

Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse

Question & Answer Sheet

Q. What is a Columbian sharp-tailed grouse?

A. The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse is one of seven recognized subspecies of sharp-tailed grouse that have been described in North America. Sharp-tailed grouse are brownish-gray with many small buff and black markings, a white belly, and a long, mostly white, wedge-shaped tail. Compared to the other subspecies, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse are the smallest and have darker gray plumage, more pronounced spotting on the throat, and narrower markings on the underside.

Q. Where does the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse occur?

A. Historically, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse range extended westward from the continental divide in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado to northeastern California and eastern Oregon and Washington; southward to northern Nevada and central Utah; and northward through central British Columbia, Canada. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse now occur in Washington, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Montana (possibly), and British Columbia. The subspecies has been extirpated from Oregon, Nevada, and California. Recent reintroduction efforts have been undertaken in Idaho, Nevada, Washington, and Oregon to augment extant populations or attempt to reestablish the subspecies in unoccupied habitats. The Service currently considers the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse a species of concern throughout its historic range.

Q. What type of habitat does the subspecies need to survive?

A. Columbian sharp-tailed grouse rely on a variety of good quality habitats within the sagebrush-bunchgrass, meadow-steppe, mountain shrub, and riparian zones of the northwestern United States. Various upland habitats, with a component of denser riparian or mountain shrub habitat to provide escape cover, are important to the subspecies from spring to fall. The availability of suitable wintering habitat, containing a dominant component of deciduous trees and shrubs, is also thought to be a key element to healthy Columbian sharp-tailed grouse populations.

Q. What are the threats to the subspecies' survival?

A. Several of the remaining Columbian sharp-tailed grouse populations are relatively small and isolated, which puts them at increased risk of further decline or extirpation due to a number of threats. Additional threats include continued loss and degradation of habitat, inbreeding, potential over-utilization, and illegal or accidental shooting. Factors such as drought, fire, and inclement weather could also cause significant mortality to smaller Columbian sharp-tailed grouse populations.

Although intensive grazing pressure can be detrimental to nesting and wintering habitats used by Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, much of the area currently occupied by the subspecies is not subject to such use. Much of the area currently occupied by Columbian

sharp-tailed grouse is privately owned and withdrawn from crop production or intense grazing under the Federal Conservation Reserve Program. In addition, mining lands reclaimed under the Colorado Mined Land Reclamation Act have also become important areas used by Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in northwestern Colorado.

Q. What is the threat level to the subspecies?

A. The available information indicates that the three largest populations of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse are relatively secure, although conclusive data regarding recent trends in these populations is lacking. Given the current level of threat to these three populations, the available information indicates that they will likely remain stable or possibly increase in abundance and area of occupied range over the near term (e.g., several decades). In addition, several regional populations are also likely to remain stable in the near term under current management scenarios, including the Nespelem population in Washington, the west-central Idaho population, and the south-central Idaho / northern Nevada population. Roughly 95 percent of all Columbian sharp-tailed grouse occur within the three larger populations that occur in northwestern Colorado/south-central Wyoming, southeastern Idaho/northern Utah, and central British Columbia.