

The Spiral Dance of Renewal (April 11, 2004)

Kathleen Cameron, Author and Editor Rebecca F. Pyle, Associate Editor From: April/May, 2004 Vol. 3 Issue 1

The pre-dawn, crisp air was filling with morning bird songs. Meadow Larks, Sage Thrashers, Sparrows, and quacking Mallards were waking up; daylight had not yet broken. Intermittently strange, swishing sounds and popping “wups” bounced across the sage-covered plain. Civil twilight revealed ghostly white images gathering in a clearing. The apparitions seemed to be growing in size and appeared to zoom and float effortlessly across the grass. Swishing “wups” sounds increased, and the dawn revealed large, svelte, stately, male Greater Sage Grouse puffing themselves to twice their normal size as they engaged in their spring mating display--the annual spiral dance. With their sharp tail feathers fanned out and heads held high, they strutted about, heaving their white breasts skyward and ballooning out two yellowish air sacs from the hugely expanded breasts. The “wups” resonated as the membranes of the sacs reached the apex of inflation and snapped to deflate. The grouse leaped into the air, beat their wings, strutted, and sparred with one another. Females occasionally strolled nonchalantly into the dance, and the proud males jostled to see who could get close to them to show



Two male Greater Sage Grouse strut their stuff on the lek. On the two occasions that I visited the lek there were twelve males displaying and only two females came to the lek. Extracted Video Frame. Copyright K. Cameron 2004.

off their magnificent genetic makeup. The fine dancers did not miss a beat when twelve mule deer trotted across their ballroom known as the lek, a brush-free, grassy area where the birds displayed in a circle. One deer did stop and looked at the grouse as if to say, “What the heck are you guys doing?” But even this brief pause by the deer did not distract the virile, dancing grouse. They displayed their finest feathers for two thrilling hours, and then at 8:00 a.m., as if by mutual understanding, in unison they flew off in all directions.

Just one week after witnessing this grand promenade of plumage and fancy hoofing, headlines appeared across the country about the decline of Greater Sage Grouse. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services are studying this bird for possible protection under the Endangered Species Act and will announce their decision in January, 2005. The population of the Greater Sage Grouse has declined by 86% since



A view of the spread tail during the mating display. Extracted video frame. Copyright K. Cameron 2004.

the early 1900's.

It is no wonder that this population is in decline. Sage Grouse are almost totally dependent upon sagebrush; in fact, in the winter they are 100% reliant on this plant. They need it for food, shelter, nesting materials, and protection from predators. In half the area occupied by Sage Grouse (E. Montana, Wyoming, NW Colorado, Utah, SW Idaho, NE California, parts of western Canada) the sage is no longer capable of supporting this species. The remainder of the sage habitat is already altered in ways that seriously impact the grouse.

Spiral Dance Continued...



In 1805 a great expanse of sage habitat altered only by naturally occurring fire covered huge parts of western North America when Lewis and Clark made their expedition. It is estimated that as many as 2 million Sage Grouse inhabited the terrain at that time. The current estimation is that there are 140,000 to 250,000 Greater Sage Grouse alive today. Lewis described flocks of this brown and white fowl in his journal in June, 1805, and March, 1806. He called them mountain cock and Prarie (his spelling) Cock, which he said was a species of heath hen. (The heath hen was once common on the eastern seaboard and was common on the dinner table as well. They became extinct in 1932. In the final years of the heath hen, there was a surplus of males and too few females to carry the species forward.) He noted, "they fed on grasshoppers and



A non-displaying male.
Extracted Video Frame.
Copyright K. Cameron
2004.

seed of the wild plant which is also peculiar to this river and the upper parts of the Missouri" (his spelling). The wild plant must have been sagebrush. He wrote at length about the size and color of the bird. He counted the tail feathers and reported that the tail was very sharp. His description is very interesting, and I can't help wondering how Lewis would have reported the mating display and plumage if he had been fortunate to witness this impressive sight. He also reported that Indians informed his party that this bird was common in the Rocky Mountains.

In Native American spirituality any species of grouse is a totem representative of the Sacred Spiral. Several Plains tribes dance the Grouse Dance to honor this bird.

The pattern of the dance is a spiral like that of the display on the lek. The spiral is an ancient symbol in many spiritual traditions for birth, rebirth, or renewal. I was deeply moved when I witnessed the majestic, gorgeous, springtime display, this precursor of birth, the celebration of surviving the harsh winter, the natural expression of instinct-driven joy. I carried this contagious joy with me as I left my early morning cathedral, the lek, to join my family for our Easter morning celebration. The themes of renewal, birth, rebirth, and resurrection flowed through the day. The image of the noble birds emerging from the darkness to their full splendor in the light of a new day continues to visit my mind's eye since my morning on the lek. I am very concerned that on some April morning in the future there will be no swishing, popping, or "wups," that the lek will lie silent, devoid of this lavish display of life. It is imperative that the remaining sagebrush habitat be protected and restored to ecological balance. It will make no sense at all to protect the Greater Sage Grouse without also protecting their remaining habitat. I hope for a resurrection of both species, the grouse and the sagebrush.

Kathleen Cameron



Please note that the plumage coloration in the G. Sage Grouse pictures is not exact. Hues are affected by the dawn light and the extraction process.

This series of extracted frames of video follows the process of the male puffing out its breast and inflating pigmented, esophageal air sacs. Males in a given area display on the lek every morning for several weeks during April and May. They display for approximately two hours each morning. It is hard to imagine how much energy it must take to repeatedly complete the cycle of displaying their air sacs. Copyright K. Cameron 2004