

APRIL 2021

# NOTES OF A NATURALIST

A monthly newsletter bringing you the species, landscape, history, and happenings of the Taft-Nicholson Center

## Sage Grouse in the Sagebrush Sea

This time of year, greater sage-grouse are gathering at their leks, where males will show off their moves to vie for female attention. Only a few will have the opportunity to mate. They compete by strutting around and inflating the balloon-like air sacs on their chests, which results in a strange noise that resonates through the air. Sage grouse are picky about their leks, requiring an area that is flat and open enough for their dances to be visible, yet close enough to sagebrush for protection from lurking predators. They often return to specific lek sites year after year.

Sage grouse have many natural predators, and unfortunately, human-made structures like fences have led to increased predation on leks and at nesting sites. Studies have shown a lower survival rate for nests in close proximity to fences. Coyotes and other four-legged predators can be funneled along the fence line where they may easily encounter a grouse nest. Fences can also increase the presence of avian predators by providing perches in a shrub-dominated landscape where perches would otherwise be hard to come by.

(Continued)



Male Greater Sage-grouse  
Photo Credit: Tom Koerner / USFWS

## Updates from Lakeview

"Daytime temperatures are slowly rising into the 40s (F) in Lakeview while nights remain well below freezing. Our landscape is transforming from white to brown. The snow pack is still solid in the high country but patchy on the Valley floor. The South Valley Road is newly plowed all the way from Monida to Red Rock Pass and Henry's Lake, and traffic has started passing through Lakeview once again, mainly anglers heading for Red Rock Creek.

Ground squirrels are emerging from their burrows for the first time since August, and it always amazes us to think that they spend nearly 2/3 of the year underground. Other recent spring arrivals have included red-winged blackbirds (3/5), tundra swans (3/18), western meadowlarks (3/28), snow geese (3/29), mallards and mountain bluebirds (4/1), American robins, mourning doves, northern flickers, Swainson's and rough-legged hawks (4/2), sandhill cranes and tree swallows (4/3). The first call of a sandhill crane that we hear echoing through the Valley might be the most thrilling sign of spring."

*Contributed by our friends at Lakeview Elementary*



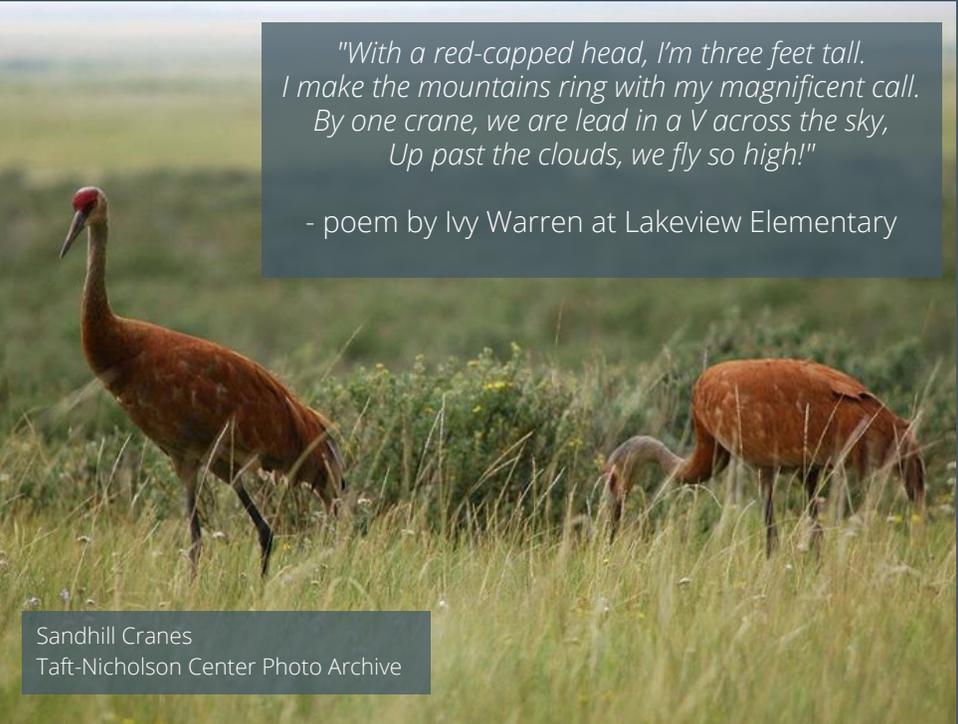
## Sage grouse (cont.)

Fence modification projects have been implemented in Centennial Valley in hopes of reducing these impacts. Removing the bottom wire allows coyotes to pass under fences, rather than forcing them to follow the fence line, and placing perching deterrents on fence posts reduces predation by birds of prey on sage grouse nests and chicks. Black and white markers have also been placed on fences, making them more visible to sage-grouse and reducing the number of fatal collisions.

The greatest threat to sage grouse populations is loss of sagebrush habitat. As sagebrush obligates, their survival depends on this aromatic shrub that has become so symbolic of western landscapes. At least half of an adult sage-grouse's diet is comprised of sagebrush leaves, even more so in the winter season when other plant species are dormant. Nests are often found under the cover of sagebrush, which helps protect eggs and chicks from predators. Because of their reliance on these plants, sage-grouse can be found throughout the range of Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*). The appropriately nicknamed "sagebrush sea" spans over 250,000 square miles, in 11 U.S. states and two Canadian provinces. Yet despite its breath-taking expanses, sagebrush habitat covers about half the land area that it once did. Current risks to sagebrush ecosystems include habitat fragmentation, human land use, introduced annual grasses like cheatgrass, conifer encroachment, and wildfires. Climate change will likely exacerbate the impacts of these. Sage grouse are just one of at least 350 animal and plant species that rely on sagebrush-steppe habitat. Their success is dependent on the future health of this iconic sagebrush sea.

## Sandhill Cranes Announce Spring's Arrival

The sandhill cranes are returning from their wintering grounds, their distinctive calls announce their arrival. Most of those found in Centennial Valley spent the colder months in New Mexico. They begin their return flight north in mid-February, making it back to the Centennial Valley by April. Around this time, they will also be performing their courtship displays, which are intricate dances that can involve leaping into the air, stretching their wings, and bowing. Sandhill cranes mate for life, and they use these displays to find a mate and strengthen existing pair bonds.



*"With a red-capped head, I'm three feet tall.  
I make the mountains ring with my magnificent call.  
By one crane, we are lead in a V across the sky,  
Up past the clouds, we fly so high!"*  
- poem by Ivy Warren at Lakeview Elementary

Sandhill Cranes  
Taft-Nicholson Center Photo Archive