

Sage grouse rounded up for study

BY GIB MATHERS
Tribune Staff Writer

Under a starry sky in mid-April, two teams set out to catch and release sage grouse in the shadow of the Big Horn Mountains.

The teams are helping with a five-year study conducted by the University of Wyoming and sponsored by American Colloid Company to monitor the birds' survival, nest success and their movement near bentonite mines. The study also will track their migration patterns and determine whether sage grouse are using reclaimed mine sites, said Lyndon Bucher, environmental supervisor for Colloid in Belle Fourche, S.D.

Among others, Colloid operates two plants in the Lovell area.

Pete Deichmann, a seasonal technician hired by the UW, eases a pickup truck over a dirt track north of Shell. In the bed, Aaron Pratt, a UW graduate student, pokes the darkness with a powerful spot light, looking for roosting sage grouse.

Another team is searching the darkness north of Hyattville.

Pratt will write his doctorate dissertation based on the study. There will be three years of field work catching and collaring sage grouse, followed by two years analyzing the data it reveals, Bucher said.

Pratt spots a grouse in the sage brush. He keeps the bird pinned down with his light as the two dash across the prairie. Then Deichmann bags the grouse with a big fish net.

They work at night because

the birds are less likely to flush than during the day, Pratt said.

As though coddling an infant, Pratt carries the bird back to the pickup, where he and Deichmann will take a blood and feather sample, weigh the bird, measure its size and band it. The band is an aluminum ring, a little thicker than a wedding band.

"The bands are for estimating annual survival for males," Bucher said in an email. "Recapturing banded males in subsequent years will provide estimates for survival after accounting for probability of detection. This information can then be used, for example, to compare male survival between mining and reference areas."

The guys talk in hushed tones. Pratt holds the bird firmly, but gently, as Deichmann takes samples and attaches the band.

The bird coos anxiously, but weathers the testing like a patient under a doctor's cold

stethoscope.

The guys finish in a few minutes. Pratt carries the bird 100 yards or so from the truck and places it on the ground. In a flash, he wings away. His feathers may be a bit ruffled, but he's no worse for wear.

Most of the birds caught that night tolerate the testing. Although a few flap their wings in exasperation, none are harmed.

With the technique the teams use, bird mortalities are extremely rare, Pratt said.

Some birds will receive radio collars to track their travel. A total of 90 sage grouse — 80 females and 10 males — will receive GPS and VHF collars.

Deichmann pulls a radio collar from his pack. It resembles a miniaturized transistor radio popular in the 1960s.

The guys cruise around more, but are having difficulty spotting birds from the truck, so they employ an all terrain vehicle. Pratt rides with his spotlight and Deichmann walks.

In a few minutes, they spy another male. The bird is silhouetted in the light like a rabbit crouched next to the highway on a dark

night.

Pratt rides toward the bird and Deichmann swoops in with his net.

"He's an adult," Pratt whispers.

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Lyndon Bucher
Environmental supervisor

Male No. 7 is caught. He's a little vexed, and he puffs his air sack to intimidate his captors.

"I'm guessing these are the dominant males," Pratt said, describing the last few caught.

The men have been here three weeks, working seven nights per week, Deichmann said.

It's after 4 a.m., and the men have been chasing birds since 10:30 p.m. The work seems a bit grueling, but neither complains.

At around 4:30 a.m., following male No. 8, the guys call it a night. A text message from the other teams says they caught one male and one female that received a radio collar.

"ACC hopes to learn what types of habitat improvement measures could be implemented both in our mine reclamation," Bucher said. "In essence we hope to gain knowledge that is specific to bentonite mining in the Big Horn Basin and the grouse population that resides there."

Catching sage grouse for study is not unprecedented, but it seems rather remarkable just the same.

"Few people ever get to do it or see it done," Deichmann said.



As part of his Ph.D. thesis, Aaron Pratt is studying sage grouse migration patterns in the Big Horn Mountains. Pratt maintains a firm, yet gentle grip on his test subject.



Pete Deichmann (left) and Aaron Pratt draw a blood sample from a sage grouse male April 12 in the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains. American Colloid Company is sponsoring a University of Wyoming study to determine sage grouse behavior around bentonite mining. Tribune photos by Gib Mather



No worse for a wear, a male sage grouse beats a hasty retreat after undergoing a few tests. Using their tried and true capture techniques, Pratt said sage grouse injuries are extremely rare.

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