

Two Win-Win Initiatives with Common Recovery Goals

Lesser Prairie-Chicken and Greater Sage-Grouse



By Christian Hagan

Lesser prairie-chickens. Photo Credit: Linda Rockwell

Have you ever been in the southern Great Plains or the high sagebrush steppe on a crisp April morning and heard mysterious cackling or bubbling sounds carried by the winds?

If you were sitting on a sand dune surrounded by waves of little bluestem in the Great Plains, more than likely it was the cackling of male lesser prairie-chickens (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) displaying to impress females.

If you were perched on a lava rock crag amidst a sea of sagebrush, you were listening to bubbling pops and wing-swishing of male greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) on their breeding grounds, called leks.

In either case, you had the great fortune of experiencing the elaborate mating rituals of two iconic western birds. Their courtship displays inspired the dances of Plains Indian tribes and continues to capture the

imagination of birdwatchers, upland bird hunters, and behavioral ecologists alike.

Both lesser prairie-chickens and greater sage-grouse depend on large prairie and steppe landscapes shared by agricultural producers, primarily ranching operations. Historically, their ranges were vast, but today wild prairies have dwindled by 90 percent, and sagebrush steppe by 50 percent.

Stressors on these landscapes continue and include energy development, subdivision, invasive species, and drought. As a result of this reduction in available habitat, the two species have been added to the list of Candidate Species for Endangered Species Act protection.

Recognizing the serious declines in suitable habitat, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its partners, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have taken a proactive and targeted approach to recover these rare bird species. NRCS Chief Dave White is leading what has fast become a win-win model for success that is helping ranchers and birds thrive across large landscapes.

In 2010, NRCS harnessed the power to the Farm Bill to create the Sage Grouse Initiative, which – in just two years – has enrolled more than 450 ranchers, invested in excess of \$100 million, and generated nearly \$60 million in partner matches. The NRCS is taking the same approach with the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative. Since 2010, Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative has enrolled over 620 landowners in NRCS contracts to improve habitat and reduce threats to the species. Both initiatives provide landowner assistance in priority habitat areas for voluntary management, enhancement, and expansion of suitable habitat – actions that benefit sustainable ranching as well. The goal is to preserve agricultural and rural ways of life.

To carry out the work on the ground, Strategic Watershed Action Teams have added range conservationists and wildlife biologists to key rural areas throughout the West. By joining forces with 38 diverse partners, a total of 34 positions are now strategically located throughout areas of greatest strategic need.

Program delivery focuses on priority landscapes identified in conjunction with state fish and wildlife agencies, Bureau of Land Management and other partners. Landscape targeting ensures that conservation investments benefit the greatest numbers of birds in the best areas

In the case of greater sage-grouse, 75 percent of the birds occur in only about 25 percent of their historic range. Investments in these areas of greatest density have the greatest likelihood of success. Initiative objectives are funded by NRCS through the Conservation Technical Assistance Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.

NRCS is committed to rigorous evaluation of outcomes from carrying out conservation practices through the two initiatives. A combination of intensive university and state wildlife

agency research projects and case studies will be developed to quantify the effects of NRCS practices to lesser prairie-chicken and greater sage-grouse populations. Additionally, changes in available habitat resulting from NRCS practices will be quantified using satellite imagery. These tools will provide partners and cooperators with a high level of confidence as to the benefits of conservation investments.

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Each spring, male greater-sage grouse gather on breeding grounds, called leks, and perform strut displays to court females and define their display territories. Photo Credit: Jeremy R. Roberts, Conservation Media

