

# GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE

DISTINCTIVE AND DISAPPEARING DENIZEN OF THE WEST



**THE GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE** (*Centrocercus minimus*) is one of the most endangered birds in North America. By the time this grouse was recognized as a distinct species in 2000, it was already in serious trouble. Human population growth and development have steadily eroded the range of this species that was once found across large expanses of sagebrush habitat south of the Colorado River in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. Today fewer than 5,000 of these grouse remain in the Gunnison Basin and six small outlying populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.

## ✓ Threats

Gunnison sage-grouse require large healthy expanses of sagebrush where they find food and cover. The loss and fragmentation of this habitat to oil and gas drilling, rural development and associated infrastructure, like roads and power lines, are the primary threats to the grouse. Live-stock grazing, invasive species, motorized recreation and climate change also threaten these birds and their habitat.

## ✓ Current Status

In 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the Gunnison sage-grouse as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and designated 1.4 million acres of critical habitat to support the bird’s recovery. The



**The Gunnison sage-grouse is an iconic western species. A recent poll showed that 75 percent of Colorado voters support ESA listing for the bird.**

Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service and state of Utah already recognized the bird as a sensitive species and in Colorado it has long been a “species of special concern,” but these status designations provide minimal protections.

## ✓ Conservation

The state of Colorado began working with communities and private landowners to implement conservation measures for Gunnison sage-grouse in the early 1990s. These efforts have helped slow population declines, but the species remains imperiled. Listing under the ESA now puts the Gunnison sage-grouse on a path to recovery rather than extinction.



**Gunnison sage-grouse: female and displaying male.**

## An Annual Display

Each spring, Gunnison sage-grouse engage in a mating ritual that has long fascinated westerners, birders and scientists alike. The grouse gather at ancestral strutting grounds known as “leks,” where the males strut their stuff to attract females. Fanning their tail feathers and puffing out their chests, the birds simultaneously

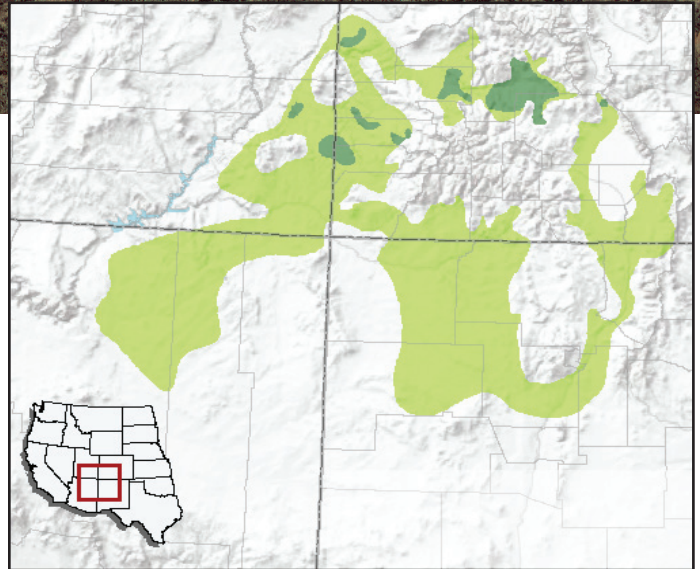




**Curecanti National Recreation Area and other public and private lands with healthy expanses of sagebrush are vital to Gunnison sage-grouse. The grouse's range (dark green on map) is a small fraction of what it once was (light green).**

Federal ESA protections will buttress state and local conservation efforts by making additional funding available for research, monitoring and project implementation. The ESA also accommodates continued land use and development on state or private land conducted in accordance with approved, science-based conservation plans.

Protecting the Gunnison sage-grouse will also protect many other species that share its habitat, including elk, pronghorn, mule deer and trout. For example, elk in the Gunnison Basin use the same winter habitat as sage-grouse, so safeguarding these areas will help maintain elk herds and preserve land and water that support wildlife viewing and other recreational activities vital to local economies.



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