



SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE *PARTNERSHIP PROFILE*

Lorelle Berkeley, Montana **From One Grouse to Another**

By Deborah Richie, SGI Communications
April 2012

Lorelle Berkeley turns up the telemetry receiver volume and aims the antenna into the sagebrush merging with tall golden grass from last year's lush growing season. Meadowlarks sing from fencepost. The Snowy Mountains gleam white on the northern horizon.

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) research biologist has dialed the frequency to match a radio-collared sage grouse hen. The beeps come in right away, an excellent sign. Lorelle slowly sweeps the antennae in an arc, holding it parallel to the ground, a technique to find a grouse that's not far away.

Where the beeps are loudest, she pauses. The more she turns down the volume, the more precise the beeps pinpoint the bird. Today, she's finding the hen just where she'd hoped she would from her check two days prior—nesting on private land enrolled in the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI).

Lorelle, who wears her hair in a ponytail tucked under an SGI ball cap, is no stranger to grouse. On the side, she's finishing up her PhD dissertation on ruffed grouse from her studies at University

of Minnesota. You might say, she's moved from one grouse to another.

Now based in Roundup, Lorelle tracks sage grouse and their responses to changed grazing systems. SGI funding supports her position and FWP has generously committed resources in a

model partnership.

When Lorelle's not capturing, collaring or following the birds, she's collaborating with Joe Smith (a University of Montana doctoral student on the project), running a field crew of technicians and checking in with landowners.

After she's clear on the nest location, Lorelle strides noisily out into the sagebrush, so the hen will think she's nothing but some passerby, rather than a stealthy predator. A

slightly higher rise makes the ideal viewpoint to glimpse the bird 20 yards away. Brown speckly feathers of the hen's back blend with the twisted wood of the sagebrush. The hen is so still and camouflaged, it takes several minutes to see her nestled under a bush ringed by tall grass—, unless you've got Lorelle's gestalt for sage grouse.

The hen is one of several dozen collared in a sage grouse stronghold of eastern Montana where the threat of sod busting is



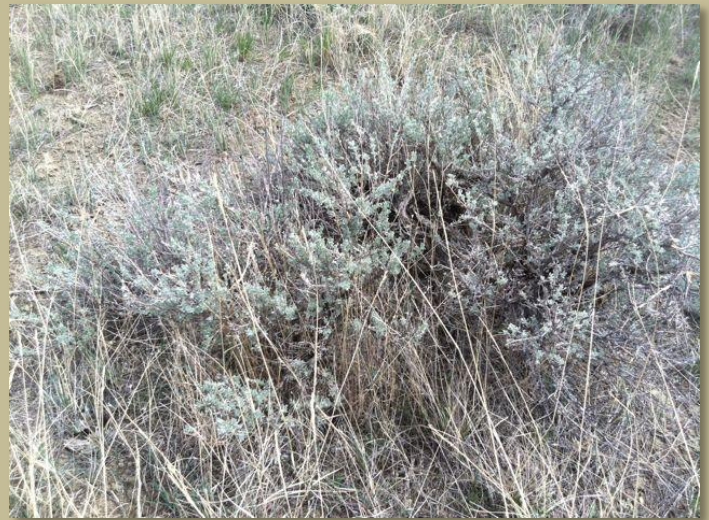
high. You might call the several hundred thousand acres of what's called a "core area" as the birthplace of the Sage Grouse Initiative.

In 2010, the first landowners signed up to be part of SGI, that applies Farm Bill funds to plan and put into practice grazing systems aimed at benefiting grouse habitat and rangeland productivity. The ultimate goal is to prevent a listing of the declining birds under the Endangered Species Act.

FWP teamed up with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help evaluate whether the practices are working. That's where Lorelle comes in. Her role is more than a biologist. She's a spokesperson for SGI, too.

Driving down a rough two-track road under a wide-open sky north of the Musselshell River, Lorelle carries a stack of handouts to update anyone who's interested in their latest findings. She drinks coffee in ranch house kitchens. On early mornings, you'll likely find her ordering up a pancake sandwich at the Stage Stop in Roundup and chatting with the owner, who's known for inventing special breakfasts.

What makes SGI tick? It's the winning combination of teaming up with local landowners, working with invaluable partners like FWP,



Rotational grazing systems support sage grouse nesting habitat, where sagebrush and tall grasses provide critical hiding cover.

and applying science and practical know-how to make a difference. Already, in just two years, the rangelands appear to be responding to rest-rotation and timed grazing. That's good news for sage grouse to find the suite of habitats they need for breeding, nesting, chick-raising and fall and winter ranges. And it's great news for ranchers, too.



FWP biologist Lorelle Berkeley tracks a collared sage grouse near a wetland in the vast open country of eastern Montana, near Roundup.

For more information about the Sage Grouse Initiative, visit our website at www.sagegrouseinitiative.com.

