

Restoring Western Montana's Sharp-Tailed Grouse - Progress Report

Kristina Harkins*, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Missoula
Mikel Newberg, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
Laura Dykstra, Montana State University, Bozeman
Ty Smucker, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
Beau Larkin, MPG Ranch, Missoula, MT
Chris Hammond, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Kalispell
Lance McNew, Montana State University, Bozeman

*Indicates Presenter

**Indicates Student Presentation

Sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus Phasianellus*) have been a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks priority for 35 years. Through the second half of the 1900s, sharp-tailed grouse populations west of the Continental Divide were considered isolated and extremely small and became essentially extirpated by the early 2000s. FWP's State Wildlife Action Plan and the Wildlife Mitigation Program identified "increase abundance and distribution of sharp-tailed grouse with a reintroduction program to western Montana" as a conservation action for sharp-tailed grouse. Sharp-tailed grouse translocations from eastern Montana to the Bitterroot, Blackfoot and Drummond Valleys began in the fall of 2021 with 75 males. The following spring our efforts were shortened due to avian influenza with 22 birds translocated. In 2023 and 2024, 144 and 212 birds were translocated respectively. Translocated females were fitted with GPS or VHF transmitters and monitored during the summer nesting season to assess demography and population viability of the reintroduced populations. Most female mortalities occurred in the first 3–4 weeks following release, and survival during the 120 days following translocation was 0.33 (95% CI = 0.22 – 0.50) in the Bitterroot and 0.45 (0.36 – 0.56) in the Blackfoot. Nest survival (0.40, 95% CI = 0.27 – 0.53) and brood success at 14 days post-hatch (74%) at both sites were similar to resident sharp-tailed grouse populations. In 2024, we observed 4 newly established leks at reintroduction sites attended by 64 sharp-tailed grouse. Translocations will occur through 2026 with monitoring continuing 5-years post-translocation.