



## Spirit of the West

For five years the photographer Noppadol Paothong traveled around the West, documenting the life cycle of the Greater Sage-Grouse, a bird that, he says, “most people probably know little, if anything, about.” Already working a full-time job, Paothong squeezed in weekend trips and used his vacation time to seek out grouse in every season. His new book, *Sage Grouse: Icon of the West*, features intimate portraits of the birds and striking photos of the vast sagebrush landscape where they live—and where unprecedented conservation efforts are underway to prevent this chubby, chicken-like species from sliding toward extinction.

### PHOTOGRAPHY BY NOPPADOL PAOTHONG

Text by Alisa Opar

#### 📷 FLIGHT PLAN

Don't let those fanciful tail feathers deceive you. Greater Sage-Grouse are powerful flyers, capable of 50-mile-an-hour bursts that give them a fair chance at escaping the clutches of Golden Eagles and other predators. Yet their wings offer little defense against one of their foes, the barbed-wire fencing that cuts across much

of their habitat: Sage-grouse can't see the fine wires and frequently become entangled in the barbs, with deadly consequences. Through the Sage Grouse Initiative, a multi-state public-private partnership, more than 590 miles of fence in key grouse habitat have been marked with flags to make the structures visible to the birds.

## 📷 DANCE PARTY

Paothong first photographed sage-grouse 13 years ago for a different project. When he started shooting them again for his new book, he discovered that the birds had disappeared from some of the places where he'd previously seen them, due to habitat loss and development.

"It's heartbreaking," he says. So he kept his hopes in check when a friend took him to this site in Wyoming. As the sky lightened he heard the familiar popping noise males make to attract mates, and looked down to find far more birds than he'd ever seen gathered in one place before.

"This is what it felt like for early pioneers," he recalls thinking. "It gave me goose bumps. My photo doesn't do justice to the number of birds spread across the valley."

In 2015 the government released sweeping land-use plans that protect critical grouse habitat while still allowing development.

But this summer the Trump administration recommended changes to the plans, including allowing states more flexibility over energy development and de-prioritizing habitat protection. (See "A Grouse About Government," p. 8.) Paothong hopes his images will help

deepen the discussion about conservation. "I want to show people that there's more than just this bird," he says. "Protect it, and you protect hundreds of other species, as well as the heritage of the West."



# A Grouse About Government

As the saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't try to fix it.

BY DAVID YARNOLD, CEO/PRESIDENT



**L**ESS THAN TWO YEARS AFTER 11 western states and the Department of the Interior put a bow around the largest conservation plan America has ever seen, D.C.-based politicians have stepped in to fix something that isn't broken. Instead of supporting the states and private landowners in their efforts to effectively manage land that Greater Sage-Grouse and more than 350 other species use, Washington had to "improve" on a solution that took a decade to reach. Sitting in the big chair in Washington appears to lead Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to think he can do a better job of planning for Western states than their

governors and the businesses and ranchers who live there. To grasp why this exercise is so infuriating it's important to understand the history. Audubon and its partners helped pilot collaborative sage-grouse conservation and celebrated when, in 2015, the USFWS determined that the Greater Sage-Grouse did not need to be listed for protections under the Endangered Species Act because of this work. This success was the result of years of painstaking collaboration on the part of state governments, landowners, energy companies, ranchers, conservationists, farmers, and scientists, and represents some of the

## A Note on Hurricane Harvey

As this issue went to press, Hurricane Harvey destroyed much of southeastern Texas, and unleashed particular wrath upon the city of Houston. First and foremost in our minds is the safety and well-being of every person who was affected by the storm. We are in contact with our staff and chapter leaders in southern Texas, and once the imminent threat to human life has gone, we will work closely with Houston Audubon and our other partners in the area in recovery efforts that will help make Houston—and the Texas and Louisiana shores—vibrant communities and ecosystems once again.



**Secretary Zinke relies on this junk science as the failsafe in his new grouse-management plan.**

best bipartisan conservation work in the United States to date. The plans focus on what's known as landscape-level conservation and provide a clear framework of rules and expectations that govern how various interests can use the land. The goal, simply put, is to keep as many acres of sagebrush lands intact while supporting economic enterprise. This gives everyone who uses that land a way to succeed. In the end, Zinke decided to toss out the science and hand down recommendations that are supported by no one except fly-by-night drillers who are most likely to operate on the edge of the law. Instead of acres, Zinke's plan focuses on population numbers of sage-grouse, an approach that is known to be susceptible to the species' boom-and-bust cycles and is a terrible metric upon which to measure success or plan for the future. It also hinges upon sage-grouse captive breeding, something that scientists have shown is difficult to do. Yet Zinke relies on this junk science as the failsafe in his new plan. Finally—and worst of all from a governance standpoint—it creates ambiguity and exacerbates conflict that everyone worked hard to avoid. Please tell our leaders to stick with the agreed-upon 2015 management plans that will best serve the Greater Sage-Grouse, and everyone who makes a living in the American West. You can reach your governor if you are in a sage-grouse state, or your member of Congress with this message by visiting [audubon.org/takeaction](http://audubon.org/takeaction). **A**

**SHARED LAND**  
Greater Sage-Grouse need intact sagebrush habitat in which to thrive. Federal plans imperil it.