

## Greater Sage-Grouse

The greater sage-grouse is found in the intermountain Western United States & sage-steppe ecosystem. This is a place where sage brush grows. Did you notice that the name “sage- grouse” includes the name of the plant upon which it is dependent? They depend on and live in sagebrush. *What do you imagine when you think of sagebrush?* It is only found in the desert. Sagebrush may seem *ho-hum*, but healthy sagebrush can live up to one hundred and fifty years! It provides *habitat and forage* for many wildlife species.

Sagebrush is also at a higher risk of *degradation* which in turn puts the sage-grouse at a higher risk for losing its habitat. *Why do you think sagebrush could be at risk for degradation? What kinds of things do you think might threaten sagebrush?* (For more reading about the sagebrush ecosystem visit: [http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/factsheets/Sage-steppe\\_022814.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/factsheets/Sage-steppe_022814.pdf))

The sage-grouse cannot thrive in any other ecosystem in the world! Because of the special balance and co-existence between sagebrush and the sage-grouse, sage-grouse are considered *Near Threatened* based on the IUCN Red list of Threatened Species (for more info visit: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22679503/0>). At one point just this past year, the sage- grouse was almost put on the Endangered Species Act, but, after careful consideration, U.S. Fish & Wildlife decided not to list the species. Collaboration between many groups and individuals has helped keep sage-grouse populations healthy enough to make this possible.

Sage-grouse are *ground foragers*. During the winter months, sage-grouse eat sagebrush leaves. They cannot eat seeds like many other birds because they do not have *gizzards* to help them properly digest hard foods. During other seasons, sage-grouse will also eat insects and *forbs (little herb-like plants or blooming flowers)* but these are not their primary diet.

Lewis & Clark provided some of the first documentation of sage-grouse in their diaries during their exploration of the west: "The flesh of the cock of the Plains is dark, and only tolerable in point of flavour. I do not think it as good as either the Pheasant or Grouse." (Meriwether Lewis, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1806: *Grouse of Lewis & Clark Expedition*)

Sage-grouse range in sized based on sex from 19-26 inches in length and can weigh anywhere between 2.5 to 7 pounds. Both sexes are a grayish brown in color with black on their chests. Although the birds are heavy and prefer to walk, they can fly up to speeds of fifty miles per hour!

Sage-grouse have one of the most unique mating rituals observed in the natural world using a “lek.” The word comes from Sweden meaning “to play.” The lek is their natural breeding ground and where they display their natural behavior. Sage-grouse may use the same mating ground for several years. To begin their mating display, males will strut around, fan their feathers, and display a yellow sack that is under their breasts, creating a “wup” like sound. They can gulp and hold up to a gallon of air in their *esophagus!* When they squeeze out that air, the sound is made. That sound can be heard up to two miles away! Once mating is complete, the female will go off on her own to raise her young. Sage-grouse

can feed themselves shortly after hatching and can fly weakly after only ten days old. It takes until they're about five weeks for them to be able to fly strongly.

Activities for kids: [http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/nrcs144p2\\_053950.pdf](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs144p2_053950.pdf)