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Count finds 443 grouse

By Thomas Dewell

In the first winter survey of sage grouse in Jackson Hole, volunteers counted 443 of the birds Saturday.

Craighead Beringia South, a research institute in Kelly, organized the survey in cooperation with Grand Teton National Park and the National Elk Refuge. Sage grouse are considered to be declining in the West because of oil and gas development, grazing, predation and climate change.

Determining the number of birds in a particular area is one of the primary needs of sage grouse conservation. However, the traditional counts of leks – the spring mating sites – are only an index to the number of birds. There is no reliable method to determine overall sage grouse numbers from lek counts.

The Wyoming Department of Game and Fish, the agency that manag-

ers the sage grouse in the state and spearheads the research and habitat-enhancement efforts statewide, was pleased to see the numbers following Saturday's count.

"This is consistent with the recent upward trend observed during last spring's lek surveys," said Doug Brimeyer, Jackson wildlife biologist for Game and Fish. "The department conducts annual winter aerial surveys in conjunction with our big-game flights, but unfortunately, we haven't had the funding to survey some of the more isolated populations such as this."

Derek Craighead, who developed the idea for the count, said, "It was time to try something new in the approach to counting these birds, and we're very pleased that it worked out the way it did. It's a boost to the conservation of a very important natural heritage of this valley, of Wyoming and the West."