



This article originally appeared in the Spring 2018 issue of Pheasants Forever Journal, which is published five times a year and features stories on upland bird hunting, guns, sporting dogs, projects, environmental issues, legislative action and other outdoor interests. It is reprinted here with permission. Pheasants Forever is dedicated to the conservation of pheasants, quail and other wildlife through habitat improvements, public awareness, education, and land management policies and programs. To learn more or join them, visit www.pheasantsforever.org.

Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) is partnership led by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services that uses a win-win approach to systematically target conservation efforts to improve agricultural and forest productivity while enhancing wildlife habitat on working landscapes. Target species are used as barometers for success because their habitat needs are representative of healthy, functioning landscape where conservation efforts benefit a much broader suite of species. To learn more visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov/wildlife

PARTNERING FOR GROUSE

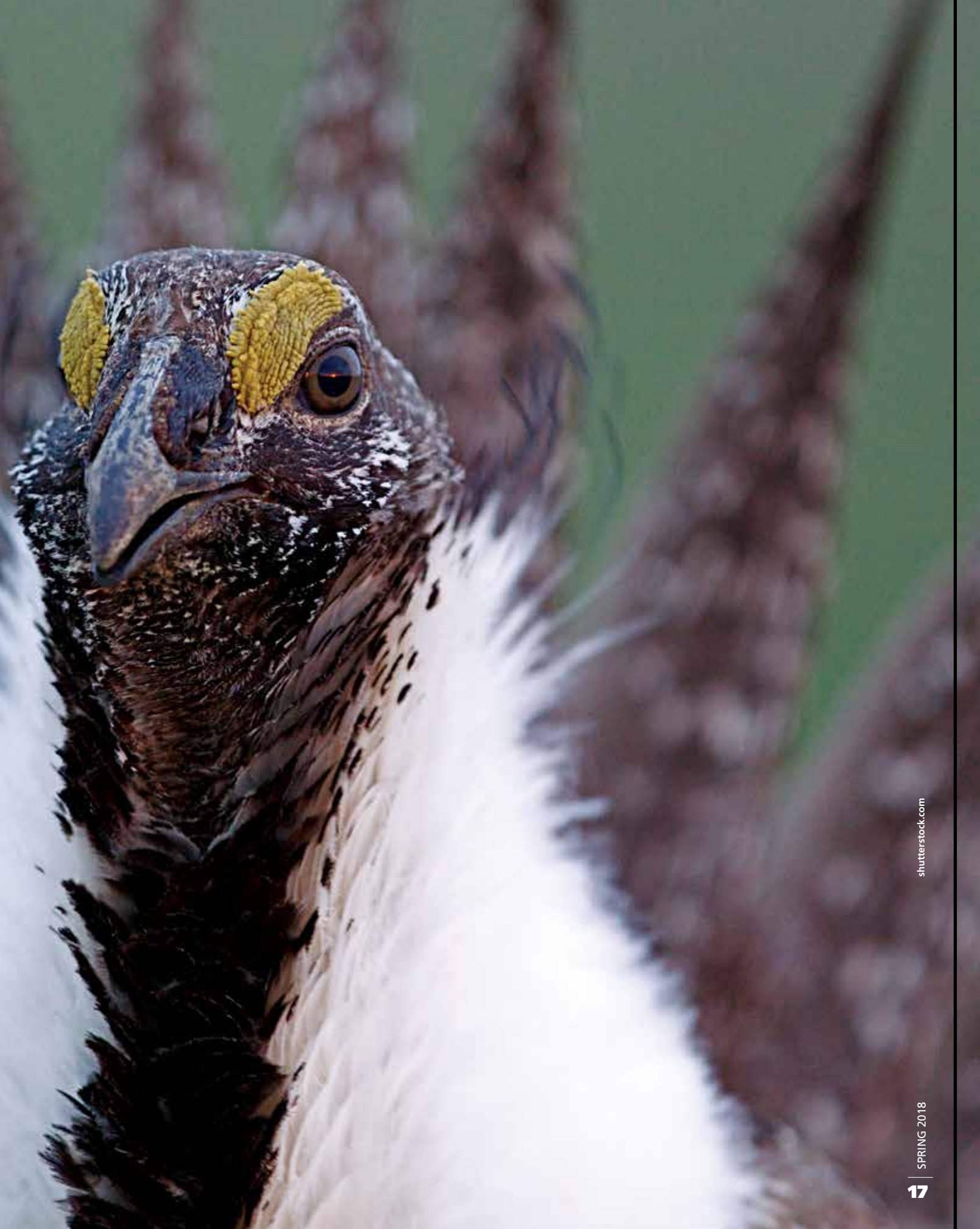




By Hannah Nikonow

MAKING ROOM OUT WEST

How removal of encroaching trees benefits
upland gamebirds, ranching and other wildlife



Did you know that some iconic western game birds hate trees? A long-time champion of habitat restoration and enhancement, Pheasants Forever is helping pioneer recovery of upland game bird habitat by removing woody shrubs and trees from places they don't belong. Why? Because good habitat means more game and non-game birds, and better hunting.

Cooperative recovery efforts are targeting three prized species: the greater sage grouse, greater prairie chicken, and lesser prairie chicken. Although they inhabit vastly different parts of the country, these prairie grouse share common needs — all require wide-open habitats to survive and an intolerance for woody encroachment on their home turf.

Today, invasive trees are capitalizing on 100 years of "Smokey the Bear" policies that have largely removed historic fire regimes that used to keep trees where they belong. Key offenders taking over grasslands include western juniper, eastern red cedar and mesquite. Beating these woody species back is crucial for both sagebrush and prairie-loving gamebirds to thrive. Left unchecked, they steal sunlight, water and soil nutrients from native flora. Their unnatural expansion depletes grasses and local groundwater stores, all of which are critical resources for upland birds, big game and scores of other wildlife, not to mention livestock. As a result, both ranchers and hunters have a shared interest in combating this joint threat.

People are now learning to effectively manage the invasion with prescribed fire and mechanical removal. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has committed Farm Bill resources to restoring



grassland and sagelands through its Working Lands for Wildlife partnership. Here we celebrate a few stories about how this partnership with conservation-minded producers and land managers is restoring upland habitats with thoughtful and targeted tree removal.

THE SAGE BOMBERS

The greater sage grouse, largest of the prairie grouse, relies on healthy sagebrush rangelands for every aspect of its life. In winter, these birds rely on a diet of solely sagebrush and actually gain weight from the nutritious leaves. Similar to pheasants, sage grouse also 'follow the green line' during the dog days of summer in search of wet meadows that provide insects and succulent grasses for hungry chicks.

Every invading tree in sagebrush habitat acts like a giant straw in the ground, robbing arid rangeland habitats of precious water. A single juniper can suck up to 30 gallons of water a day. This in turn robs the range of native plants — in severely tree-invaded landscapes, only bare dirt remains beneath trees, leaving entire landscapes devoid of sagebrush, grasses and wildflowers. Sage grouse also evolved in a treeless landscape and naturally avoid vertical structure. In fact, new science confirms that most grouse

leave tree-infested lands, and birds that do remain, suffer high mortality rates. Unsurprisingly, these impacts extend to big game populations, degrading the hunting experience for all enthusiasts.

In the American West, with its wealth of public lands, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is taking a proactive approach to invasive tree removal. In 2017 alone, BLM restored habitat for sage grouse, elk, mule deer, antelope and songbirds on a half-million acres by removing encroaching juniper. In southeast Oregon, sagebrush songbird populations increased by 50-80% on BLM lands following tree removal. Pheasants Forever replicated this success in Burley, Idaho, through an innovative partnership with NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative, BLM, and two dozen ranchers, restoring an entire watershed by cutting trees on private and public lands.

"In some places, beneficial cuts end at the fence line, but with our partnership, treatments now span ownership boundaries to achieve whole watershed benefits," said Michael Brown, Sage Grouse Initiative Field Capacity Coordinator and Pheasants Forever employee. "Wildlife response is almost immediate — when invading trees are pulled out, sagebrush-loving grouse,

songbirds and big game come right back in."

THE BIGGER CHICKEN

Another prairie grouse hunters can pursue is the greater prairie chicken, which is also threatened by invading trees. A core part of this bird's habitat is a 19,300 square-mile area known as Nebraska's Eastern Sandhills, where the tree of ill repute is

eastern red cedar. With more precipitation in this region, these fast-growing trees can ruin a landscape much quicker than their western counterparts.

"We're all working together for one common goal," said Pheasants Forever Senior Wildlife Farm Bill Biologist Ryan Lodge, "and that's healthy, connected grasslands for ranching, greater prairie chicken, sharp-tailed

grouse and other species, as well as people."

Each year in the Eastern Sandhills, 30,000 acres of grasslands and nearly half of all forage on working rangelands is lost as woodlands expand. Entire ranches are being suffocated by tree expansion in this mostly privately-owned landscape. To combat the loss of rangeland, resource managers are using mechanical tree removal followed by prescribed fire to keep cedars from reseeding. Pheasants Forever and other partners are supporting locally-led prescribed burn associations that help landowners learn about fire, acquire equipment, and attend hands-on demonstration on how this restoration approach works.

"It's neighbors helping neighbors put fire back on this landscape," Lodge said. "People are learning how burning can enhance rangelands for livestock and wildlife, and how these projects succeed when diverse partners all chip in."

THE SMALLER CHICKEN

Just like its cousins to the north and west, the lesser prairie chicken prefers plenty of space on the prairie, avoiding trees — and the potential predators that perch on them — like the plague. Lesser prairie chickens vacate an area with just one tree per acre and won't place its nest within three football fields of a tree or shrub. This bird's home is being overtaken by a woody shrub called mesquite, as well as red cedar, and exists almost completely on private agricultural lands. The economic impact of woodland encroachment and the resulting water and forage losses for livestock is valued at more than \$205 million annually in Oklahoma alone. Mesquite removal benefits chickens, while also making ranches more

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“Mesquite removal solves the immediate problem of resource loss. We then develop a plan with producers to keep their ranch healthy for the long-haul,” said Jordan Menge, a Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist working for the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative. “What’s good for the bird is good for the (cattle) herd

and that applies to sage grouse and prairie chickens as well as other species like bobwhites, scaled quail and pronghorn.”

In a true Dixie Chicks-homage, our favorite grouse species need their wide, open spaces to thrive. Add just a few trees to that mix, and habitat starts going downhill fast. Efforts to restore sagebrush and prairie rangelands have proven highly successful. Plus, they produce value-added benefits

for a host of other wildlife, as well as for the people who call these places home. Partnerships are critical for solving complex conservation issues, so contact your local Farm Bill biologist (listed at pheasantsforever.org) today to learn more about how to take action in your area. 🦋

Nikonow is a Sagebrush Communications Specialist with the Intermountain West Joint Venture in Missoula, Montana. She and her dog recently bagged their first sage grouse.

WORKING LANDS AND GROUSE ARE BIRDS OF A FEATHER

“Pheasants Forever’s ability to combat woodland encroachment is vital to conservation in the West,” said Tim Griffiths, western coordinator for Working Lands for Wildlife, a program of the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. “Their partnership puts the boots on the ground that make large-scale conservation happen.”

By identifying priority landscapes for restoration, Working Lands for Wildlife uses an incentive-based, partnership-driven approach to conserve whole landscapes. This kind of collaboration efficiently stretches limited resources to achieve impactful conservation outcomes. These prairie grouse initiatives are

powered by Pheasants Forever field staff, in addition to other conservation professionals and their organizations.

“Much of our country has game birds that are suffering from invading trees,” Griffiths said. “Science has shown us the negative impacts of the invasion — now it’s our job to help restore these rangelands for the wildlife and rural economies that depend upon them.”

Working Lands for Wildlife will be at Pheasant Fest this year in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, February 16-18. Make sure to stop by its booth to learn about the initiatives and opportunities in your state.

