

Sharp-tailed grouse return to Elko County

By Larry Hyslop



Sharp-tail male dancing in front of a trap

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse have returned to Elko County. The Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) has recently completed the first phase of a re-introduction project.

The state of Idaho has an agreement with NDOW to transfer 50 birds each year, over three years. Of these birds, only 40 can be hens. This spring, NDOW transplanted 36 hens and 13 males into the Bull Run Basin of northern Elko County.

Ken Gray is the Regional Game Supervisor for the Nevada Department of Wildlife's Elko office. He said these grouse were historically abundant. The Tuscarora Times newspaper on July 30, 1883 had an article about local hunters returning to town with 80 prairie and sage hens. Sage hen is another name for sage-grouse and prairie hen for sharp-tailed grouse.

The birds were released onto private land owned by Newmont Mining. A USGS team checked Bull Run Basin before this first release to ensure the rangeland compared favorably with Idaho's sharp-tailed grouse habitat. Proper livestock management on this area has resulted in intact shrubs and good condition rangeland. Also, few man-made structures occupy this area. Sharp-tails spend summers on open grasslands and winter where they can eat the buds of willows and aspens.

This is the second try at re-introducing sharp-tailed grouse. In 1999-2004, birds were released in the Snake Range north of Wells. This area suffered large fires and the birds may have died out.

I asked Ken why NDOW would want to re-introduce this grouse given the problems with sage-grouse in Elko County. He said this transplant increases the sharp-tails habitat range, helping their population. They are not dependent on sagebrush, which has been much of the problem with sage-grouse.

Male sharp-tails dance on leks, or dancing grounds, much like our sage-grouse. The re-introduction allows county residents to someday enjoy the sight of sharp-tails dancing on leks like we now enjoy watching sage-grouse. Also, local hunters may be able to hunt these birds someday.

Of the 49 transplanted birds, 41 carry radio collars so they can be monitored in their new habitat. A crew is watching them for three months plus monthly flights check collared birds. They want to ensure the sharp-tails survive, where they might move to and to see if they nest. The transplanted hens may have been pregnant and there is hope they might nest this spring. The population in Idaho will also be monitored over the next three years to ensure healthy populations exist for transplant.

The birds were trapped in Idaho using wire traps with wings that intercepted and funneled the grouse into the traps as they walked onto the dancing leks. NDOW wildlife biologists, Idaho Fish and

Game biologists, and Newmont employees, watched from a distance. As soon as a bird entered the trap, they were retrieved and placed in boxes. Each day's catch were transported to the Bull Run area and released the next morning.

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