

Gunnison Sage-Grouse



Male Gunnison sage-grouse displaying on a lek / © Mike Danzenbaker

The Gunnison sage-grouse was listed as threatened with designated critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in late 2014. Critical habitat includes specific areas that are essential to the species' conservation. Currently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is implementing the protections of the ESA and developing a recovery strategy for this iconic species.

How does the listing affect me?

The “take” of species listed under the Endangered Species Act is prohibited without a permit. Take means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect or attempt to engage in any such conduct. Harm is further defined to include significant habitat modification or degradation that results in death or injury to listed species by significantly impairing behavioral patterns such as breeding, feeding, or sheltering. Harass includes actions that create the likelihood of injury to listed species as to significantly disrupt normal behavior patterns.

Federal Agencies:

Now that the Gunnison sage-grouse is listed and critical habitat is designated, federal agencies are required to use their authorities pursuant to Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA to carry out programs for the conservation and recovery of the species. Section 7(a)(2) also requires that federal agencies consult

with the Service, when actions they authorize, fund or carry out may affect a listed species. This ensures the actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.

The ESA sections 7(a)(1) and 7(a)(2) mandates described above would apply only to federal agencies and lands; these standards would not apply on private, state, or other non-federal lands, except where there is a federal nexus (*e.g.*, federal funding or permit).

State, County, City, and Private Entities:

The Service can provide technical assistance to landowners who have questions regarding impacts to Gunnison sage-grouse or its habitat. This can include helping determine whether a proposed project or action is likely to result in take, and providing recommendations on project design to avoid take. For example, the project could be designed with seasonal restrictions on construction to minimize disturbance to the species. A Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) or General Conservation Plan (GCP) may be prepared if an incidental take permit is needed.

What is a Gunnison sage-grouse?

Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) are charismatic ground-dwelling birds known for their elaborate mating ritual where

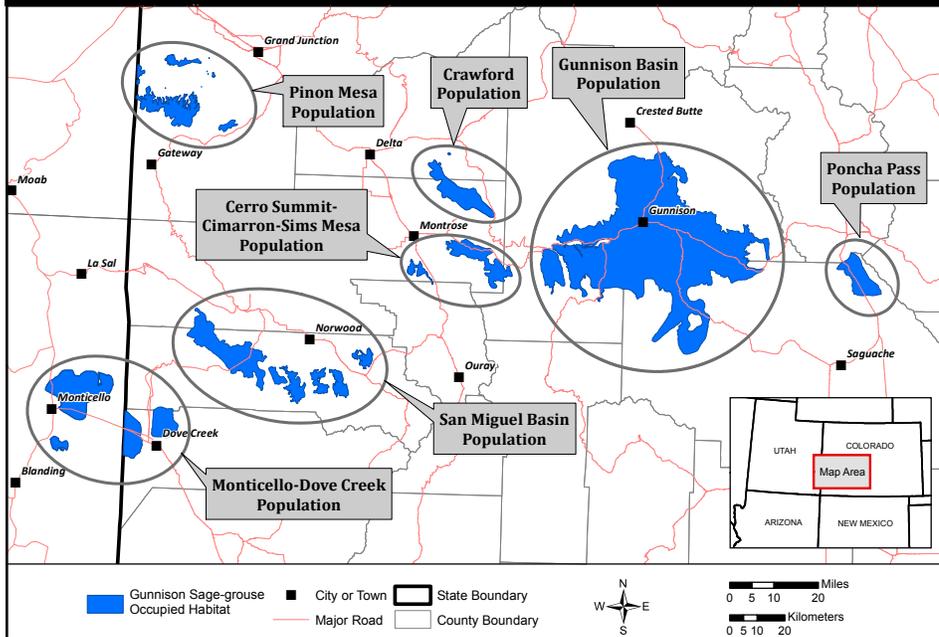
males congregate on leks (breeding grounds) and strut or “dance” to attract mates. During the breeding season, males have conspicuous neck feathers, and yellow-green air sacs on the chest. Gunnison sage-grouse are most easily identified by their dark brown color, distinctive black bellies, long, pointed tails, and association with sagebrush habitats. Hens have drab, cryptic plumage that helps them hide from predators.

Habitat:

Sage-grouse are considered obligate users of sagebrush and require large, contiguous areas of sagebrush across the landscape. Several species of sagebrush provide the specific food, cover, and reproductive habitats necessary for sage-grouse survival. Loss and fragmentation of sagebrush habitats are chief causes in the decline of Gunnison sage-grouse populations.

Population Size and Trends:

The current rangewide population is estimated at 5,000 birds across the seven population areas. As of 2015, the Gunnison Basin, Colo. population contains more than 86 percent of the total number of birds. The six satellite populations are much smaller, isolated, and are generally declining or significantly below population objectives. The Gunnison Basin population trend has been stable during the same period. Multiple secure populations across a broad geographic area are required for species survival.



Gunnison sage-grouse population range map

Range:

The range of Gunnison sage-grouse closely matches the distribution of sagebrush habitats. Historically, the range included parts of central and southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. The current range is limited to southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Approximately 940,000 acres (380,000 hectares) of habitat are occupied by the species. Of this, about 54 percent occurs on federal lands; 43 percent occurs on private lands; and three percent occurs on state lands. Gunnison sage-grouse occupy approximately seven percent of their potential historic range.

Taxonomy:

Gunnison sage-grouse were recognized as distinct from greater sage-grouse in 2000, based on physical, genetic and behavioral differences, as well as geographic isolation between the two species.

What are threats to the species?

- The most substantial current and future threats are habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation due to human development and associated infrastructure.
- Other threats include overgrazing, mineral development, piñon-

juniper encroachment, fences, invasive plants, fire, large scale water development, predation (primarily associated with human disturbance and habitat decline), and recreation. The fragmented nature of the remaining habitat amplifies the negative effects of other threats.

What is being done to conserve the Gunnison sage-grouse?

The Service applauds the numerous, effective conservation actions undertaken by Gunnison County, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, local citizens, and many others. This work is one important reason that the Service listed the species as threatened, rather than endangered.

The Service continues to work with partners on strategic conservation actions. A range of conservation tools are being used to ensure that the Gunnison sage-grouse will be able to survive on its own in the wild. Some of the actions in progress include further developing the science to guide conservation actions; prioritizing on-the-ground efforts such as habitat restoration, enhancement, and preservation; and seeking funds for needed research.

How is species recovery achieved?

The ultimate goal is to “recover” the species so that protection under the ESA is no longer necessary. The Service is developing a recovery plan that describes the steps needed to restore the Gunnison sage-grouse to ecological health. Collaborative efforts are critical to recovery success, and the Service will work with partners and concerned stakeholders throughout the recovery process.

What can I do?

Conserve: Consider enrolling your property in conservation programs such as Safe Harbor Agreements, conservation easements, and similar tools (see <http://www.fws.gov/conservation/landowners/landowner-tools.html>). These programs often benefit the species as well as the landowners. The Service works with landowners, tribes, federal and state agencies to benefit listed species and species-at-risk. We provide technical assistance on designing and implementing conservation actions to address threats to these species.

More Information

Connect with us at the Mountain-Prairie Region Regional Website: <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/>

For information specific to Gunnison sage-grouse conservation and management contact:

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