much larger area of southern Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, and southeast Oregon throughout the Steens, Malheur and Owyhee public lands support these curious prairie grouse, permitting regulated hunting seasons.

Sage grouse are known for their dramatic “lekking” behavior. A lek is a common area where males gather in spring to perform courtship displays for females and fiercely defend their territory on the lek, which may only be a few yards in size.

The sage grouse courtship dance is something to behold. Males have spiked tail fans and snow-white breast feathers with two

yellow air sacs that they inflate during the ritual. The Cornell University bird laboratory explains the courtship behavior as follows.

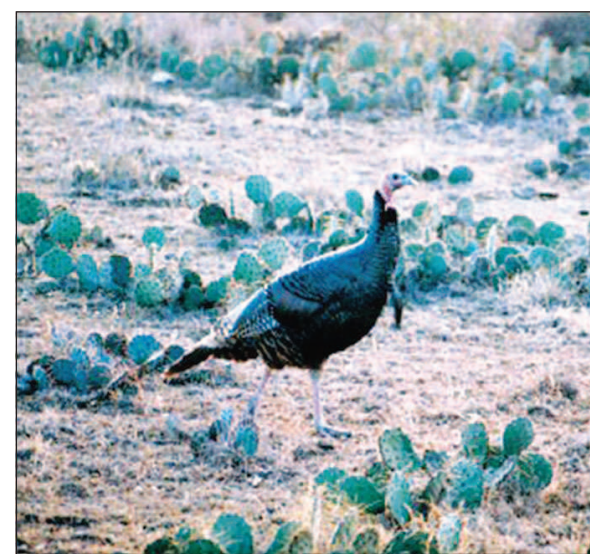
“Standing tall, with inflated chest held high, the male sweeps his wings across his white breast, creating a swishing noise. He tilts his head back, rapidly inflating, bouncing, and deflating the yellow, balloon-like pouches on his chest. The outward popping of these bare pouches creates a series of echoing pops. These displays are performed almost continuously, and up to 10 times per minute, for several hours in the early morning.”

Ensuring the persistence of this iconic species of the western sagebrush habitats, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) helped found the SGI, leveraging Farm Bill funds and volunteer landowner cooperation to

conserve the largest intact tracts of sagebrush with the largest sage grouse populations. To date, the SGI has cooperated with 1,856 ranchers to conserve more than 7 million acres across 11 Western states (California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming).

The SGI includes NRCS partnerships with myriad local, state and federal governments and nongovernmental organizations like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Oregon Hunters Association, Pheasants Forever and the Ruffed Grouse Society. While the NRCS channels funding through the Farm Bill, success is only possible through partners that leverage funds, shoulder work, and tackle policies beyond the authority of the NRCS.

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Tom Claycomb/Contributed Photo

A wild turkey is traditional Thanksgiving fare.

# Turkey is on the menu ... of course

Four centuries ago, America was a fledgling country. Her life was in the balance. The pilgrims were on the verge of starving and things didn’t look good. Luckily some friendly Indians came out of the woodwork (OK, the woods) and provided a feast for the pilgrims. That shifted the pendulum and gave the starving pilgrims hope.

Tradition has it that the Indians brought in some wild turkeys among an assortment of other foods. The pilgrims were overwhelmed by their kindness and gave thanks for the meal, their new friends and all of their many blessings in general.

Since that time nearly 400 years ago, Americans nationwide have declared Thanksgiving as a national holiday and stopped for a day to acknowledge their many blessings and give thanks for them and our country. Four hundred years later, we still have the best country in the world as evidenced by the thousands of people trying to enter America. Who can blame them?

So, with that said what should your main course be this Thanksgiving? Anything less than a turkey along with maybe a smoked ham and for sure pumpkin pie is obviously a Communist plot designed to end all true American traditions.

One year I thought I’d do something different. I grilled some ribeyes for a change of pace. They were nice, well-marbled ribeyes. They were probably as good as any ribeyes you’ve ever had. But it went against all tradition. It put a big kink in the Claycomb family traditions. The Wampanoag Indians would have turned over in their graves. Never again has my family deviated from having a smoked turkey as the main dish. Since then things have settled down and all is well again in the Claycomb household. Katy and Kolby have not left me.

The last decade or so mom has sent us a smoked turkey from Greenburg’s in East Texas but a few weeks ago their plant burned down.

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**BASE CAMP**  
TOM CLAYCOMB