A Scarcity of Sagehens

A letter by rancher Rodney Flournoy recalls the history of sagehens in Northern California.
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Understanding population fluctuations in birds is a complex science. Some birds, like migratory snow geese, currently suffer from extreme overpopulation. When populations rise, diseases like avian cholera and West Nile virus are more easily spread from water source to water source by migrating birds. These burgeoning flocks are seldom studied as funding and prestige are tied to doomsday predictions, and conservation groups depend on protectionist propaganda to keep their donations rolling in. So when a bird population is declining, like the sagehen (properly called sage grouse), the easy target is ranching as the probable culprit.

Thus when the Bureau of Land Management's rangeland management specialist, Alan Uchida, called a meeting of BLM permittees in the Alturas region of Northern California to "discuss" the sagehen, it made rancher Rod Flournoy nervous. As one of the permittees called to the meeting, Flournoy sat down to collect his thoughts and reconstruct the history of sagehens in the area as accurately as possible. His letter to Uchida eloquently describes the many complex relationships that came together during one brief window of time to create ideal sagehen habitat and high numbers of birds, maybe too high.

Modern science operates by controlling for only one variable, but Flournoy makes clear that sagehen ecology will not fit easily into that kind of box. Flournoy's facts don't come from two years of observations that most research is based on, but from a lifetime of observations and conversations recorded in journals that he's written since childhood. More ranchers who have inherited experience from generation to generation, as well as their own lifelong observations on the land, need to bravely take up their pens, as Flournoy has done, to help the American public and the "experts" understand the complexity of these issues. Ideal habitat and protection for one species is often destructive for others and, as many bird sanctuaries are discovering, more birds are not always better.

Flournoy was asked to read his letter at the meeting. The sagehen experts agreed with his summary and everyone wanted a copy of his letter. But Flournoy is still nervous. Which "fact" will be cherry-picked as the answer to the sagehens' decline? Will the government reintroduce sagehens into the area and "protect" them from the ranchers? Only time will tell how the political winds will blow.—BN

Jess Valley, California
March 30, 2010

Dear Alan:

I received your letter of the 24th announcing the meeting to be held April 7th concerning sagehens. There used to be thousands of those birds in this area. It seems their numbers reached their peak during the 1920s and '30s, and by the time I could remember them in the 1950s, there were still a few hundred. They ranged between the tablelands and Jess Valley.

A person could set their calendar by the sagehens' arrival in here as it occurred between July 15th and 20th with certain regularity each year. The young ones were almost half-grown and could fly good. Until after World War II, all the haying was done here by means of draft horses for a source of power. It took a few over 100 head of workhorses to do the job and between 25 and 30 men. Two big fields were used to graze those horses, one was out south of the houses and corrals and one was east of these buildings. Each field had some irrigated meadows with white dutch clover and other grasses; a lot was timothy. The horses would graze those choice grasses off real close, leaving it only maybe a half-inch tall, but there were still small clover leaves close to the ground. That really short grass and especially the clover was what the sagehen liked to eat.

The Jess brothers settled in here in 1871 and one of their first jobs was to split rails and build a pine-rail fence north and south along the east side of the valley. The fence was completed about 1878; a few of the old rails are still there. The rail fence was the east boundary of both those horse pastures, and after the sagehens filled up on those tender short green shoots of grass, they liked to wander up along the rail fence and lay in the shade of it and they liked to scratch and roll in the dust and take a dust bath just like chickens like to do.

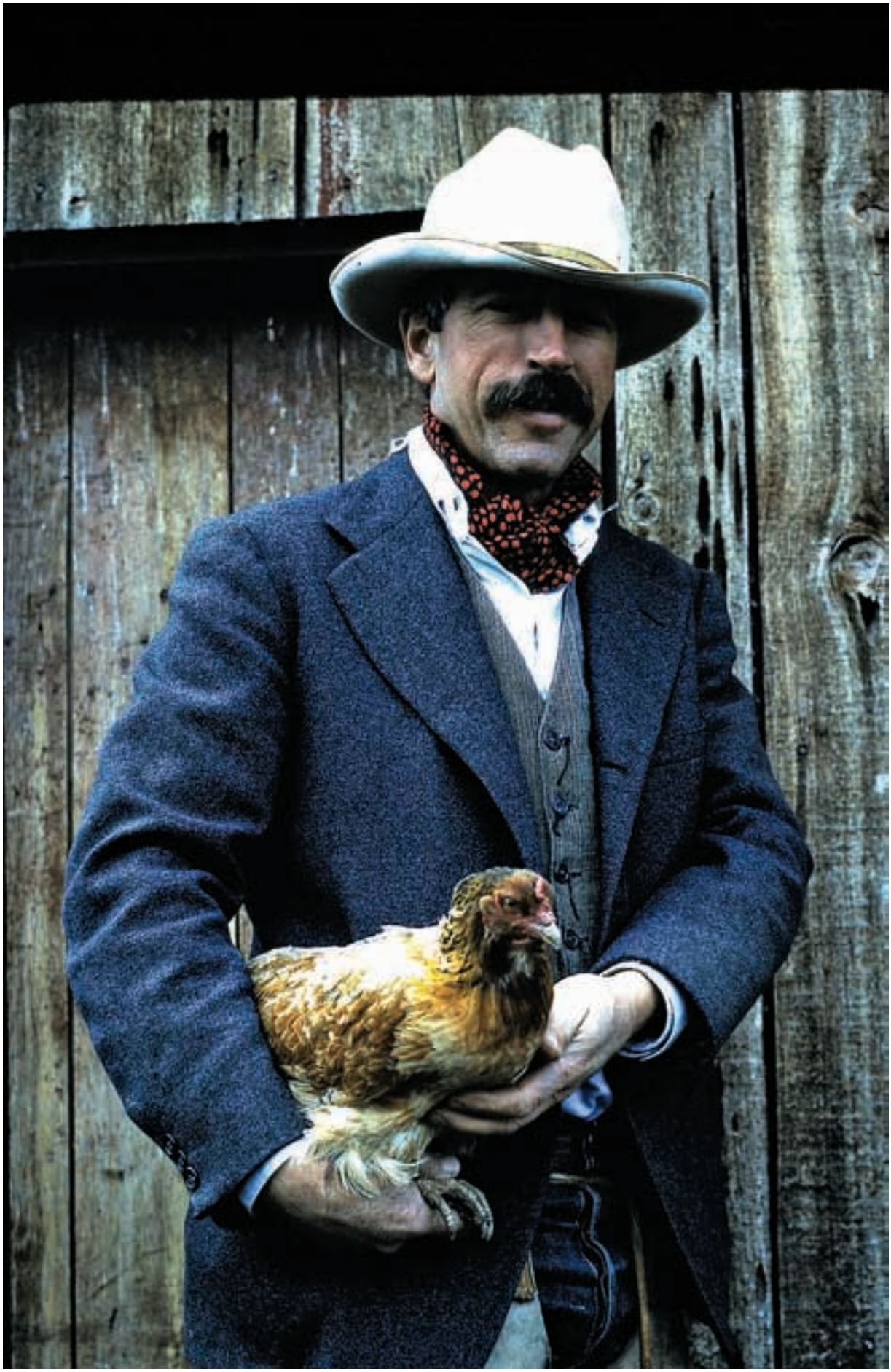
After they grazed off what was left of the short pickin's in the horse pastures, they would wander to the fields where the yearling steers were grazed and settle for the shortest grass left by the cattle. Then later in the summer and early fall, they would pick the green grass in the hay meadows that had been irrigated back after haying. There were not near so many sagehen in this area before the country was settled up and grazed. During those earlier times the sagehen had to get their tender green shoots of grass from an area that had been burned and then spring, summer or fall rains would start the grasses those birds preferred.

For the sagehens to be good eating, they needed to be allowed to pick green grass for a few weeks, thus the season to hunt them opened the first weekend of September. Sagehens are so gentle by nature they were very easy prey. The Indians came in big numbers to kill the young birds and have a big feed. The ranchers likewise considered it a treat to have a big sagehen feed for all the hay crew along toward the end of haying.

My grandfather, Arthur Flournoy, who was born at the home ranch west of Likely on September 19, 1879, and lived and spent his life on these ranches until his death September 5, 1966, had what was for me very interesting memories of the sagehen. I recall one time, about 1960, he was here and we were looking at the 50 or so sagehens left that had come in the timothy field just north of the house. By that time, we only had 20 or so saddle horses and they were run in that timothy field. The sagehens were picking the short clover just like the thousands had done years earlier in the 1920s and '30s. Pop told me about being out in the horse pasture changing the water and said, "Many was the time I saw some Indians come in to get 'em a mess of sagehens along the rail fence."

He continued, "I've seen so many sagehen fly up and circle off toward Henderson Meadows after the first few shots were fired that their shadow would cast a large amount of shade just like a cloud had got between me and the sun." He said: "When I was a kid in the 1880s and '90s, there was

California rancher Rodney Flournoy holds one of the pasture-roaming modern sagehens he raises for eggs and meat. He has always been interested in history and poultry, both wild and domestic.



plenty of 'em around even though they was hunted pretty hard, but then from about 1915 to about 1940, they was around by the thousands. They was just way too thick." He continued, "They took quite a toll on what grass we had in here for our horses and steers."

As he and I stood there and looked at that small flock of sagehens, he sorta half said to himself and half to me, "I never thought I would see 'em get down to so few left as that, but I reckon the only thing that is constant is change."

I was always full of questions, especially about something I liked and I have always liked poultry and history. I asked Pop why he thought they had died off so much. He said: "Well, sir, we had some heavy hard winters from about 1946 to 1952 and that could a killed off some of 'em. But we had an awful long hard winter in 1889 and '90, the snow drifted clear over the little barn that winter, and in 1911 and quite a few other years we had hard winters. There's a lot of things that's different now. The country here used to be badly overgrazed. Many bands of sheep were drove through here from Oregon and grazed along as they traveled south. Many's the time when I lived up here in Jess Valley, I'd get up to find a band of sheep in our meadow due to a herder knocking down the rails on the fence and letting 'em in.

"There were as many as 3,000 cows turned out on those ranges around here where now only a few-hundred head graze. When the Forest Service got started in 1905, it helped a lot to get the transient bands of sheep out of here and in a few years' time, they got the cattle numbers in line more with the carrying capacity of the country. But one thing they done that turned out to be a bad thing was to stop letting the Indians set fire to the hills. Them old Indians used to like to set fire to the mountains. They would whoop and ki-eyee and have a big time when the fire would roll and burn through the brush and trees. All that overgrazing and burning seemed to be things the sagehens thrived on. At the time when the Forest Service said, 'Don't let nothin' burn off,' I thought maybe they was right. But now I see big stands of young junipers a comin' in that I know would not be there if burning had continued uninterrupted since 1905." Pop continued: "I've come upon areas where a band of sheep had camped and the ground was all tore up and the whole area would be alive with sagehens. As I would ride up, it looked like the ground was moving, they was so thick."

This is how things looked to Arthur in 1960, answering up his inquisitive grandson pondering sagehens. Now another 50 years has gone by since Pop and I had that visit. I watched with pain as the numbers of those birds continued to decline and still a hunting season was opened each September on them. I forbid any hunters to come on our property, but that was a small protection. Their decline continued here until 1984 when I saw two old roosters here in the meadow picking clover. The year before there had been two or three young ones, a couple hens, and three or four roosters. But that last year there were only two big old sageroosters and the next year none.

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It's been eight or 10 years now since I have seen any anywhere, and I do mourn their passing. I just called Uncle Don Flournoy. He is the last one living of my dad's generation. He was born at the home ranch, March 24th, 1918. I asked him if he remembered the big flocks of sagehen. "I sure do," said he. "They used to have a strutting and breeding ground by Pat Spring when I was a kid. We'd see 'em there more'n a hundred when we'd go to Alturas."

Pat Spring is just east of the radio tower that is five or six miles north of Likely. Don said: "I've seen 'em get in the old log corral there at Jess Valley to roll and bathe in the dust. I remember when there were hundreds of 'em out on the Madeline Plains, and I remember them fellers from Alturas would go out there and kill 200 or 300 of 'em and bring 'em back to town and have a big sagehen supper and a dance."

Two or three years ago, we were riding for cattle up above Mill Creek Meadows and I came upon a place two bulls must have had a fight and the ground was disturbed some. I saw there three blue grouse, which we do still see these birds occasionally, and when I saw them there, I thought of Pop and the sagehen in the sheep camp.

One time I was visiting with Elmer Cantrall who was born in 1897 and spent 92 years here in Modoc County. I asked him what he thought about the sagehen dying off. He said: "They just got too thick. Anything that gets too thick dies off." In the many years I worked with that fellow, I found his wit and his wisdom to be exceeded by no man. I know the field mice go in cycles here. About every 10 years they get so numerous we find hundreds in each haystack. Then for a few years we see almost none. Then they commence to get thicker until they are in annoying abundance. Then the cycle repeats.

Walter Cantrall was one of our neighbors here in Jess Valley. He was born at the north end of the valley in 1895. He was a very good rancher and horseman. There were times groceries were short and he said they would harvest a few sagehens to eat. "But," said he, "during the winter when they had been eating the leaves off the sagebrush, the meat would be so bitter we couldn't eat 'em. We knew that, so didn't kill 'em then, and those birds knew it. They would be dog gentle and we could ride through 'em like a flock of chickens." Walter continued by saying, "I see now a lot of the sagehens' wintering grounds have been took over by juniper trees."

I asked him what his idea was about why the sagehen had died out. "Well," says he, "there are way more hawks and eagles now. We used to shoot 'em and keep 'em thinned out so they wouldn't kill our chickens and young turkeys and I know that also helped the sagehen population." The mountain lion bounty was also once $65 at a time when a month's wages was $30 with room and board.

Well, Alan, I have rambled on here, but I figured maybe my observations should be set down in writing before I go the way of the sagehens. It will be interesting to see what measures are proposed to enhance sage grouse habitat. I doubt they will want to graze the grasses off into the ground, shoot the eagles and hawks, burn large areas of brush, trees and junipers, put a bounty on mountain lions and coyotes as those creatures were also at an all-time low when the sagehen flourished.

I am yours most sincerely,

Rodney Flournoy

Rodney Flournoy ranches in Northern California, running a cow/calf and horse operation. He has provided several articles to RANGE magazine through the years explaining the ranchers' views. The Flournoy family has been in the ranching business for many generations.