

Adopt-a-Lek Star Volunteers

The passionate thoughts of two sage-grouse observers...



Montana's sagebrush prairies can be unforgiving places in April, but for the past eight years that hasn't kept Martha Vogt and Jim Greene from loading up their trailer and heading out onto rural dirt roads in search of elusive sage-grouse leks. As Jim says, "Monitoring Montana's Greater Sage-Grouse has become a spiritual experience. We're alone on the expansive central Montana prairie, initially in the dark, then

are privileged to witness another day begin. It is silent at first, then Western Meadowlarks and coyotes begin their celebratory songs, sometimes drowning out the popping sounds of the courting sage-grouse. As the birds gather, our hearts quicken, and we begin our count, which has become a cross between a meditation and a prayer."

For these two enthusiastic lek observers, it started with an advertisement in *The Missoulian* calling for volunteers to help biologists get a better understanding of Montana's Greater Sage-Grouse populations. They were hooked after one weekend—and now look forward to bouncing along 2-track roads covering 32 square miles of sagebrush lands. They have observed grouse at Bannack State Park, C. M. Russell Refuge, Baker, and Cow Island Trail in north-central Montana.

Why are these star observers so dedicated? They had been avid birders for years, but became hooked seeing the morning light shine through the sage-grouse's white tail feathers as they flew into their lek to begin their ancient courting—not to mention experiencing the breathtaking Montana prairies as the sun peaks over the rolling expanse of land.





A typical day of counting begins before dawn and ends with the departure of the birds around 8:00 a.m., but that doesn't end the day for these observers. After that, they "go out for breakfast" at the local "cafe"—a high, nearby scenic spot with the best view and atmosphere around—the prairie coming to life on a spring morning. Then it is back to the leks to gather feathers that are used

for DNA sampling. The rest of the day is free for hiking, reading, knitting, napping, exploratory drives, and most importantly, scouting the next day's route. This daily rhythm suits Jim and Martha well, in fact so well that they plan to continue their lek monitoring into the future.



Not that every season has been a picnic. In 2011, the snow was so frequent and deep that the road to their Cow Island campsite (50 miles southeast of Big Sandy) was impassable; they weren't able to monitor any leks that year. This past spring, after pulling their trailer the 5-hour trip to the campsite, the trailer broke down—a collapsible trailer that really did collapse.

"Jim, your worst nightmare has come true,"

teased Martha. They also have to be tuned to the ever-changing spring weather, as they are in "gumbo" country and may need to make a quick exit. They got to be good friends with the locals as they became temporary residents of Big Sandy at Q's Motel—the one and only motel in town.

It is Martha and Jim's hope that their story will inspire people to find out more about this vital volunteer opportunity and to sign up to be lek observers. Not only can you witness these birds dancing on their ancestral grounds, you can also become a citizen scientist, contributing much information to biologists on the nation's largest remaining populations of Greater Sage-Grouse.

If you have questions about the process of monitoring Montana's Greater Sage-Grouse, feel free to contact Martha and Jim at vogtgreene@optimum.net or (406) 495-9270.