

Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area

2017- 2018 Wildlife Area Management Plan Update

Units Include: *Sagebrush Flat, Chester Butte, Dormaier, Bridgeport*



Figure 1: Snow covers the Bridgeport Unit

This document highlights accomplishments related to goals and objectives identified within the [Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area Management Plan](#). The plan addresses the status of wildlife species and their habitats, ongoing restoration efforts, and public recreation opportunities on the Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area. Every 10 years, WDFW revises management plans for each wildlife area to identify new management priorities and actions. In between plan revisions, the updates focus on recent accomplishments over the last two years.



Figure 2: Mclean Lake encased in winter

Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area Management Highlights

Noxious Weed Management (Goal #1, Objective 1)

During this reporting period, staff treated approximately 350 acres for noxious weeds each year. Using integrated pest management (IPM) techniques, weeds controlled include Dalmatian toadflax, diffuse knapweed, Russian knapweed, Russian thistle, cereal rye, annual bursage, kochia, and a variety of other annual weed species. With the recent find of rush skeletonweed at two locations on the Bridgeport unit, staff have another species to treat. Across all units, treatment sites include previously restored agricultural fields, disturbed sites, firebreaks, and individual weed patches. Many of the above sites received multiple treatments during the growing season to ensure complete coverage. We also performed annual weed control on 45 miles of roads including unimproved access roads within the units, county roads that bisect or are adjacent to the units and 6.6 miles of Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) service roads within the Bridgeport Unit. We mow and use herbicides on these roads. Both methods address weed reduction as well as removing vegetation to reduce fire danger. Treatment of the roadsides is an annual priority due to their function as a disturbance and dispersal vector for weeds. Staff also cut and stump treated regrowth of the invasive tree Russian olive (Class C weed), on the Bridgeport Unit.



Figure 3: Volunteers and staff members plant juniper trees on the Bridgeport Unit

Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Projects (Goals #1 and 2, Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8)

Within old agricultural fields restored to native vegetation, staff interseeded 40 acres at the Chester Butte Unit, and another 40 acres at the Bridgeport Unit to enhance species establishment and diversity. We focused on areas where the previously seeded grass had not come in as well the surrounding areas. In another project to enhance the diversity and composition of the old agricultural fields, staff planted approximately 800 woods rose bushes in two fields on the Bridgeport Unit. Although the planting sites are drainages that hold water farther into summer, irrigation will occur at each site with drip systems to speed establishment. Finally, more than 1,600 trees and shrubs were purchased and planted by staff in four locations to expand the distribution and diversity woody vegetation. The planting sites selected offered either sub-irrigation, or easy access to developed springs that allowed staff to build drip irrigation systems to water the new plants.

Pygmy Rabbit Recovery (Goal #2, Objective #8)

As time and schedules allowed, wildlife area staff helped the Pygmy Rabbit Recovery Program. Staff members have helped with survey, trapping, construction, and maintenance efforts in support of the project. As the recovery program progresses and evolves, some of the built infrastructure on the Sagebrush Flat Unit that is no longer of use was dismantled and removed, e.g. the 'nursery', also known as "Tiny Town" is one example. Tiny Town, was built with the intent to young rabbit kits until they were deemed old enough for release. Though it served that purpose, it had become an unused and unsightly structure

attached to the larger of the rabbit enclosures at Sagebrush Flat. Staff then planted 1,600 bluebunch wheatgrass seedlings in the bare ground left behind.



Figure 4: Pulling staples and fabric at the Tiny Town teardown



Figure 5: Processing another Douglas County sage grouse

Sage Grouse Capture via night-lighting (Goal #1, Objectives 2, 4, and 8)

On a crisp Saturday night, wildlife area staff assisted a WDFW research scientist, two WDFW biologists from Spokane, U. S. Fish and Wildlife staff from Colorado, and three volunteers to trap sage grouse to collect blood samples for genetic testing. The genetic tests should either confirm or deny that Washington sage grouse are a distinct population

segment. Beginning at sunset, the crew worked to sunrise traveling to four grouse leks and captured 20 grouse, drawing blood from all, plus outfitting two male sage grouse with satellite transmitters. To be as efficient as possible, the crew divided into a processing team and a team to trap and shuttle birds to the processing station.

Sharp-tailed Grouse and Camera Traps (Goal #1, Objectives 2, 4, and 8)

Each spring, volunteers and staff conduct counts to assess the population. Those counts show the population of sharp-tailed grouse has increased over the last few years despite two consecutive severe winters. In fact, winter observations of sharp-tailed grouse were a real bright spot this reporting period. During the 2017 Bridgeport Christmas Bird Count, Mike Schroeder, WDFW Research Scientist, and his wife, Leslie Robb, observed a flock of 45 sharp-tailed grouse in poplar trees located in a remote location on the Bridgeport Unit. Also, in December 2017, we began placing trail cameras at stands of native water birch trees, and the water birch plantings we have established over the last several years to learn if sharp-tails use our water birch plantings. The resulting photos show sharp-tails are using our plantings and appear to do so as frequently as they use native trees. Since 2010 we have created seven irrigated and fenced (protection from deer browsing) stands of water birch trees in an effort to provide additional, and more widely distributed, sources of this important winter forage for sharp-tailed grouse. Having confirmation of their use is a pleasant dose of positive reinforcement for all the hard work.



Figure 6: Sharp-tailed grouse foraging in a 7.5-year-old water birch stand



Figure 7: Sharp-tailed grouse foraging in the water birch stand



Figure 8: Male sharp-tailed grouse often spend nights on a lek leaving them vulnerable to predation



Figure 9: A great-horned owl most likely killed this bird