



Rocky Mountain Regional Office  
105 West Mountain Avenue  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
Tel: 970.416.6931  
Fax: 970.416.5944

April 1, 2013

Public Comments Processing  
Attn: **FWS-R6-ES-2012-0108** and **FWS-R6-ES-2011-0111**  
Division of Policy and Directives Management  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 2042-PDM  
Arlington, VA 22203

Re: Endangered Status for Gunnison Sage-Grouse, Proposed Rule (FWS-R6-ES-2012-0108)  
• Federal Register 78(8): 2485-2538  
Designation of Critical Habitat, Proposed Rule (FWS-R6-ES-2011-0111)  
• Federal Register 78(8): 2539-2570

Please accept these comments from Audubon Rockies (Audubon), a regional office of the National Audubon Society, which focuses on Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. Audubon has a long history of constructive participation in federal and state planning and decision-making in the Rockies, with special interest in sage-grouse species.

#### **Audubon's History with GUSG**

The Gunnison Sage-grouse (GUSG) is on the National Audubon Society's WatchList Red Category which is for species that are declining rapidly or have very small populations or limited ranges, and face major conservation threats. In 2006, National Audubon Society identified GUSG as one of the top ten most endangered birds in the country. Our Rockies staff and volunteers have worked multiple years with the Gunnison BLM office to assess the quality of brood rearing habitat on federal lands in the Gunnison Basin. We have conducted field trips for the public over the years to view GUSG on their lek and to teach the public about the values and conservation concerns for the species. We have also engaged in the development of the draft CCA document. That said, Audubon remains fully committed to credible conservation strategies designed to recover healthy grouse populations and habitat.

#### **Audubon's Support for Endangered Status for GUSG and Critical Habitat Designation**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) final determination on GUSG and critical habitat designation will be an important one in species conservation. When the five factors<sup>1</sup> for listing

---

<sup>1</sup> (A) The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat/range; (B) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; (C) disease or predation; (D) the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or (E) other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence. Factor (B) was ultimately excluded as a current or future threat to GUSG.

determination were considered by the USFWS and outlined in the Federal Register, four of these were identified as currently a threat/potential to become a threat in the future for this species throughout all of its range. Given these thorough analyses of the best scientific and commercial data available and the high magnitude of imminent threats to the species, *Audubon supports listing Gunnison Sage-grouse as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.* This species fits the definition of a species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. *Audubon also supports designating critical habitat for the Gunnison Sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act.* Audubon agrees with the USFWS that the 1.7 million acres is prudent and critical habitat is determinable.

Of specific concern to Audubon is the determination of lack of stronghold for the species, furthering the vulnerability of this species to a myriad of threats of restricted habitat (Federal Register at 2535). All seven populations are experiencing habitat degradation and fragmentation due to exurban development, roads, powerlines, and improper grazing management. These pressures are only expected to increase with increasing human populations. Furthermore, six of these populations are low enough to induce inbreeding depression and all seven may be losing their adaptive potential (ibid). The USFWS must act to conserve this species through appropriate habitat protection measures.

The amount and distribution of critical habitat identified by the USFWS for Gunnison sage-grouse habitat is appropriate, and will be an important means to avoid destruction or adverse modification of important habitat. The current range occupied by GUSG is documented to be inadequate to ensure the long-term population viability for four of the populations, and minimally adequate for two populations (Federal Register at 2548). Given this, Audubon supports the designation of unoccupied habitat for the Gunnison Basin population as well as these areas will provide habitat for future population growth/reestablishments, increased buffer in the face of continued threats to current occupied habitat, and allow for movement between other populations and within the Gunnison Basin. Therefore, the larger area proposed as critical habitat by the USFWS for all seven populations would enable movement between populations *and* expansion of existing, vulnerable populations. While areas proposed for designation may require some management to improve the quality to meet the biological needs for GUSG, the benefits will be far reaching to pronghorn, elk, and other species of concern that are sagebrush obligates.

#### **Audubon's Climate Change Modeling Program**

The National Audubon Society's programs offer opportunities to contribute to and inform GUSG conservation. The National Audubon Society has been funded through a grant and cooperative agreement with the USFWS to analyze how birds across North America may respond to climate change, using extensive citizen-science data and detailed climate data. Audubon developed models that characterize the relationship between the distribution of each species and a set of bioclimatic variables. Audubon used these models to forecast species distributions in future time periods based on climate change estimates described by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. For taxa of concern, Audubon has developed spatially explicit predictions for areas that will remain climatically suitable from 2000-2080. Identification of these climate "refugia" could serve an important role in species specific conservation planning. Results of this work are currently being finalized for inclusion in the Audubon report to the USFWS. While GUSG weren't selected in the original list of targeted species, the Greater Sage-grouse (GRSG) was. Given the similarities between the species and the USFWS own use of GRSG scientific management

principles to guide GUSG management needs (Federal Register at 2488), Audubon encourages USFWS to contact Gary Langham (Chief Scientist, 202-600-7975, glangham@audubon.org) to discuss use of Audubon's climate predictions or address any questions related to Audubon's climate change work.

### **Value of ESA and Recovery Team Engagement**

Audubon has long appreciated the importance of The Endangered Species Act (ESA), as a critical safety net for America's native fish, wildlife, and plants. This landmark conservation law has prevented the extinction of such iconic birds as the Bald Eagle and the Brown Pelican. In some situations, we work diligently with state and federal partners to avoid the necessity to list a species, such as Greater Sage-grouse. However, fewer than 5,000 Gunnison Sage-grouse remain (occurring on less than 10 percent of their historic range) and efforts to date have been unable to stem the downward spiral of this species. Federal listing and critical habitat designation are needed to more comprehensively address threats to Gunnison sage-grouse, providing additional federal funding for species recovery under the Endangered Species Act and a coordinated recovery plan. As with the Bald Eagle and Brown Pelican, we hope that GUSG can return to a secure, self-sustaining, and functioning component of their ecosystem.

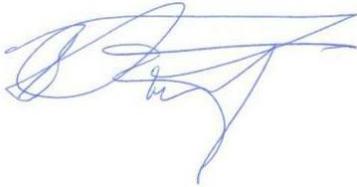
Audubon understands that the recovery plan will identify site-specific management actions. We strongly encourage that this includes a focus on habitat restoration, given the highly fragmented nature of the species' range, and the threats associated with climate change. Effective conservation must entail preserving and restoring sagebrush habitat, moderating grazing, limiting disturbance from recreational activities, protections from renewable and traditional energy development actions including the construction of vertical structures, any approved mitigation<sup>2</sup> should enhance long-term health and viability of impacted populations, and ensuring that development is planned with an eye to conserving critical grouse habitat.

---

<sup>2</sup> When considering impacts and mitigation measures, the best available science should be used. If successful and made public, the mitigation approaches identified could be applied in improving siting of future infrastructure. However, steps must be in place to evaluate the proposed mitigation measures where effectiveness is based on number of sage-grouse (Doherty et al. 2010). Mitigation for unavoidable impacts should rely on science-based processes that quantify what is being lost and replace those losses on-site or nearby when possible. Off-site mitigation is necessary in some instances but should be used with emphasis placed on scientifically defensible habitat improvements and strict development activity restrictions in important habitats. Before a rigorous discussion of mitigation can take place, however, the complete extent of the potential impacts must be rigorously assessed. This assessment must include science-based estimates of the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts throughout the project area or area of disturbance, and how the cumulative impact of the disturbance adds to the other ongoing and reasonably foreseeable impacts throughout the range of the targeted species. Ecosystem level planning and strategies should be employed in addition to species-specific analyses. An assessment tool or evaluation strategy approved by the USFWS should be used to quantify the interim and permanent impacts (injury) to habitats (direct, indirect and cumulative as outline above) and the ecological services provided by those habitats. This will enable a more accurate, predictive approach to mitigating impacts across the entire line. Mitigation protections will require additional and ongoing monitoring to determine effectiveness.

In conclusion, while Audubon acknowledges the conservation efforts made by a wide range of stakeholders (including proactive landowners), the ongoing decline of Gunnison Sage-grouse and the variety of continued threats warrant federal protection and resources associated with an endangered status determination and designation of critical habitat (at the scope and scale suggested by the USFWS) for species recovery. **Audubon Rockies is interested in participating in recovery efforts for this species.** As a nongovernmental organization, Audubon would welcome the opportunity to further engage with members of a Recovery Team for the benefit of this species and surrounding communities. Additionally, Audubon Rockies is interested in participating in public outreach efforts, related to the ultimate listing decision and critical habitat designation. Concern about federally listing a species under the Endangered Species Act and the associated critical habitat designation has caused fear and misunderstanding among members of the general public. Future outreach efforts must be handled swiftly and strategically by the USFWS to improve understanding about the local implications.

Respectfully,



Brian Rutledge  
VP National Audubon Society  
Audubon Rockies  
[brutledge@audubon.org](mailto:brutledge@audubon.org)

*For over 100 years, the National Audubon Society has been working to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.*