

## **Outstanding Citizen Conservation Work in Midas, NV**

The “Midas Grouse Day” team had their Second Annual Sage Grouse count and dinner, Saturday April 28, 2007. Eighteen enthusiasts lead by Brian Elmore documented 7 leks sited within the Rock Creek basin. As the first light of dawn streamed across the open space of the lek, eyes searched the terrain for sage grouse strutting activity. This would be the final of four counts taken on the 7 leks within this basin. Brian has been tracking the Rock Creek sage grouse leks for the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) for the past six years. There is special interest this year in observing lek activity within the Rock Creek watershed. Given the extensive burns of 2005 Esmeralda Fire (96,896 acres), and 2006 Winters Fire (238,458 acres) there is anxiety and interest in seeing how sage grouse use the basin and their established lek system during the period of vegetative recovery.

A delicious steak dinner was supported by the Nevada Big Horns Unlimited – Midas, with generous contribution of side-dishes by the local cooks. J.D. and Elizabeth Radakovich hosted the group at the Upper Clover ranch bunk house. Gregg Simonds and Eric Sant of Open Range Consulting were present, and have an interest in utilizing the lek count information for their integrated management of Barrick’s Squaw Valley property. Additionally, the sage grouse counts within the Rock Creek watershed complement the Tuscarora Watershed/Population Management Unit (PMU) assessment work being conducted by the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group (NNSG).

Brian has inspired and informed his fellow Midas residents to understand the life cycle requirements of sage grouse, and enlisted their help on the final season count of the areas 7 leks for the past two years. (2 leks were added this year) The season’s lek information will be directed to NDOW, and incorporated into the Elko County Population Management Units (PMU) for sage grouse regional information. Elmore and team will continue to monitor lek activity within the Rock Creek region. This information is vital to understanding the larger picture of sage grouse habits and activity across northeastern Nevada.

**2008 Midas Grouse Day, Saturday, May 3** turned out fifteen faithful lek observers who covered five strutting areas – leks – eager to see whether the sage grouse numbers had changed from the 2007 season. Reports from the five leks counted indicate the numbers have held. That could be important news, however, as Ellmore stated, “so whether the bleeding has stopped or just slowed, is yet to be determined.” To help understand how the Rock Creek sage grouse populations are utilizing the region, faced with the extensive burned habitats, a 2008 banding project was developed. Brian is the man-on-the-ground for a special collaborative project between Barrick Mines, NV Department of Wildlife, and Brian that is designed to gain more data related to the travel and use patterns of the basin by sage grouse. This information will be gained through telemetry technology from 9 collared grouse: 7 females and 2 males. Ellmore has located all of the collared birds – that is good news – finding 3 in the Nelson Creek area, 3 in Toe Jam, one bird is staying in the vicinity of its lek, and one male is still attending his lek. (Two additional males are yet to be collared) The telemetry wand carried by Brian is his guide to locating the birds, and as long as he can locate the birds from the ground, he will. The objective will be to use the ground telemetry as long as that is effective, then, use fixed-wing flights to track beyond Brian’s ground access. The collared technology usually lasts from 12-16 months, allowing the life cycle of the sage grouse to be followed through the four seasons producing patterns of use, particularly over the winter months, where knowledge has been very speculative. Additionally, if mortalities occur, they will be recorded.

Prior to the extensive wild fires of northeastern Nevada, Ellmore witnessed the sage grouse populations of the Rock/Willow region as trending upward. Watching the decline of lek activity, and waiting for the sagebrush vegetation recovery to be realized, prompts more anxiety. As Brian puts it, “the Winters Fire, took a lot of the wind out of me.” If the leks counts stay stable for the next few years, at the least, there is the hope that as the vegetation communities recover, the strength of the populations will increase. The question at the outset of each summer season is now and will be for many years, “how will the fire season treat us?”

Over most of the West, vigorous discussions around fire fighting exist: whether to, where to, when to, under what conditions to, or not to fight fire, occupies peoples’ time, and too many of our Nations’ tax dollars.

The Midas citizens serve as an example of effective collaborative work in service of the sage grouse; citizens throughout the West could examine their species and natural resource priorities, and see where increased collaboration might further all interests.



(L to R) Brian Elmore, Kris Mickleson, & Jesse Braatz collaring birds in 2008



Tony Scheuller, Sheri & Mike Barlow and Mace the dog, after 2008 Scrapper Springs Lek count.



2007 - The Midas Grouse Day lek count group, and supporters from the community.