

1. **Species:** Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*)
2. **Status:** Table 1 summarizes the current status of this species or subspecies by various ranking entity and defines the meaning of the status.

Entity	Status	Status Definition
NatureServe	G1	<i>Species is Critically Imperiled</i> At very high risk of extinction or elimination due to very restricted range, very few populations or occurrences, very steep declines, very severe threats, or other factors.
CNHP	S1	<i>Species is Critically Imperiled</i> At very high risk of extinction or elimination due to very restricted range, very few populations or occurrences, very steep declines, very severe threats, or other factors.
Colorado State List Status	State, Endangered	Colorado List of Threatened and Endangered Species.
USDA Forest Service	ESA Section 7	ESA Section 7 consultation requirement for activities that may affect the species.
USDI FWS ^b	FT	Federally listed as Threatened
USDI FWS Critical Habitat	None	No occurrence of designated critical habitat within the planning area.
^a Colorado Natural Heritage Program. ^b US Department of Interior Fish and Wildlife Service.		

The 2012 U.S. Forest Service Planning Rule defines Species of Conservation Concern (SCC) as “a species, other than federally recognized threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species, that is known to occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined that the best available scientific information indicates substantial concern about the species’ capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area” (36 CFR 219.9). This overview was developed to summarize information relating to this species’ consideration to be listed as a SCC on the Rio Grande National Forest, and to aid in the development of plan components and monitoring objectives.

3. Taxonomy

Genus/species *Centrocercus minimus* is accepted as valid (ITIS 2015).

4. Distribution, abundance, and population trend on the planning unit [12.53.2,3,4]:

Historically, the range of the Gunnison sage-grouse included parts of central and southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. Gunnison sage-grouse currently occur in seven populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014a).

The Poncha Pass population is the only Gunnison sage-grouse population associated with the planning area. Delineated occupied distribution of this population covers approximately 27,747 acres, of which approximately 5,060 acres coincides with lands managed by the RGNF. Approximately 725 acres of sagebrush habitat occur on RGNG lands within or near the Poncha Pass population delineation (see Section 9 below).

Status of the Poncha Pass population is described by the USFWS (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014a). Poncha Pass is thought to have been part of the historical distribution of Gunnison sage-grouse. However, there were no grouse there when a population was established via transplant from 30 Gunnison Basin birds in 1971 and 1972. No population's trend information was available until 1999 when the population was estimated at roughly 25 birds. In one year, the population declined to less than 5 grouse, when more grouse were brought in, again from the Gunnison Basin, in 2000 and 2001. In 2002, the population increased to just over 40 grouse, but began declining in 2006, until no grouse were detected in lek surveys in the spring of 2013. Grouse were again brought in in the fall of 2013 and 2014 and six birds were counted in the Poncha Pass population during the spring 2014 lek count (CPW 2014d, cited in USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014a); however, no subsequent evidence of reproduction was found. Therefore, the USFWS concluded in 2014 that the Poncha Pass area is not a landscape capable of supporting Gunnison sage-grouse, and subsequently removed critical habitat proposed for this area from the final critical habitat determination (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014a).

Table 2. Known Occurrence Frequency within the Planning Area (NRIS AND RMBO 2015)

Known Occurrences in the past 20 years	Several
Year Last Observed	Early-mid 2000s

5. Brief description of natural history and key ecological functions [basis for other 12.53 components]:

Sage-grouse are considered obligate users of sagebrush and require large, contiguous areas of sagebrush across the landscape for long-term survival. Several species of sagebrush provide the specific food, cover, and reproduction habitats critical for sage-grouse survival (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014c).

In Colorado, strutting occurs from mid-March through late May, depending on elevation (Rogers 1964 cited in GSRSC 2005). Territories on leks are established by males in early March, but the timing can vary annually by 1-2 weeks depending on weather condition, snow melt, and day-length. Males are present on leks approximately 1 hour before dawn, and strut until approximately 1 hour after sunrise each day for about 6 weeks (Scott 1942, Eng 1963, Lumsden 1968, Wiley 1970, Hartzler 1972, Gibson and Bradbury 1985, Gibson et al. 1991, all cited in GSRSC 2005).

Approximately 85% of nests occur within 4 miles of lek sites. Nests typically occur on the ground at the base of live sagebrush. Hatching begins around mid-May and usually ends by July. Most eggs hatch in June, with a peak between June 10 and June 20. Incubation typically lasts 27-28 days (Patterson 1952 cited in GSRSC 2005).

Intermixing of broods and flocks of adult birds is common with the advent of fall, and birds move from riparian areas to sagebrush-dominated landscapes that continue to provide green forbs. Fringed sagebrush is often a transitional food as grouse shift from summer to winter diets (Schroeder et al. 1999 cited in GSRSC 2005).

GRSG winter range in Colorado varies according to snowfall, wind conditions, and suitable habitat (Rogers 1964 cited in GSRSC 2005). Sage-grouse may travel short distances or many miles between seasonal ranges. Movements in fall and early winter (September-December) can be extensive with some movements exceeding 20 miles. During severe winters sage-grouse depend on very tall sagebrush, which is exposed even above deep snow, providing a consistently available food source. GRSG are capable of making long movements (>18 miles) to find appropriate habitat. The extent of movement varies with severity of winter weather, topography, and vegetation cover (GSRSC 2005).

6. Overview of ecological conditions for recovery, conservation, and viability [12.53 7, 9?, 10, 11, 12]:

The Gunnison Sage-grouse Rangewide Steering Committee (CSRSC 2005) identified the following conservation strategy elements specific to USFS management of lands within the Poncha Pass population (page and section references below are applicable to *Gunnison Sage-grouse Rangewide Conservation Plan* (CSRSC 2005)):

- Incorporate grazing management practices (such as those presented on page 212) for both cattle and sheep that are compatible with, or enhance, GUSG habitat (see Appendix H) on federal and state lands during the permit renewal process, or when monitoring indicates need.
- Implement recommendations from rangewide strategy on “Human Infrastructure: Powerlines, Other Utility Corridors, Wind Turbines, Communication Towers, Fences, and Roads” (pg. 225).
- Implement recommendations from rangewide strategy on “Noxious and Invasive Weeds” (pg. 232).
- Implement recommendations from rangewide strategy on “Recreational Activity” (pg. 245).
- Evaluate suitability of vacant/unknown habitat classification and determine if habitat improvement techniques may enhance suitability.
- Implement timing restrictions provided in rangewide “Human Infrastructure: Powerlines, Other Utility Corridors, Wind Turbines, Communication Towers, Fences, and Roads” strategy (pg. 225), and “Oil & Gas and Mining” strategy (pg. 233).
- Implement recommendations from rangewide strategy on “Predation” (pg. 243).
- Conduct inventory of vacant/unknown habitat areas using inventory technique developed at a rangewide level (“Habitat Monitoring” strategy, pg. 220).
- Search for new or unknown existing leks utilizing survey methodology developed at rangewide level (“Habitat Monitoring” strategy, pg. 220).
- Map GUSG seasonal habitats in a GIS as defined per “Habitat Monitoring” rangewide strategy, Objective 1, Strategy #7 (see pg. 220).

7. Threats and Risk Factors

The most substantial current and future threats are habitat loss and decline due to human development and associated infrastructure (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014c). Other threats impacting Gunnison sage-grouse to a lesser extent include overgrazing, mineral development, pinyon-juniper encroachment, fences, invasive plants, wildfire, large-scale water development, predation (primarily associated with human disturbance and habitat decline) and recreation. The fragmented nature of existing habitat amplifies the negative effects of these other threats (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2014c).

The Gunnison Sage-grouse Rangewide Steering Committee (CSRSC 2005) identified residential development on private land is a threat specific to Gunnison sage-grouse at Poncha Pass because the area is scenic, easily accessed via Highway 285, and some interior parcels of land are in small tracts and currently for sale. There is some threat from cumulative physical disturbances associated with recreation in the area. In addition, a mica mine was recently proposed near Poncha Pass, and although the application has been withdrawn, the possibility of a mine (and potential negative impacts on GUSG and their habitat) remains (GSRSC 2005).

8. Key literature:

Gunnison Sage-grouse Rangewide Steering Committee (GSRSC). 2005. Gunnison sage-grouse rangewide conservation plan. Colorado Division of Wildlife, Denver, Colorado. 359 pp.+appendices.

USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014a. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Designation of Critical Habitat for Gunnison Sage-Grouse; Final Rule. Federal Register 79(224): 69312-69363.

USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014b. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Threatened Status for Gunnison Sage-Grouse; Final Rule. Federal Register 79(224): 69192-69310.

USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014c. Gunnison sage-grouse: threatened designation and responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act. Mountain-Prairie Region.

9. Map of Known Distribution and Modeled Suitable Habitat

Gunnison sage-grouse known distribution and modeled suitable habitat are shown in Figure 1. Modeled habitat totals 976 acres, of which 725 acres occur on RGNG lands within or near the Poncha Pass population delineation.

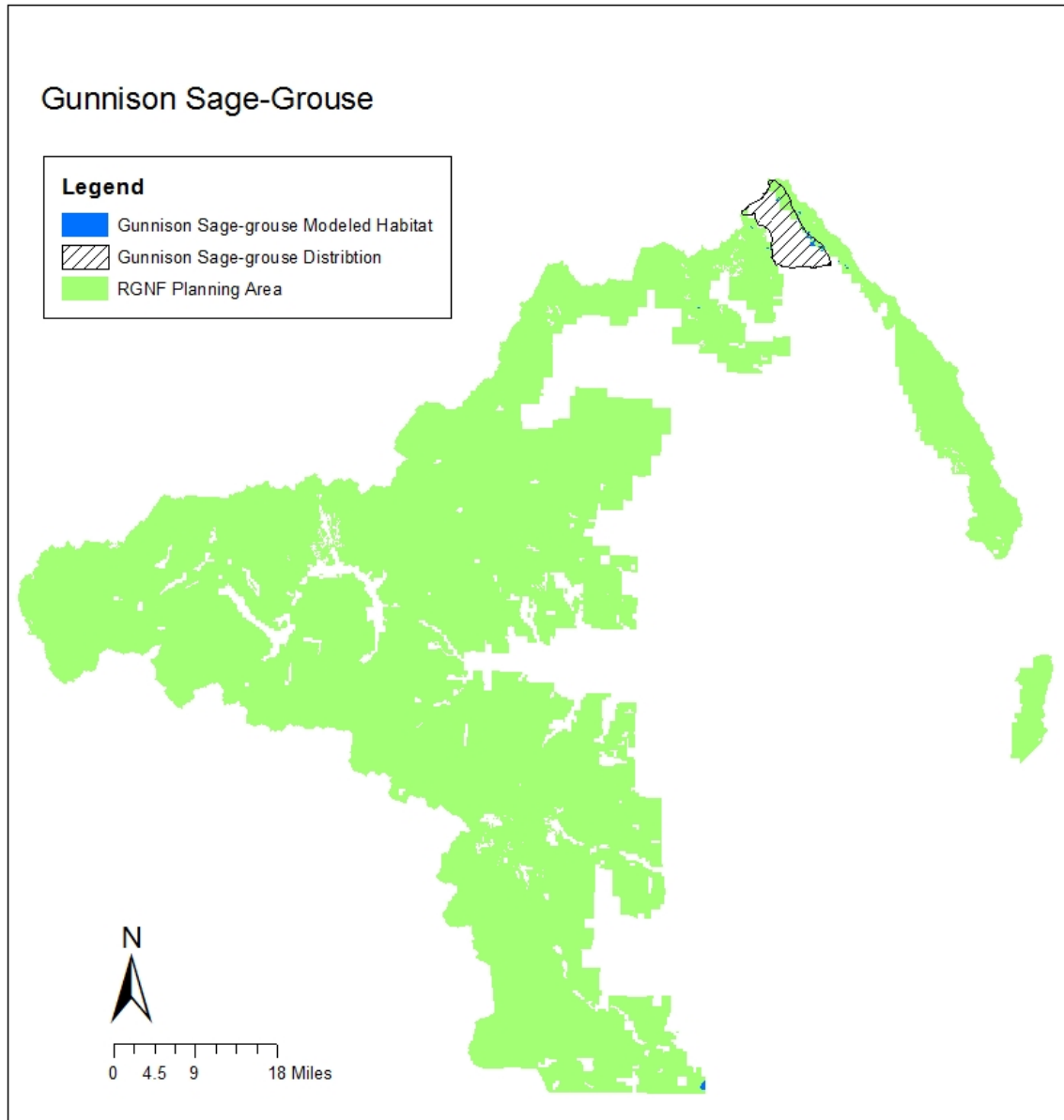


Figure 1. Gunnison Sage-grouse Modeled Habitat and Distribution.