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 Audubon | WASHINGTON

# Audubon Washington Sagelands Strategy

2021-2024

# Sagebrush birds tell us it's time to act



The shrub-steppe is an iconic ecosystem of the western United States, an arid land of shrubs and grasses described by some as the “sagebrush sea.” In Washington State, shrub-steppe, including sagelands is the habitat of the imperiled Greater Sage-grouse, as well as declining populations of Sagebrush Sparrow and Ferruginous Hawk. Unfortunately, threats to this ecosystem are on the rise. Development pressure, invasive species, and increased instances of rangeland fire are threatening what little habitat remains. In 2020, 600,000 acres of shrub-steppe habitat burned in the Columbia Plateau of Eastern Washington, destroying critical breeding grounds for grouse and other shrub-steppe birds. Without immediate and aggressive action to rehabilitate these areas and improve ecosystem resilience, species like the Greater Sage-grouse are unlikely to survive in Washington.

Audubon Washington’s Sagelands Program leverages the power of birds—along with Audubon’s unique organizational structure—to pursue actions at the local, state, and federal level that benefit ecosystem health. We do this by bringing together the grassroots advocacy strength of our eight local Eastern Washington chapters with the policy, science, and conservation expertise of our state and national offices towards shared goals for shrub-steppe conservation. Our Sagelands strategy addresses urgent landscape-level conservation needs that will have a lasting impact on the well-being of wildlife, people, and the ecological health of the region.

## Birds and Habitat at Risk

Eighteen wildlife species that depend on shrub-steppe habitat are considered *Species of Greatest Conservation Need* in Washington. Two sagebrush species of conservation concern, the Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Sage-grouse, currently occupy just 3% and 8% of their historical ranges in Washington. Both species of grouse have recently been up-listed to *State Endangered* status.

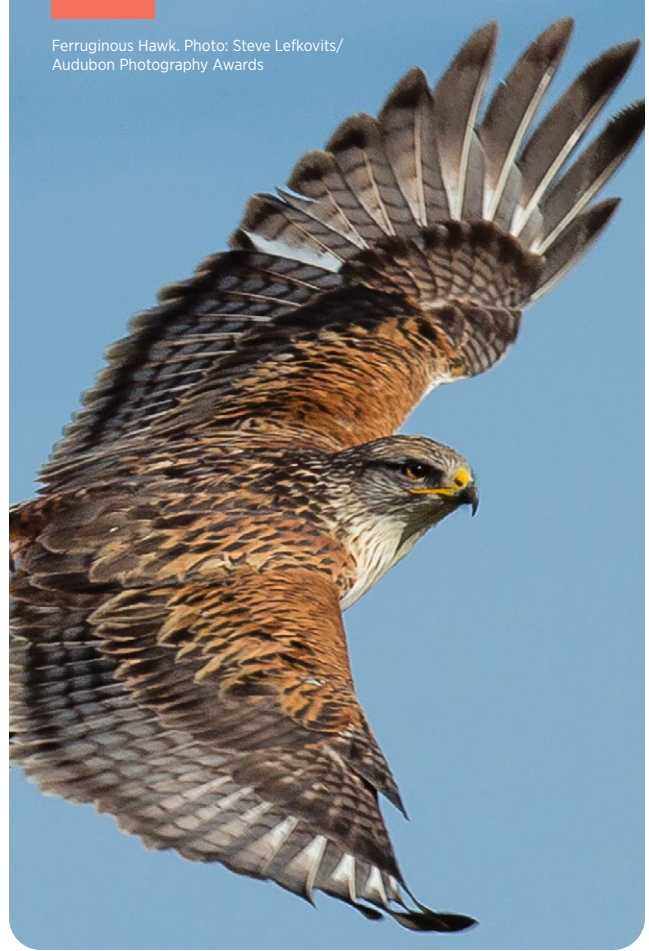
Since colonial settlement in the 1800s, shrub-steppe areas in the Columbia Plateau have largely been converted to agricultural production and fragmented by residential and urban development, resulting in a loss of over 80% of Washington’s historic shrub-steppe habitat. Furthermore, the limited habitat that remains is under constant threat from development, incompatible grazing practices, invasive species, and—increasingly—from wildfire. In recent years, the number of wildfires has increased, and the intervals between fires have shortened. The increased frequency of wildfires leaves insufficient time for sagebrush recovery, encouraging further encroachment by invasive species such as cheatgrass.

The increasing demand for large-scale clean energy poses both an opportunity and a threat. On the one hand, climate change poses a severe threat to North American birds and we must meet the state’s net zero climate goals as established by the 2019 Clean Energy

Transformation Act. However, the scale of the proposed solar facilities could significantly impact remaining shrub-steppe habitat without smart siting practices and permitting.

## Communities at Risk

Hotter, drier summers and recurring drought mean more fires and increasing challenges for agricultural producers and farmworkers. The 2020 fires tore through both sagebrush habitat and farming communities across Eastern Washington. At the same time that birds are finding it harder to survive, farmworkers and other outdoor laborers are at severe risk of health problems stemming from heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation. As fires become more frequent and more intense, entire communities may be facing existential risk. Fire also threatens tribal resources on ceded and un-ceded lands, threatening tribal community members' ability to fish, hunt, and gather food and provisions in usual and accustomed areas.



## Our Approach

Audubon Washington's priorities in the Columbia Plateau reflect the importance of local engagement and on-the-ground conservation efforts that are backed by science and driven by a vision for the well-being of birds and people. Our efforts in public-private partnerships, grassroots engagement, and science have been a major focus for the past decade. Wildfires over recent years have escalated the urgency of our work, while also elevating public attention to the issues, thereby creating opportunities for meaningful action. We are increasing our efforts to protect remaining shrub-steppe habitat from conversion and promote management practices that foster ecosystem health and resilience.

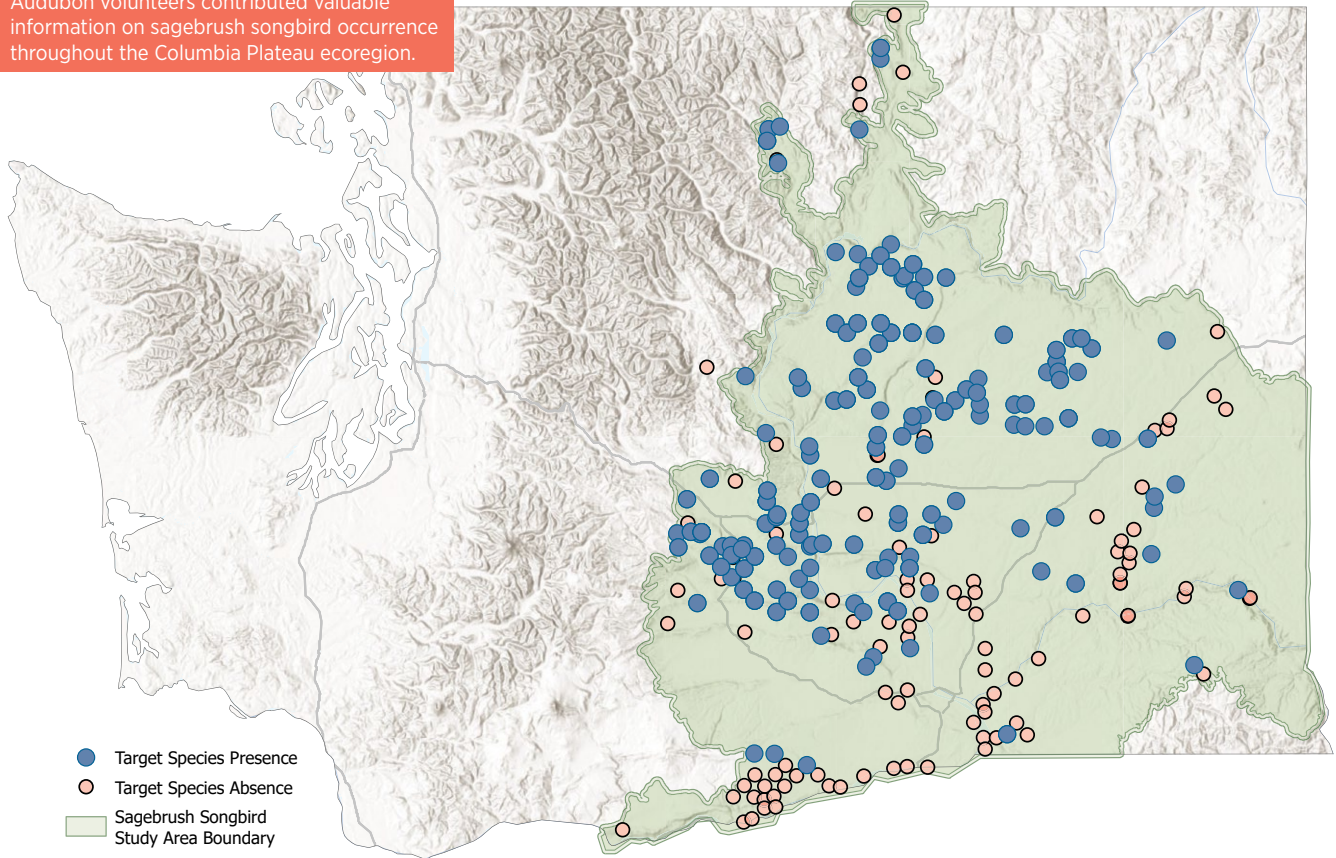
### Grounded in Science

The Sagebrush Songbird Survey was a 6-year community science project conducted by Audubon Washington, National Audubon Society, local Audubon chapters, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to address a critical gap

in knowledge of sagebrush songbird distributions in remaining shrub-steppe habitat areas. The project was a million-acre, landscape-level effort to document the presence of sagebrush and shrub-steppe species across a range of habitats — including both the larger tracts of intact habitat under state, federal, and tribal management, as well as the nearly 60% of remaining shrub-steppe habitat in Washington under private ownership.

We completed the study in 2019 and the results of this survey are now available for use in a variety of local and regional land-use planning tools, including the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool. Survey data have also been incorporated into the WDFW Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) database, a legally recognized source for best available science in our state. This sets the stage for the data to be more readily used in local and county-level decisions concerning the state Growth Management Act and regional scale planning efforts such as least conflict solar siting.

Audubon volunteers contributed valuable information on sagebrush songbird occurrence throughout the Columbia Plateau ecoregion.



WA State Parks GIS, Esri Canada, Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, Bureau of Land Management, EPA, NPS, Esri, USGS

The Survey results and associated species distribution models are a critical piece of scientific infrastructure for the urgent next steps to conserve and restore ecosystem health in this landscape.

### Strategic Partnerships

Audubon is a core partner in the public-private Arid Lands Initiative partnership (ALI). ALI is a group of public and private organizations that collaborate on management and conservation to achieve a shared vision, defined as “a viable, well-connected system of eastern Washington’s arid lands and related freshwater habitats, that sustain native plant and animal communities, and that support compatible local economies and communities.” ALI has developed a number of science products to inform landscape conservation. By integrating these products with Audubon’s sagebrush songbird data and other ecosystems values related to landscape resilience, we have created a strong platform for identifying and protecting priority places for conservation in the Columbia Plateau.

## 2021–2024 Priorities for Impact

Our success in addressing urgent landscape-level conservation needs over the next three years will have a lasting impact on the ecological health of the region, with important implications for wildlife and human well-being. Accordingly, our goal for the next three years is two-fold: to protect remaining high-quality shrub-steppe habitat and to promote ecosystem health and resilience to fire and invasive grasses. We will protect remaining intact shrub-steppe landscapes areas by continuing to build and broaden public and institutional support for policies, land-use decisions, and responsibly sited clean energy that avoids and minimizes impacts to shrub-steppe birds and habitat. We will improve on-the-ground conditions for people and shrub-steppe birds by developing a landscape-level strategy for fire resilience and expanding our capacity to better support and deliver private landowner stewardship incentive programs.

These are lofty ambitions, and to accomplish them we must build on the success of our recent efforts to expand public support for shrub-steppe conservation and grow additional staff capacity to deepen local partnerships and engagement, and deliver meaningful conservation outcomes for birds and people.

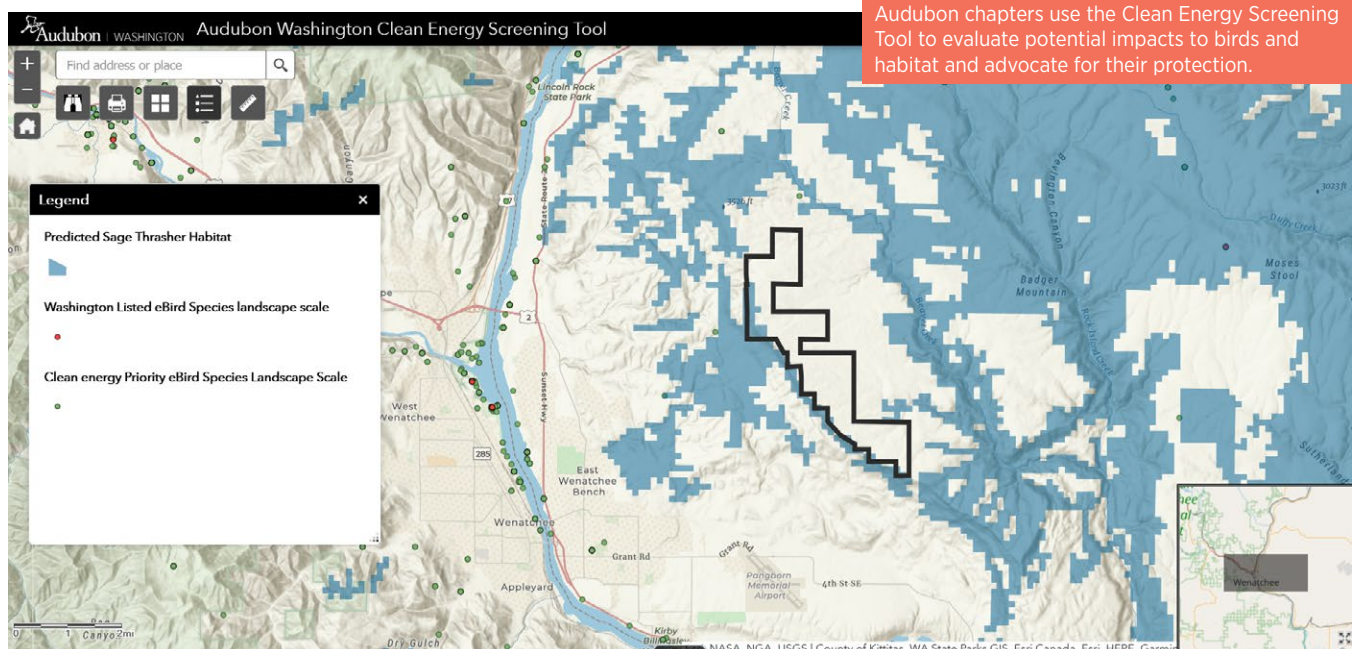
## Protect Remaining Intact Shrub-steppe Habitat from Conversion

### Utility-scale Solar Siting

In 2019, Audubon Washington helped pass the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA) and concluded our six-year songbird survey program. Since then, we've been working to leverage our songbird science to protect this important habitat as our state builds the solar energy needed to reach clean electricity goals. We successfully led a legislative effort to fund a program at Washington State University's Energy Program aimed at properly siting solar energy in the Columbia Plateau. This program will be an exemplar for future stakeholder-driven energy siting processes and will help mitigate conflict in our state's sunniest region. The least-conflict process kicks off in the summer of 2022, but in the meantime there is a pressing need to advocate for well-sited clean energy in the Columbia Plateau.

### Conservation Actions Underway in 2022

- Collaborate with Washington State University to initiate and participate in the least-conflict stakeholder process, encouraging strategic outreach focused on equity and inclusion.
- Collaborate with National Audubon's Clean Energy Initiative to empower local chapters with mapping tools and resources to provide science-based comments on clean energy project proposals, opposing those that threaten key habitat areas and encouraging strategic mitigation for projects that are less of a threat to sensitive species and landscape connectivity.
- Work with the Governor's office, state agencies, NGOs and key legislators to improve policies that govern the state's approach to rapidly siting, permitting, and building the clean energy necessary to meet our CETA goals while protecting and restoring important habitat for birds and other wildlife.
- Participate in energy facility siting working groups created by the legislature in 2021 with a special focus on promoting the incorporation of mapping tools that identify marginal lands for utility-scale solar and opportunities to have a more targeted, data-driven approach to project mitigation.



- Pursue policy opportunities to promote solar development in the built environment.

### Growth Management Act

Conversion and fragmentation of shrub-steppe has resulted in an 80% loss of historic shrub-steppe in Washington. Our state's Growth Management Act requires that counties develop and follow plans to preserve local critical areas, such as fish and wildlife habitat, and farmland.

Counties can opt into the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP), which uses financial incentives to voluntarily engage agricultural landowners in actions that protect critical areas. Public input and oversight in the designation and stewardship of critical areas is essential to ensure that VSP plans and policies are effective in protecting critical areas.

### Conservation Actions We'll Take with Additional Capacity

- Coordinate with our eight Eastern Washington chapters to ensure that important habitat areas for sagebrush songbirds are identified as critical

areas and meaningfully protected and stewarded under the State Growth Management Act's VSP framework.

- Serve on VSP Statewide Advisory Committee to represent environmental interests in review and approval of County work plans and progress reports.

## Support Ecosystem Health and Resilience

### Fire Resilience and Restoration

In 2021, we worked with chapter members to secure critical funding from the state legislature for post-fire landscape rehabilitation efforts and the development of a landscape-level strategy for fire resilience and ecosystem health. Today, we are working with WDFW and other shrub-steppe stakeholders to develop a landscape-scale strategy for fire resilience. With additional capacity we plan to establish and strengthen relationships with communities most at risk from fire so that we can better integrate their needs, priorities and concerns in our conservation strategies.





### Conservation Actions Underway in 2022

- Bring our expertise on avian science, policy, and landscape conservation to the table as a core leader in the stakeholder advisory group led by WDFW, resulting in a landscape-scale strategy for fire resilience and restoration.
- Use social media to elevate the visibility of the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to sagebrush wildfires.

### Conservation Actions We'll Take with Additional Capacity

- Collaborate with ALI partners to fund, direct and coordinate pre- and post-fire habitat investments and other conservation priorities across land ownership in the Columbia Plateau.
- Engage Eastern Washington chapter leaders in Audubon's How-to Guide for incorporating equity, diversity and inclusion in chapter partnerships, programs, and culture.
- Work with Audubon chapters to identify, establish and/or strengthen relationships with local organizations that serve communities most at risk from wildfire, including Black, Indigenous and People of Color led groups. Seek to integrate the needs, priorities and concerns of these communities into policy and conservation strategies.
- Work with NGO and agency partners to formulate and pursue a legislative agenda that proactively mitigates fire risk by addressing unprotected lands and invasive species issues.
- Explore opportunities for creative funding solutions at the state and federal level to direct funding and other resources to fire mitigation.

## Ecosystem Health

Over half of remaining shrub-steppe areas in Washington are on private lands, making private land owners critical partners in protecting and rebuilding ecosystem health in the Columbia Plateau. Audubon has a track record of working with public and private landowners and tribes in the region, building the foundation for collaborative efforts to advance habitat protection. With additional capacity, we will explore how Audubon can help secure funding and resources for on-the-ground conservation, stewardship and restoration activities.

### Conservation Actions We'll Take with Additional Capacity

- Re-engage the local tribal partners and private landowners that participated in the sagebrush songbird survey to share the results, setting the

stage for deeper partnership and engagement on tribal and private-land conservation opportunities. Identify potential opportunities for collaborative conservation and restoration actions.

- Work with National Audubon Society staff and federal decision-makers to lift caps on enrollment in USDA programs that contribute to conservation outcomes on private lands.
- Ensure that our science is integrated into WDFW's Wildlife Management Planning framework and that the most important habitat areas are prioritized for public grant funding and voluntary stewardship outreach strategies.
- Explore innovative, incentive-based approaches, such as the Audubon Conservation Ranching Initiative.

