

19 August 1983

Mr. Jerry M. Conley, Director
Idaho Department of Fish and Game
600 South Walnut
Boise, ID 83707

Dear Jerry:

On behalf of the Idaho Chapter of The Wildlife Society, I would like to comment on the Department's possible acquisition of the Sage Creek Basin Ranch, presently owned by Stanley Nelson. The private land, along with state, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Forest Service grazing permits include a large block of foothill and mountainous country, offering habitat for a variety of wildlife. Significant among these is the presence of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse.

As you know, Columbian sharptails have undergone a significant reduction in abundance and distribution. This subspecies is now extirpated in Oregon, California, Nevada, New Mexico and Wyoming. Disjunct remnant populations occur in northern Utah and western Montana. Portions of British Columbia, Washington, Idaho and Colorado retain viable populations. Nevertheless, even these populations are significantly reduced from historic levels.

Available evidence indicates that many remaining populations are relatively stable but others are still declining in Washington, Idaho and Utah. For example, the few remaining birds were lost from northern Idaho about 1970. In Fremont County, hunter success since 1958 indicates a decline in the population in spite of a substantial recovery since 1975. Southwestern Idaho dancing grounds monitored during the 1950s are now unoccupied. Remaining populations in southwestern Idaho now appear to be in severe jeopardy. Populations are small and separated by substantial distances. The Sage Creek population, with an estimated 50-75 birds, appears to be the best of what is left in this part of Idaho.

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Existing information on the biology of Columbian sharptails indicates that habitat changes have been responsible for their relict status. Conversion of native grasslands and grass/shrub environments to agriculture (particularly dry farming) and modification of remaining habitat by livestock grazing are the two most significant inimical factors which have affected this subspecies. These same two factors are likely to continue to adversely modify remaining habitats.

Widespread interest exists to reintroduce Columbian sharptails throughout their historic range. However, two problems exist that may limit the success of reintroductions. First, knowledge of specific habitat requirements for Columbian sharptails is lacking. The current research being conducted by Bob Autenreith of the Department, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, will improve this information base. Second, techniques to successfully re-establish populations are not currently available. Many prior efforts to establish various species of grouse have met with failure. The only reintroduction attempt of Columbian sharptails was at the National Bison Range, and it subsequently failed. Successful techniques may ultimately evolve but their development will be costly. The benefits of retaining existing populations and habitat are likely to be more fruitful (and less costly over the long term) than allowing the populations to become extirpated and then working toward re-establishment.

We recognize that dollars for acquisition are limited and that you have a difficult job deciding where to best use those funds. In addition to thinking about the values received from saving this population of Columbian sharptails, also consider the fact that this property and its attached grazing permits include many other wildlife values. The ranch is occupied by a diverse variety of upland game species, including huntable populations of chukar partridge, hungarian partridge, valley quail, pheasant, blue grouse, ruffed grouse and sage grouse. Elk use of the ranch has increased dramatically in recent years. Based on the experience at the Sand Dunes Wildlife Management Area, these values could be enhanced to an even greater extent if the ranch was under state management. Acquisition would also assure public access to a large amount of wildlife habitat which could be potentially blocked under a new private owner.

In conclusion, the Idaho Chapter feels that the Sage Creek Basin Ranch merits serious consideration for acquisition by the Department. We appreciate your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Lewis Nelson, Jr., President
Idaho Chapter - The Wildlife Society

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