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Hunting Dog Group Helps Montana Sage Grouse: Unique “Double-Marking” Project to Prevent Fence Collisions

By Deborah Richie, SGI Communications Director

The [North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association](#) spent a hot August day giving back to the birds they care for. A dozen volunteers marked five miles of fence to prevent sage grouse collisions in the upper reaches of the Big Hole Valley of Montana, not far from the tiny town of Wisdom, known as one of the coldest places in winter in the lower 48 states.

Marking fences takes clipping on plastic white vinyl pieces at three-foot intervals along a top wire. However, this was not your usual marking project of the [Sage Grouse Initiative](#).

“The amount of work the group put in was almost like marking 10 miles of fence,” said Bruce Waage, who serves as the liaison for sage grouse for the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

Waage has become masterful at organizing volunteers to mark fences and works hard to carry out the Montana Fence Marking Partnership that provides free markers. He also likes to try out some new ideas that expand upon the science of fence marking (well documented by University of Idaho researcher Bryan Stevens).

In this case, Waage had each person clip an unusual black-colored marker right next to the typical white marker. He points out that in this high-elevation area above 6000 feet that’s near a sage grouse lek

(breeding area), the birds often fly in and out of the lek so early in spring that snow covers the ground. White markers don't show up well against snow, but black markers do.

The experimental project took place on a remote block of state land, managed by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Waage is looking forward to see the results next year.

What he does know is that the fence definitely needed marking. The volunteers found evidence of 13 sage grouse strikes. Feathers caught in the fence served as clues to past collisions that could well have been deadly.

"These fences are particularly high with taller posts and posed a high risk for grouse," said Waage.

The North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA) had gathered to run dog trials for a week and set aside one day for a conservation project. The event attracted people from as far away as Pennsylvania, Calgary (Alberta, Canada), and California. The nonprofit association is dedicated to "fostering, improving, promoting and protecting the versatile hunting dog in North America," according to its mission statement.

Tom Healy, president of the Montana Sharptail Chapter of NAVHDA, was the main driver behind the fence-marking effort. Healy lives in Whitefish and emphasizes that conservation is important to the organization's mission.

"It was great to learn about the problem, then head to the field and hang the markers, confirm what we learned was important, and at the end we all felt motivated to do more," Healy said.

Waage met the eager group gathered at their campsite on Monday, August 4th, and headed to a classic restaurant for breakfast in Wisdom called The Crossing Bar & Grill at Fetty's. There, he gave them a short introduction to the problem. While avid bird hunters, particularly of sage grouse, the group had not realized the challenges fences pose for grouse.

Sage grouse in spring fly into their leks in darkness before dawn. If fence wires don't show up, the heavy birds can crash into them.

Marking the right fences to illuminate the hazard can reduce the risk of bird strikes by 83 percent, according to Stephens' research. A science tool is now available to managers to help locate the fences that are most problematic and focus efforts. The flatter the terrain, the higher the risk to birds that fly low into the leks.

The Sage Grouse Initiative has helped fund the marking or moving of more than 530 miles of fences saving an estimated 2,800 sage grouse from collisions.

The volunteers headed into the field with shoulder bags loaded with marker. They spread out down the fence lines, and got to work. Waage was impressed at the many astute observations from participants who enjoyed the double-marking project.

They noted that white markers are also hard to see against a cloudy sky and black markers work better in stormy conditions. Whenever someone saw feathers on a fence, the news of the bird strike traveled from person to person on down the line, motivating them to work that much harder.

"I'm thrilled with their help and the many folks who volunteer to put up markers," Waage says. "The Sage Grouse Initiative and the Montana Fence Marking Partnership are key to funding, but getting the markers out where they need to be is the best part of the effort."