

OBSERVATIONS ON SAGE GROUSE

By Steve Sewell

For some time, now, I have been aware of the controversy about the effect of cattle grazing on the sage grouse population. I offer the following facts reflecting my personal experience in this matter.

From the mid-1890s until 1956, my family owned and operated several ranches at Riddle, Idaho, just north of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation. These ranches were known as the Eleven Bar, The UD, The Portlock, and the Flying H. The Eleven Bar and the UD were on the east side of the valley, in the watershed of Payne Creek and Squaw Creek. The Portlock and Flying H were on the west side of the valley, in the Blue Creek watershed.

My personal participation in the ranching operations began in 1944, and ended in 1956, when my father sold the property. After my father sold the ranches, I worked for other ranches in Elko County until 1961, at which time I was called into military service.

Concerning the sage grouse, or sage hen, as they were commonly called, there were large numbers of them on the ranches, particularly the Portlock ranch, which had large fields of alfalfa. The sage grouse population was fairly consistent, usually numbering in the thousands. We kept close track of the population, because they were very good to eat, and we harvested a few from time to time. Most of the people who lived in that area were very familiar with the sage grouse, and very knowledgeable about them.

It was common knowledge among the local people that the sage grouse population was dependent upon the weather at the time of the hatching of the chicks in the spring. If there was any significant amount of rain when the chicks were small, they nearly all perished. Sometimes, when that happened, the adults would raise a second brood of chicks. It was easy to tell when that happened, because the young from the second hatching were smaller than normal later in the summer.

Sage grouse were nearly always found in, or close to, the alfalfa fields. I recall few, if any, instances of finding large concentration of them in areas of nothing but sagebrush. They obviously preferred the tender alfalfa leaves to the foul tasting leaves of the brush.

The predation of sage grouse was by coyotes, and, to a limited extent, bobcats. It was a very common experience to find one or more instances each day, whether riding horseback working cattle or working in the hayfields, where a sage grouse had been eaten by a coyote. The evidence was always the same. Every bit of the bird had been eaten, except the outer wings, which consisted only of feathers. The remains of the bird were always positioned the same, with the bird having been eaten while lying on its back. There was nearly always a deposit of coyote feces at or near the scene of the kill, further evidence that a coyote had been involved.

During the years I spent working as a cowboy and ranch hand, I saw no evidence whatsoever that the sage grouse population was adversely affected by cattle grazing, or ranching activities in general. My observation was quite the contrary. Sage grouse thrived in the cultivated fields, particularly alfalfa, which was there due to ranching activity, not by nature. I never saw one sage grouse nest which had been disturbed by cattle. The sage grouse were also helped by the fact that most ranchers shot coyotes whenever possible.

Another way in which the sage grouse population, as well as other wild bird and animal populations are helped by ranching is in the development of water resources. Prior to the development of water resources by ranchers, there was not much water available for wildlife in many arid areas of the west, the habitat of the sage grouse. Once water had been provided for the cattle, it was also available for all other birds and animals in the area.

During the early 1900s, my grandfather constructed several large dams on Blue Creek and Payne Creek, and my father enlarged them during the 1950s. Prior to the building of these dams, once the runoff of the snowmelt in the spring was complete, the valleys dried up, and water was in short supply. After the dams were built, there was never again a lack of water for the livestock or the wildlife. On the Blue Creek side of the valley were approximately 4000 acres of wild hay meadows. The stored water provided by the dams allowed for flood irrigation of this area to a depth of at least one foot, and more in some places. Each year, this vast flooded area provided nesting grounds for thousands of ducks and geese. A flock of about 500 Canada geese lived on the ranch year round, obviously attracted by the abundant water and extensive fields of wheat, oats, and barley. This wonderful habitat, like the alfalfa fields, did not exist prior to the efforts of my grandfather and father. It was not created specifically as wildlife habitat, but was every bit as good for the wild birds and animals as it was for the domestic animals. We very much enjoyed our wildlife companions. The dams constructed by my family have also become popular fishing spots in recent years.

In addition to the large dams, many small water storage facilities have been constructed by ranchers in order to provide water for their livestock throughout the west. A visit to nearly any of these watering holes will show who the users are. In addition to the tracks of livestock will be found the tracks of deer, antelope, elk, raccoon, birds of all kinds, and whatever predators inhabit the area.

In summary, I feel that the sage grouse population, as well as the wildlife population of the west in general, has been aided, and not harmed by cattle grazing and agricultural activities in general.

Steve Sewell

Steve Sewell
January 7, 2004