

**SAGE GROUSE**



WILLIAM H. MULLINS

Sage grouse are large — from 21 to 30 inches long, and weigh three to seven pounds, depending on gender.

Much of their habitat has been lost or degraded, although populations are plentiful in some places. Sage grouse could be considered BLM's signature species because of their dependency on sagebrush habitat. They're grayish-brown with a black belly and long, pointed tail feathers. Males are twice the size of females. Courtship begins at activity centers called strutting grounds, or leks, which range from a few hundred feet in size to a few acres. Each lek may have 10 to 150 birds.

At the start of strutting, males arch and spread their tail feathers, inflate their air sacs, and hold their heads high. They then make a short charge forward, that is accompanied by vocal and mechanical sounds. At the seasonal peak of performance, the routine may

be repeated a dozen times or more each minute. The show doesn't do much good for most of the males — only a few dominant sage grouse holding the center position on the strutting ground will get to mate.

**CHUKAR**

Chukar are plump, chicken-like birds that have proved to be a popular foreign import. The hot, dry, seemingly barren rocky hills of the West are their preferred habitat. They were brought from Eurasia in the 1890s.



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With their black and white head patterns, bold brown stripes on their flanks, and buffy white outer feathers, they are one of the most striking of upland game birds. Chukar are about 16 inches long and weigh from 16 to 28 ounces. Chukar don't tolerate wet or humid areas.

Although they can withstand temperatures of -30F, heavy snow prevents them from feeding in the winter. They prefer cold, wind-swept slopes for roosting. Because of the bird's love of steep, rocky locations, it takes a bit of grit for hunters to bag one of the birds. Chukar numbers are stable on Western rangelands, and in a few places, their population is growing.

**GAMBEL'S QUAIL**



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Gambel's quail, unlike its look-alike cousin, the California quail, is a true desert species. Much of their habitat is BLM land in southeastern California, Arizona and New Mexico. They're not quite a foot in length, with males weighing up to 7 ounces, and females slightly less. Gambel's quail have black-and-white facial markings, with a white upper belly featuring a large black patch. Their sides are

a ruddy brown, and males have a distinctive top knot or plume. Their preferred habitat is dense shrubby areas in draws and drainages. Gambel's quail rely on rain; when drought strikes and desert annuals don't bloom, the birds will not reproduce. If fleshy plants are available, Gambel's quail may live their entire lives without a drink of water. Populations fluctuate wildly depending on how much rain falls.

**WILLOW PTARMIGAN**

Willow ptarmigan is a species of the far north, its range sweeping from Newfoundland across the northern tier of Canada and into Alaska. On BLM land in Alaska, it's common, or even, abundant. Willow ptarmigan are white in the winter except for black tail feathers, with a mottled brown plumage covering most of the 15-inch bird by summer. Males have a conspicuous red "eyebrow" that makes them easy to distinguish. Their name refers to their food preference; willow buds and twigs provide about 80 percent of their diet. Male willow ptarmigan occasionally fight to the death to protect their territory.

Dominant males sometimes "patrol" the outer edges of their territory, walking a route parallel to another willow ptarmigan, almost daring the other to step



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over the line. Because most of the birds' breeding range is in remote Arctic tundra where human impacts are negligible, their habitat is stable. Populations fluctuate because of the weather.

**RUFFED GROUSE**

Ruffed grouse can be found as far south as Georgia and northward through most of Canada and into Alaska. Unlike quail or pheasants, they are hardly bothered by weather; ruffed grouse will ride out a snowstorm by burrowing and can go several days without eating. Ruffed grouse love brushy woodland areas along streams and near springs. They are a plump bird, with short, almost rounded

wings. Ruffed grouse are 15 to 19 inches long, weighing from 16 to 28 ounces. Most birds are brown, but some tend toward gray or are even reddish. The ruffed feathers that give the bird its name are triangular patches on each side of the neck. Ruffed grouse are well-known for their "drumming" during courtship. Males usually stand on a log and move their wings forward and upward in very quick strokes, producing a sound that can be heard for hundreds of yards away. It sounds like an old gasoline engine being started in the woods.



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**BLUE GROUSE**

Blue grouse inhabit higher elevation forests from the southern tip of the Sierra Nevadas all the way into the Yukon Territory. They depend on conifer forests; up to

98 percent of their winter diet is fir needles. During the nesting and brood-rearing seasons, blue grouse travel for miles into grasslands or sagebrush country to find the right spot. Blue grouse are 18 to 23 inches long, and weigh up to 32 ounces. Birds are a sooty bluish-gray color, although females have more shades of brown. Males



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have a light orange comb above the eyes, and white feathers that cover an inflatable air sac. It's not unusual for blue grouse to perch in a tree and simply stare at a ground predator, accounting for their nickname of "fool hen." Their natural predators are birds of prey. If the threat comes from above, say a goshawk or golden eagle, blue grouse will crouch and hide or take wing. Blue grouse populations are steady in most areas. So "fool hen" or not, they're doing better than many of their "smarter" cousins.

**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

Sharp-tailed grouse are divided into six subspecies, each of which describes its geographic range. A prairie or low-shrub-and-grass species, sharp-tailed grouse are 15 to 20 inches long and weigh about two pounds. They're mostly grayish-brown and cinnamon colored, and heavily barred. Males and females are strikingly similar in appearance. Sharptails perform an elaborate and spectacular courtship ritual consisting of leaping, twirling, spreading their wings, sinking low to the ground and pointing their feathers skyward, all the while moving their feet in a machine-gun cadence while cooing, chirping and croaking. Sharptail numbers are generally dropping, although populations in northern Utah and southern Idaho have improved recently, mostly because of the federal Conservation Reserve Program.



JEFFREY RICH



**A HOME ON THE RANGE**

There really is a home on the range. In fact, homes, or “habitat,” are everywhere on the 270 million acres under the care of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). About 3,000 different wildlife species live on BLM’s rangelands, deserts and forests.



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These lands are among the best in the nation for some of the 23 different species of upland game birds found in North America. Where the right combination of food, cover and, especially, water occurs, birds are abundant. It can be a harsh land, but these are resourceful creatures. Ruffed grouse

and ptarmigan, for example, can burrow under snow and survive surface wind chill temperatures to -80 F.

Upland game birds are also among nature’s finest entertainers. Male sharp-tailed grouse put on a dizzying display of dancing, jumping, leaping, twirling and cooing during their courtship. Drumming of ruffed grouse, strutting of sage grouse, and booming of prairie chickens will never be forgotten by people lucky enough to enjoy them.

Unfortunately, upland game bird habitat is not what it could be. Unrestrained livestock grazing, logging, fire, invasion of non-native plants, farming, urbanization and industrialization cut deeply into the quality and quantity of habitat. Most upland game bird populations are well below their potential. Some, including Columbian sharp-tails, western sage grouse and mountain quail, are in trouble.

**HOME IMPROVEMENT**

The good news is that a little habitat improvement work goes a long way with most upland game birds. They can bounce back quickly. Wild turkeys, for example, numbered 10 million birds at the turn



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of the century, but populations dropped to 300,000 in the early 1900s. Through careful management, more than three million gobblers roam the countryside today.



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With the help of BLM, outdoor groups, hunters and others, habitat improvement work on public land should mean a good home on the range for upland game birds for years to come.

**BIRDS OF A FEATHER**

Although their habitat covers tens of millions of acres, and they’re an important part of the West’s natural legacy, upland game birds remain a mystery to many Americans. Take a closer look at upland game birds, and you’ll discover some of nature’s most marvelous wildlife.



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**A HAND TO HABITAT**

Almost every species of upland game bird is found on BLM land.

We have a big job — to improve habitat and thereby help the populations of these fascinating creatures grow.

Lend a hand to us . . . volunteer as an individual or organization to help make your public land a better place for upland game birds. Get in touch with any BLM office and find out what can be done. We can’t do it alone. Working together will mean more upland game birds for all of us to enjoy.

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