



## Up Front

*The big, fat, gray chicken.*

By C.J. Hadley

**W**hen Peter Skene Ogden traveled through present-day Winnemucca, Nev., on Jan. 28, 1826, he noted: “Many in Camp are Starving and have been so more or less for some time past, indeed...we have been for the last ten days with only one meal every two days still I am determined the company’s horses shall not fall.”

In 1927, Ed Cantlon, 17, staying at a camp called Ten Mile at the edge of Nevada’s Smoke Creek Desert west of Winnemucca, was helping with a roundup. “We made a big circle east of the home ranch and were to gather the animals at a long string of water troughs which are known as Betty Creek,” he says in his University of Nevada, Reno, oral history. “The foreman sent me on an outside circle to make sure that we hadn’t missed any cattle. He also cued me to ride to the east side of the steep mountain, so that when I brought them back I would see about 20 or 25 water troughs. One would overflow and run into the next. When I came back with about 200 head of cows and calves, I kept looking for these water troughs and wondered for a while whether I was lost. Then, as we approached, I realized why I couldn’t see them; they were covered by sage hen. When those cattle moved toward the troughs, it looked like the whole country was moving. That’s the largest concentration of sage hen I’ve ever seen in my life. Without exaggeration, there must have been at least 10,000 birds in that group.”

When Ogden’s and other expeditions crossed the Great Basin in the early 1800s they found Indians eating insects. To survive, the explorers often ate their own dogs and horses. After cowboys and livestock showed up, sage grouse numbers exploded and, from the late 1800s until the 1960s, there were so many sage grouse you could kill one with a stick. But when livestock numbers were drastically cut in the 1960s, sage grouse diminished and they might soon be listed as “endangered” or “threatened” and will need all kinds of “protection.” (See Special Report, next to page 40.)

It is moments like this when emotions rise, lawyers step in, and rural lives change. Radical activists sue the federal government to halt a business to save a critter and they wield

such a big hammer that the feds almost always back down while real producers pay the price.

Known as the sage grouse, sage hen or sage chicken, this big, gray, ground-nesting, low-flying bird roams around 100 million acres of high desert. Weighing from two to seven pounds, the males can be pretty, but the chicken-sized females are, well, ordinary. Ogden wished he’d seen one. Cantlon would wonder where they went.

The Bureau of Land Management is riding point, in charge of about 47 million acres of sage grouse habitat. That’s half of what the birds use. Even though sage grouse might be the Forest Gump of game birds, another hammer is coming down—just like it did on the loggers in the name of the spotted owl in the 1990s. That pretty bird was said to only nest in old-growth timber on the West Coast. Thanks to “protect the spotted owl” propaganda, the timber industry was decimated, hundreds of mills closed, tens of thousands of good jobs disappeared, and small towns are still reeling from the onslaught. And it turns out that loggers were not the problem.

Old growth was nice but not imperative (a spotted owl’s nest was discovered in a Kmart sign). The major problem was that in addition to the slick, two-legged predators, winged enemies emerged. Barred owls pushed enough spotted owls out of old-growth forests that they have been in decline since the chainsaws moved out. Now the feds are putting a bounty on barred owls to “save” their spotted brothers. Too bad that truth was ignored.

Now most of the same players—enviros, feds, state-agency people, and friends—have come together to save the sage grouse. This includes folks from BLM, NRCS, USGS, USFS, plus tribes, state fish and wildlife departments, sportsmen’s groups, wildlife advocates, ranchers and other landowners. They are meeting in most of the states affected—California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming—and they want to make sure that sage grouse and its habitat will continue to exist.

Ranchers should be scared. They will be targets just like the loggers 20 years ago, and they, too, want to continue to exist. Ed Depaoli, former southern Oregon BLM area manager, now ranches on the 40-Mile Desert. “Sage grouse numbers were highest when predator control was at its peak and when livestock use was high, especially sheep use,” Depaoli says. “Change without knowledge is a risk to avoid.”

Even in 1927, young Ed Cantlon knew that ranchers are the sage hens’ best friends. ■

## RANGE

VOLUME XX, NUMBER 2, SUMMER 2012

PUBLISHER/EDITOR: *Caroline Joy “CJ” Hadley*

DESIGN CONSULTANT: *John Bardwell*

SCIENCE EDITOR: *Chance Gowan*

CUSTOMER SERVICE: *Ann Galli*

ADVERTISING/PROMOTIONS: *C.J. Hadley*

OFFICE MANAGER: *Joyce Smith*

PROOFREADER: *Denyse Pellettieri White*

WEBMASTER: *Larry Angier*

INSPIRATION: *Ann Henderson*

ENVIRONMENTAL EDITORS: *Carolyn Dufurrena (NV), Barney Nelson (TX)*; SOUTHWEST CONNECTION: *Kathy McCraine (AZ)*; PHOTOGRAPHERS: *Linda Dufurrena (NV/OR), Larry Turner (OR/TX)*; NOT FORGOTTEN: *Tim Findley (NV), Chet Mercer (WY), J. ZaneWalley (NM)*; WEBLOOKERS: *Gail Brooks (AZ), Carrie Depaoli (NV), Paul Etzler (UT)*; COWBOY ADVISORS: *Don Coops (CA), Ed Depaoli (NV), Tom Wahlen (CA), Carolyn Carey (CA)*.

RANGE (ISSN #1093-3670), published quarterly for \$19.95 per year U.S. (\$22/yr Canada, \$42/yr all other countries, U.S. funds only) by Purple Coyote Corp., 106 East Adams St., Ste. 201, Carson City, NV 89706. Periodicals postage rate paid at Carson City, NV, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Address changes to RANGE, P.O. Box 639, Carson City, NV 89702.

**775-884-2200**

FAX: 775-884-2213

**1-800-RANGE-4-U** (credit card orders)

Publisher/Editor: [cj@rangemagazine.com](mailto:cj@rangemagazine.com)

Freelancers: [edit@rangemagazine.com](mailto:edit@rangemagazine.com)

Customer Svc: [info@rangemagazine.com](mailto:info@rangemagazine.com)

Business: [admin@rangemagazine.com](mailto:admin@rangemagazine.com)

The Web: [www.rangemagazine.com](http://www.rangemagazine.com)

Photos: [www.cowboyswest.com](http://www.cowboyswest.com)

Become a friend on Facebook

RANGE is an award-winning quarterly devoted to the issues that threaten the West, its people, lifestyles, lands and wildlife. No stranger to controversy, RANGE is a leading forum for opposing viewpoints in the search for solutions that will halt the depletion of a national resource—the American cowboy.

RANGE CONSERVATION FOUNDATION Grants to the nonprofit 501(c)(3) RCF to assist with RANGE’s mission are appreciated. Mail to RCF, Attn.: Ed Depaoli, P.O. Box 1595, Carson City, NV 89702.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Reproduction in whole or part without written permission is strictly prohibited. Publisher not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts and photographs or for the opinions of the contributors. Subscription fulfillment by Integrated Fulfillment Services, Concord, Calif. Printed in U.S.A. Distributed by Warner International, Los Angeles, Calif.

COPYRIGHT © 2012