

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse

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Imagine a crisp, cool, spring dawn in the Southern Interior's grasslands. The air is filled with the songs of migratory birds advertising their arrival and breeding intentions. Among these songs, a soft cooing accompanied by foot stomping can be heard in the distance. These sounds are part of an amazing breeding display that male sharp-tailed grouse engage in during the breeding season. The breeding ground, or lek, is often a small knoll with sparse vegetation that is visited by males year after year. On these, males display to each other and to receptive females in an effort to pass on their genes. Sharp-tailed grouse is the only remaining species in British Columbia that exhibits this amazing behaviour (sage grouse, another lekking species, was extirpated from BC at the turn of the century).

The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, one of three subspecies of sharptails found in BC, is a medium sized (40 to 48 cm long, 500 to 1000 grams) game bird. The sexes are difficult to distinguish except during the breeding season when males expose a pale violet airsac and yellow orange combs over the eyes. The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse is mostly associated with grasslands although in British Columbia they are also found in large forest openings and meadow complexes. Home ranges of the sharp-tailed grouse are relatively small. Despite their ability to fly for long distances, they seldom move further than 2 km from the lek. Within this area, they use a variety of habitats for various stages of their life history. During the nesting season (April to June), females require open grasslands with dense bunchgrasses and herbs. Nests are usually located under large bunchgrasses with abundant residual cover. The nest consists of a shallow depression lined with grasses and moss. The female lays on average 9 to 12 eggs that hatch after 22 to 24 days. During the brood rearing period, sharptails use seepage areas with dense cover where chicks can find abundant insects. In the winter, birds use riparian and upland shrubs for cover, feeding and roosting.

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse were once thought to be the most abundant grouse in the continental Northwest. Today, they occupy less than 10% of their former range. British

Columbia's populations in forested areas appear to be stable, while grassland populations have experienced dramatic declines. In BC's grasslands, the sharp-tailed grouse has been extirpated from the Okanagan and is virtually gone from the East Kootenays. The disappearance of this subspecies from southern portions of our province has effectively isolated our population from those in the United States. In the remaining grassland areas, the populations continue to decline. In 1991, the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse was provincially designated a blue-listed (at-risk) species.

Numerous factors have been implicated in the decline of the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. Foremost is the loss and degradation of their grassland habitat due to conversion of native grasslands to croplands, certain grazing practices, land development, invasion of non-native plants, forest encroachment, and damage to upland shrub and riparian areas. In most areas, the cumulative impact of these factors has been attributed to local extinctions and declines. Despite the declining trends in our grassland populations, BC still supports over 60% of the North American breeding range for sharp-tailed grouse. Therefore, British Columbians have an important global responsibility to ensure the continued existence of this intriguing bird.

The road to recovery of BC's populations, however, is not easy. We need to implement realistic approaches that address the current relationship between sharp-tailed grouse and land use practices. This in turn must be incorporated into long term plans and activities geared towards conservation and recovery at the landscape level. To achieve this requires the co-operative efforts of provincial governments, ranchers, First Nations and the range management community. Together, we must develop and implement ecologically and economically sustainable range management practices that incorporate the needs of this and other grassland species regardless of political and demographic boundaries.

In April of 2002, the Sharp-tailed Grouse Stewardship Program was initiated to do just that. The individuals involved in this project represent a wide range of organizations with



The lords of the dance. Sharptails squaring off.

PHOTO BY ERNEST LEUPIN

vested interests in grassland integrity. By working together and using research, education, stewardship and habitat enhancement, and restoration techniques as recovery tools, we aim to restore the viability of sharptails in grassland habitats. Although the project is still in the initial stages of delivering the program, the collective concern and willingness to act towards wildlife conservation by all involved will ensure the success of this program. We also urge others to become actively involved in our vision to restore grassland habitats for sharptails and other species of conservation concern.

Ernest completed his MSc (UBC) on songbirds and their responses to alternative harvesting methods and has run a biological consulting business in Kamloops, BC since 1997. He is currently a lead biologist in the Sharp-tailed Grouse Stewardship Program.

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Partners of the project are: Ministry of Water, Land, and Air Protection (Regions 3 and 5), BC Parks, Upland Bird Society, Grasslands Conservation Council, Agriculture Canada, Guichon Cattle Company, Palmer Cattle Company, OK Cattle Company, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and BC Conservation Foundation.

You can learn more about this program by contacting Ernest at ecoscape@shaw.ca or visit us at www.bcgrasslands.org under "Grassland Species at Risk."