

## Gunnison sage grouse population numbers decline to alarming low, nonprofit says

There could be as few as 1,800 birds, well below 5,000 needed for viable population, nonprofit says

The number of Colorado Gunnison sage grouse has reached alarming levels, dropping to as few as 1,800 birds, well under the 5,000 needed for a viable population, according to a nonprofit environmental conservation group.

Western Watersheds Project (WWP) said they have counted only 429 strutting males rangewide in 2019, down from 1,129 in 2015, marking the lowest since reliable records have been kept starting in the 1990s.

“Another bad year for the main Gunnison basin population could spell disaster, so state officials need to leap into action to help these amazing birds,” Ryan Shannon, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a press release from the WWP.

The WWP numbers are derived from state data released earlier this year.

The decline raises major questions about the adequacy of federal and state officials’ [efforts to protect](#) the imperiled birds, the WWP said.

In 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared the grouse officially threatened, triggering Endangered Species Act protections.

“Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is concerned about this year’s low count of Gunnison sage grouse and will continue to evaluate the data and our on-the-ground efforts to manage the species and to enhance and

protect habitat through treatments and conservation easements,” said Rebecca Ferrell, a CPW spokeswoman, in a written statement Wednesday.

Sage grouse numbers typically bottom out with low population periods occurring about every 10 years, followed by periods of increasing numbers, according to the CPW.

Gunnison sage grouse rangewide population estimates (CPW).

Two extreme winter seasons — exceptionally dry in 2017-18 and deep snow in 2018-19 — raised challenging conditions for the birds and biologists who track them, the CPW said. State officials rely on a three-year running average and managers will not realize the full extent of recent lower numbers until the spring 2020 count.

Despite recent extreme weather challenges and low counts, Colorado Parks and Wildlife has “had anecdotal observations of large numbers of sage-grouse chicks in 2019.”

The WWP’s Clait Braun, who formerly led the Colorado Division of Wildlife’s sage-grouse research program, said loss of habitat is contributing significantly to the decline of the birds. Burying powerlines, closing road through habitat areas, taking down fences, and reducing or eliminating livestock grazing should help restore numbers.