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# Gunnison Sage-Grouse: Proposed Listing and Responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act

Sarah Fierce

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, sarah\_fierce@fws.gov*

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# Gunnison Sage-Grouse

## *Proposed Listing and Responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act*



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

### **What is Gunnison sage-grouse?**

*Description:* Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) are charismatic birds known for their elaborate mating ritual where males congregate on leks (breeding grounds) and strut, or “dance”, to attract mates. Leks are typically open areas with short vegetation within sagebrush habitats, often located on broad ridges, benches, or valley floors where visibility and hearing acuity are optimal. Gunnison sage-grouse are most easily identified by their large size, dark brown color, distinctive black bellies, long, pointed tails, and association with sagebrush habitats. During the breeding season, males have conspicuous filoplumes (specialized neck feathers), a black bib on a white upper breast, and yellow-green air sacs on the chest.

### **Taxonomy**

In 2000, Gunnison sage-grouse and greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) were recognized as separate species. This determination was based on differences in physical, genetic, and behavioral characteristics, as well as geographic isolation, between the two species.

### **Habitat**

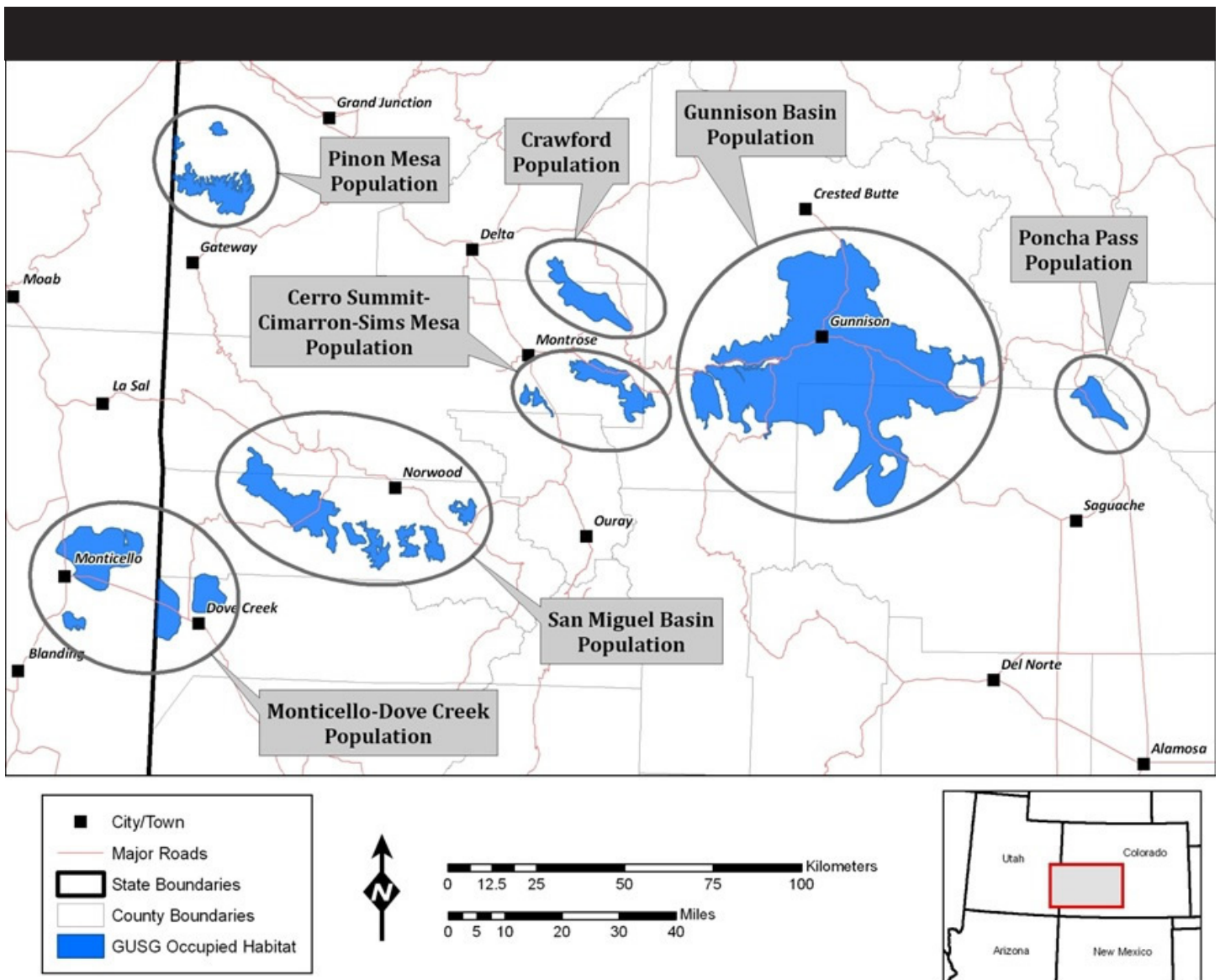
Sage-grouse are considered obligate users of sagebrush and require large, contiguous areas of sagebrush across the landscape for long-term survival. Several species of sagebrush provide the specific food, cover, and reproduction habitats critical for sage-grouse survival. Loss and fragmentation of sagebrush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

### **Range**

The historic and current distribution of Gunnison sage-grouse closely matches the distribution of sagebrush habitats. The current range of Gunnison sage-grouse is limited to seven population areas in 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; 41 percent occurs on private lands; and five percent occurs on state lands. Gunnison sage-grouse occupy approximately seven percent of the species’ potential historic range.

### **Population Size and Trends**

The current rangewide population is estimated at 4,621 birds across the seven population areas. The Gunnison Basin population contains over 87 percent of the total number of birds and constitutes the largest remaining



*Gunnison sage-grouse population range map*

population. Population trends over the last 12 years indicate that the six smaller populations are in decline. The Gunnison Basin population trend has been stable over the same period.

### Reproduction

Males perform courtship displays on leks from mid-March through late May. Nesting occurs from mid-April to June, often in close proximity to leks. Typically six to seven eggs are laid per nest, and hatching occurs during June. Early chick development and survival depends on habitats that provide adequate cover adjacent to areas with nutritious forbs and insects.

### What are threats to the species?

**Primary Threats:** The principle threat to Gunnison sage-grouse is habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation due primarily to residential, exurban, and commercial development and associated infrastructure such as roads and power lines. These types of development and their impact on sage-grouse habitat are expected to increase as human populations continue growing in size. The fragmented nature of the remaining habitat amplifies the negative effects that other factors are having on the current populations.

**Other Threats:** Other threats include improper grazing management;

predation (often facilitated by human development or disturbance); genetic risks in the declining, smaller populations; and inadequate local, state, and Federal regulatory mechanisms (e.g., laws, regulations, zoning) to conserve the species. Other factors that may not individually threaten Gunnison sage-grouse but, collectively, have the potential to threaten the species, include: invasive plants, fire, climate change, and the interaction of these three factors; fences; renewable and non-renewable energy development; piñon-juniper encroachment; water development; drought; disease; and recreation.

## What is being done to prevent the extinction of Gunnison sage-grouse?

*Proposed Listing:* On December 30, 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposed to list the Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) as endangered<sup>1</sup> under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended. The purpose of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is to protect and recover imperiled species and the ecosystems upon which they<sup>3</sup> depend. The ESA prohibits the take<sup>3</sup> of listed animals and the interstate or international trade of listed species, including their parts and products, except under Federal permit.

The Service is also in the final stages of preparing a proposal to designate critical habitat<sup>2</sup> for the Gunnison sage-grouse, which we expect to separately announce and make available for public comment within the next month. Also, during January and February 2013, the Service will hold several informal meetings with stakeholders and the public. In coordination with Gunnison sage-grouse Local Working Groups, meetings will likely be held in Gunnison, Colorado; Montrose or Delta, Colorado; and Cortez, Colorado or Monticello, Utah. By September 30, 2013, the Service will consider and analyze all the public comments and other information available to make a final decision on whether to list Gunnison sage-grouse as an endangered species and designate critical habitat for the species.

### Conservation Efforts

Gunnison sage-grouse local working groups meet regularly to discuss projects, issues, and opportunities, and have developed conservation plans for six of the seven Gunnison sage-grouse populations. Conservation tools including conservation agreements and easements have been developed and are being implemented on public, private, and state lands across portions of the species' range. In addition, the Service is coordinating with Federal agencies to design Federal projects for ESA compliance and to benefit Gunnison sage-grouse. Research by Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the

U.S. Geological Survey, and academia continues to provide critical biological information for the species. Numerous habitat improvement projects have occurred, and are being proposed, in Gunnison sage-grouse habitats. The Service will continue working with agencies and landowners to facilitate these and future efforts to advance the conservation and long-term recovery of the species. The combined efforts of all private, county, State, and Federal partners are essential to achieve long-term conservation and recovery of Gunnison sage-grouse.

### How does a proposed listing affect me?

*Federal Agencies:* Under Section 7(a) (4) of the ESA, Federal agencies are required to confer with the Service on any actions that are likely to jeopardize the continued existence of proposed species or destroy or adversely modify proposed critical habitat. Federal agencies may also request conferencing with the Service on any program or activity that may affect a proposed species or proposed critical habitat.

If Gunnison sage-grouse is listed and critical habitat is designated, pursuant to Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA, Federal agencies would be required to utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of the ESA by carrying out programs for the conservation of the species. Furthermore, Section 7(a) (2) requires that Federal agencies consult with the Service, when actions they authorize, fund, or carry out may affect a listed species to ensure 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.

*State, County, City, and Private Entities:* Coordination with the Service on projects that may affect proposed species or proposed critical habitat is not required under the ESA. However, if there is a Federal nexus on non-Federal lands or with a non-Federal project (e.g., Federal funding or permit), conferencing with the Service may be required.



*Pair of Gunnison sage-grouse / USFWS*

If Gunnison sage-grouse is listed and critical habitat is designated, the ESA section 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). However, take<sup>3</sup> of Gunnison sage-grouse would be prohibited under the ESA. Significant habitat modification or degradation have the potential to harm Gunnison sage-grouse and may result in take of the species. The Service can provide technical assistance to landowners who have concerns regarding impacts on Gunnison sage-grouse or its habitat.

#### **What can I do?**

*Conserve:* Consider enrolling your property in conservation programs such as conservation agreements, conservation easements, and similar tools (see <http://www.fws.gov/ endangered/ landowners/landowner-tools.html>). These programs often benefit the species as well as the landowners, agencies, and other interests, particularly when such agreements are completed prior to listing of a species. The Service works with landowners, Tribes, and Federal and State agencies to forge voluntary conservation agreements that benefit proposed and other species-at-risk. We provide technical assistance on designing and implementing conservation actions to address threats to these species.

#### **Participate**

Provide comments on the Service's proposal to list Gunnison sage-grouse as endangered. Comments must be received by March 12, 2013, (end of the 60-day comment period). For instructions on submitting your comments, refer to [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov), Docket No. FWS-R6-ES-2011-011.

In coordination with Gunnison sage-grouse Local Working Groups, meetings will likely be held in

Gunnison, Colorado; Montrose or Delta, Colorado; and Cortez, Colorado or Monticello, Utah, and will be advertised at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/>.

#### **Footnotes/Terms**

<sup>1</sup> An endangered species is one that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

<sup>2</sup> Critical habitat includes specific areas that contain the physical or biological features essential to the species' conservation.

<sup>3</sup> 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 to such an extent as to significantly disrupt normal behavior patterns including, but not limited to, breeding, feeding, or sheltering.

#### **More Information**

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

Regional Facebook site: <http://www.facebook.com/USFWSMountainPrairie>

Regional Twitter page: <http://twitter.com/USFWSmtnprairie>

Regional Flickr page: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwsmtnprairie/>

News releases can be found at: <http://onlinepressroom.net/fws/>

#### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 6**

**For information on the listing process:  
Sarah Fierce  
Listing and Candidate Classification  
303 / 236-4388  
[sarah\\_fierce@fws.gov](mailto:sarah_fierce@fws.gov)**

**For information specific  
to Gunnison sage-grouse  
conservation and management:  
Patty Gelatt, Assistant Field  
Supervisor, at 970-243-2778, ext.  
26, or [Patty\\_Gelatt@fws.gov](mailto:Patty_Gelatt@fws.gov); or  
Charlie Sharp, Fish and Wildlife  
Biologist, at 970-243-2778, ext. 18.**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
PO Box 25486  
Denver Federal Center  
Denver, Colorado 80225**

**For State relay service  
TTY / Voice: 711**

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
<http://www.fws.gov>**

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