

Comparing Sage-grouse and Mule Deer

By Larry Hyslop



Mule deer populations have been decreasing since the 1960s

The populations of these two wildlife species have changed dramatically over the last 150 years. Yet I hear people talking in very different terms concerning the future goals for these two wildlife populations.

Before European settlement, say 150 years ago, Sage-grouse numbers were much lower. Their actual population number in Elko County is impossible to pinpoint. Perhaps the best description is locally abundant, since some early visitors to this area reported seeing them and others did not. In specific areas, there were numbers of Sage-grouse but overall, this bird was scarce.

Regardless of their early populations, we do know that Sage-grouse numbers quickly increased with the arrival of livestock grazing. Heavy grazing helped replace grass with sagebrush, and reduce the number of wildfires. Grazed meadows were more attractive to the birds and produced more desirable foods. Increasing shrubs helped protect nesting females from predators. All of this led to a population peak in the 1950s.

Since then, Sage-grouse numbers have dropped by 50%. Increasing numbers of wild fires and the spread of cheatgrass has reduced habitat quality and quantity. Areas have lost much of their quality wintering and brooding habitat. Meadow productivity has dropped. This has led to a possible listing of the Sage-grouse as an endangered species.

The mule deer story is much the same. In pre-settlement times, they were rare in Elko County. With livestock grazing and fire suppression, their numbers increased. Grazing and fewer fires allowed more sagebrush, bitterbrush and Curlleaf mountain-mahogany seedlings, increasing preferred foods for mule deer.

Mule deer populations reached an all-time high in the 1950s and began a decline during the 1960s. Since then, sagebrush and bitterbrush have matured and few new plants are available as deer food. Mountain mahoganies have matured into tree shapes, offering little deer food. Pinyon-juniper stands have thickened and spread, offering less understory. Fewer domestic sheep have allowed aspen, chokecherry and other wood plant species to spread, taking away land from desirable food plants. Wildfires have removed valuable winter habitat.

These two wildlife species have undergone much the same types of population increases and declined yet peoples' attitudes toward these species are often different. I have heard people say the declining Sage-grouse population is ok since there are still more birds than were here in pre-settlement

times. They say there is no need to protect the bird since their populations are at an unnatural high. I have heard other people say we need to do everything possible to get mule deer population numbers back up to what they were in the 1950s. The information for this column came from George Gruell and Sherman Swanson's excellent book *Nevada's Changing Wildlife Habitat, an Ecological History*.

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