

It exploded at our feet, rocketing from the brush on a heart-stopping whirl of wings. The gray bundle of feathers flew out from the aspens, along the trees to where the ridge fell away to the valley below, and dropped out of sight. The whole thing lasted but a second.

"Did you see it?" I blurted to my clients. Silly question—I'm sure their hearts were still recovering from the shock, as was mine.

"Well, yes, we did," answered the husband.

"You know what it was?"

"I guess it was a blue grouse."

"That's right. Did you see the gray band on the end of the tail?"

"I think so—it was awfully quick...."

It was too quick. My clients had come all the way from Michigan to Utah to see a blue grouse. This glimpse wouldn't do.

Bird-watchers are a funny lot. I know. I've been a bird-watcher since I was five years old. Birders like to see birds, but what they really like is to see different birds, and birds they've

FOR THE BIRDS

Good grazing management at Utah's Deseret Land and Livestock has made the ranch a haven for birds and a mecca for bird-watchers.

Words & photos by Mark Stackhouse

ica alone. But, in spite of numerous attempts, they had never seen a blue grouse. It was their number-one nemesis bird. They signed on to my first-ever multiday birding tour of Deseret Ranch because I told them

fifth and final group of aspens, we flushed our bird. With no more aspens and our bird gone down below the ridge, we walked back to our van.

"Are you going to count it on your life list?" I asked on our way back to the van. A life list is a list of all the birds a bird-watcher has seen in his life. It's the quest of most birders to add "lifers" to their list.

To add it to their list, birders want to see a new bird well enough to be able to clearly identify it.

"Well, it was a pretty short look, but I guess I saw the tail band," said the husband, trying to be diplomatic with me because of the hard work we had just done to see it. His wife would have none of it, saying that it was clearly not a "countable" view.

I turned to face them. "Look," I said, "we just worked our butts off for one lousy look at a grouse. The gods of birding are watching. They'll recognize all of our hard work. If you are appreciative of the tiny tidbit they tossed



A male blue grouse in full breeding display. For Michigan birders this was the number one "nemesis bird." They found it at Deseret Land and Livestock in Utah.

never seen before. When a birder has searched unsuccessfully for a particular bird, the desire to see it grows with each failed attempt. After many attempts without luck, it becomes what I call a "nemesis" bird. Other birders have different names for these birds—some of which shouldn't be printed here.

The couple from Michigan had been birding for years. They had seen many birds—well over 600 species in North Amer-

that we could see a blue grouse.

It was a pleasant evening in early June. We had come to Bull Nelson Ridge, where groves of aspen stand as islands in a sea of sagebrush and serviceberry. It's perfect habitat for blue grouse. We spread out along the edge of the first aspen grove and worked our way through. We came out the other side with no blue grouse. This continued through three more aspen islands along a mile of the ridge. In the



Yellow-headed blackbirds are just one of the many attractions for birders at Deseret Ranch. Abundant birds indicate ecosystem health.



A soaring prairie falcon is one of almost 300 species of birds on this working cattle ranch.



Usually unwelcome on ranches, prairie dogs play a role in the ecosystem, improving soil fertility and aeration and providing homes for a variety of wildlife and bird species. BELOW: Colorful plant diversity is displayed in spectacular spring blooms.



you, you'll soon be rewarded."

"You know, I'm starting to feel a lot better about it," said the husband.

"Good. Keep those positive thoughts."

His wife, on the other hand, remained unsatisfied. We had seen many birds that day, visiting a number of the varied habitats of Deseret Ranch. We birded lakes, wet meadows, hills of sage and grass, thickets of willow and cottonwood, and forests of fir and aspen. As I've come to expect over 10 years of guiding birders there, all these habitats were filled with birds. I've recorded a total of 273 species of birds on the ranch, including at least 170 nesting species. Birders from all over the country and beyond have learned that the ranch is a place where you can see over 100 species of birds in a day and over 160 species on a weekend. It's truly a birder's paradise.

Among the reasons there are so many birds at Deseret Ranch is the diversity of habitats there. Encompassing some 200,000 acres running west from the Wyoming border in northeastern Utah, an example of nearly every habitat of the region can be found on the ranch.

But the large number of birds and bird species that thrive at Deseret Ranch is not just a result of habitat diversity. On a recent birding tour to the ranch, we birded for a day off the ranch on nearby national forestland. My clients were commenting on how few birds were there. They couldn't wait to get back to the ranch where they could see more birds.

The real reason why there are so many birds at Deseret Land and Livestock is the quality of the habitat. Biologists have long recognized that birds are a fantastic indicator of ecosystem health. Where the ecological system functions well, there will be lots of birds. Maintaining a high level of ecosystem function is one of the primary goals of the management plan at Deseret Ranch. A diverse community of native plant species is key. So are the 14,000 acres of prairie dog towns, the jackrabbits, the ground squirrels, the badgers, the golden eagles, the coyotes, the elk, the pronghorn, the beaver, the moose, the mule deer, and the birds. So are the cows. Like all ecosystems, the natural system at Deseret Ranch evolved over thousands of years as a complex and delicately balanced system. Grazing is a part of that system.

What's happening at Deseret represents a philosophical shift of land management. It's not really about "managing" nature; it's about managing ranch activities to fit with nature's rhythms. Our history is full of examples of ill-conceived efforts to change nature to fit our needs, creating problems that come back to haunt us and end up costing much time, work, and money to fix, or leaving us with endless



Birders from all over the country expect to find over 100 species of birds in a day on Utah's Deseret Ranch, also known as "birder's paradise." RIGHT TOP: Nesting in Deseret barns, predatory great horned owls help to control the ground squirrel population. BELOW RIGHT: Badgers are common on Deseret Ranch. A healthy population of predators is another indication of ecosystem health.

struggles to maintain the imbalance we created.

Examples like Deseret Ranch show that we get better results working with the natural system and adapting our activities to fit within that system. This means tolerating or even encouraging all the elements of that system—even those, like predators and prairie dogs, which we view as being "harmful" to our activities. All are equally essential to the functioning of the whole.

Because virtually all ecosystems evolved with some form of grazing, it is generally true to say that grazing is better than no grazing—if the grazing resembles the grazing that evolved with the ecosystem. In other words, good grazing is better than no grazing, but bad grazing is worse than no grazing. We can see the results of decades of bad grazing throughout the American West. At Deseret Ranch, the time-controlled grazing system they use closely resembles the type of grazing bison did there. The results are clear to see—improved range condition and productivity, all achieved with a higher stocking rate than traditional grazing methods.

I had parked the van on a high ridge, giving us a panoramic view of the eastern half of the ranch. Miles of rolling hills of grass and sage

fell away before us. We paused, and I asked the group to find the cows. At first look, it appeared that there wasn't a cow in sight. Then one of my clients spotted them, a dark mass on the far side of a meadow about five miles distant. Several thousand cows were in a small pasture there.

"Imagine that I had asked you to find the bison out there," I said. "They would appear in a herd much as those cows do. Next week, when I come back, they will be someplace else, just like the bison would be."

I had already told them about the grazing at Deseret Land and Livestock. These birders from someplace back East, like all the birders who visit Deseret Ranch, would go home knowing a bit more about grazing in the West. They'd go back knowing that grazing can be done right, and that cows and birds and coyotes and endangered species can and do fit into the same natural system.

We drove on down Wasatch Ridge, dropped into Peck Canyon, and followed the canyon to the bottom at Lost Creek. We forded the creek and drove up the switchbacks of "the Wall," where the road climbs a thousand feet to the top of Blue Ridge. The evening was fading into the long twilight of the mountains in sum-

mer. Then I saw it—a male blue grouse in full breeding display, right on the side of the road. This was a countable look. The gods of birding, and Deseret Ranch, had answered.

My clients went home happy and, like most birders who visit the ranch, were destined to return. Or maybe they never really leave, as with one birder who wrote to me after her trip: "Loved, absolutely loved, my time on the ranch. Actually, I'm still there, only my body came back." ■



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