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401 S. Carson Street  
Carson City, Nevada 89701-4747  
Office: (775) 684-1234  
Fax No.: (775) 684-4321  
[www.leg.state.nv.us](http://www.leg.state.nv.us)

# State of Nevada Assembly

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DEAR READER: the purpose of this paper is to help dispel the too often highly romanticized myths passing as history about early Nevada, and to provide an historical prospective about a bird species very likely to soon be placed on the endangered species list, the Sage Grouse. As an example of such mythmaking, the following is a quote from the book "Birds of the Great Basin" by Fred A. Ryser, Jr.

"The West was settled to the detriment of the Sage Grouse. Ranches, farms, towns, cities, roads, and other human developments were centered in the sagebrush zone...Springs, seepage areas, small streams, and wet meadows were often severely damaged by livestock and human usage...The Sage Grouse decreased in number and disappeared from parts of its former range; by the 1930's it was in serious difficulty...Since then it has made a comeback somewhat, as the abuse of public lands by livestock has been alleviated a bit."

This of course assumes high Grouse populations prior to the arrival of white man. As I will document in the future, Ryser and his fellow mythmakers have it backwards: Sage Grouse *thrived after the introduction of livestock and domestic agricultural practices*. They have declined in tandem with the Federal government's practice of systematically removing livestock and ranches from the public domain.

**SUMMARY:** As shown in part one, observations and sightings of Sage Grouse in early Nevada as recorded by the first explorers are nearly non-existent. As an additional sampling of Sage Grouse abundance or scarcity, I have recorded all of the journal references to Indian diet which as you will read are extensive and often highly detailed. Out of 65 references to diet, only a single case, by Odgen, of "sparingly scattered pheasants" in one location is the lone reference to Sage Grouse use as a food source by Indians.

By count I have broken down the Indian diet by frequency of occurrence as recorded by the explorers. First: plants, seeds and roots (22 times); second: rodents (14 times); third: fish (12 times); fourth: rabbits (7 times); fifth: reptiles (4 times); sixth: ducks (3 times) and insects (3 times); seventh: antelope (2 times), and sage grouse, (once).

Common sense would dictate a bird as large as a Sage Grouse, approximately the size of a domestic chicken, if present in any quantity, would have been a frequent and highly desirable food source. Their almost complete absence suggests they were uncommon, even rare, in pre-Caucasian Nevada. If Sage Grouse were abundant before white man's arrival, as some revisionists, the mythmakers, have alleged, where is the

evidence? Why nearly no mention by the explorers? Why only a single reference to the natives eating them?

As I will detail in a future paper, Sage Grouse became remarkably abundant within a couple of decades following the introduction of livestock and widespread agriculture. Ironically, livestock is supposedly one of the primary reasons for their alleged decline later – a premise entirely questionable especially for the Great Basin. Indeed, their period of greatest abundance corresponds closely with the period of early Nevada history when grazing was entirely unregulated.

I have also included all references to birds in general by the early explorers. Several of them were keen observers of the wildlife they saw. I do this to demonstrate that the absence of observations and the dearth of references about Sage Grouse are due to not seeing any, rather than simply ignoring bird life in general.

### **JEDEDIAH SMITH – 1827**

June 1, 1827, [At south end of Walker Lake] “As I was near the southern extremity of the lake...I went on a little further where there was several families encamped. They were fishing with nets very neatly made with fine meshes.”

June 10, [Near Belmont] “Having crossed two ranges of hills after dark I discovered a fire and steered toward it – and found an Indian squaw and 2 children who were of course much frightened. They appeared to be travelers having with them some water which they divided with us. I then for the first time saw scorpions prepared to eat.”

June 12, “In the course of the day I killed a hare. I mention this for in this country game is so scarce and wild it is a most hopeless task to kill anything.”

June 18, “...I fell in with some Indians 14 in number. The Indians gave me two small ground squirrels which we found somewhat better than horse meat. They likewise showed me a kind of water rush which they ate.”

June 20, “After encamping some Indians came to me. They gave me some squirrels...”

June 21, “All the Indians I have seen since leaving the [Walker] lake had been the same unintelligent kind of beings. Nearly naked having at most a scanty robe formed from the skin of the hare particular to this plain which is cut into narrow strips and interwoven with a kind of twine or cord made apparently from wild flax or hemp. They form a connecting link between the animal and intellectual creation and quite in keeping with the country in which they are located.”

### **PETER OGDEN – 1828 & 1829**

Nov. 4, 1828 - (near Orvada) “Indians are most numerous in this part of the country and their chief subsistence appears to be grass, roots and water fowl.”

Nov. 13, 1828 – “Six Indians paid us a visit, traded three beaver skins, at least the part of them. On inquiring what they had done with the remainder of the skins they pointed to their shoes and on examination I found they were all made of the skins of beaver...I apprehend if the river is not deep we shall find them scarce, as the natives in shallow water find no great trouble in destroying them.”

Nov. 19, 1828 – “As usual the banks of the river lined with Indian villages, at present all deserted...in the afternoon upwards of 150 Indians paid us a visit, poor miserable looking wretches with scarcely any covering, and the greater part without bows or arrows or any weapon of defense. The only thing I could observe that does them credit their being fat and in good condition.”

Dec. 16, 1828 – "...descending into the plain, we discovered three tents of Indians. We could only procure one dog to add to our provisions; these poor creatures were men, women and children with the exception of small hare skin blankets entirely naked...their stock of provisions appears to be the reverse of plentiful, and consists of grass which our horses can ill spare them and a few pheasants and hares which are scattered sparingly on the hills we crossed over."

NOTE: *This is the only reference to Sage Grouse as a source of food for Indians in all of the explorer journals.* I am assuming the "pheasants" he mentions were Sage Grouse.

April 3, 1829 – "I presumed we traveled this day no less than 30 miles and I may truly add over a most barren country, and with the exception of one hare, not a bird or an animal did I see."

April 9, 1829 – "We had not traveled more than eight miles when we reached unknown river [Humboldt] and on reaching it found thirty Indians employed in fishing salmon trout, about eight inches in length, remarkably fine. They gave us all they had, about 15.

June 2, 1829 – "As far as I could observe their [the Indians near the Humboldt sink] sole subsistence, particularly those in the upper quarter, appears to be fish of a small kind, strongly resembling carp; they also collect a quantity of water rushes which they dry and lay by for winter. To this may be added a few hares; the latter appear scarce. The above forms their total support, as for roots the country does not yield any."

June 9, 1829 – "We came...on a party of Indians...these poor wretches were going on the plains, to many it will appear almost incredible that human beings can live on grass, but it is a fact, this now the fourth time in different places I have seen them[subsisting on grass]. In regard to their food one advantage they have in having abundance; it would require I presume many years to reconcile my trappers to such food."

**BIRDS** June 1, 1829 – "...in wild fowl, although the country is well adapted for them, not over numerous. Pelicans are the reverse...As for birds they are numerous and among the number the whip-poor-will, the first I have seen on the west side of the mountains..." [Near Humboldt sink].

### **JOHN CHARLES FREMONT – 1843, 1844, 1845**

General report, written in 1847, under chapter "Great Basin": "But few Indians are found, and those in the lowest state of human existence...except about the lakes stocked with fish, which become the property and resort of a small tribe."

Nov. 1845 "Traveling along the foot of a mountain...we discovered a light smoke rising from a ravine, and riding quietly up, found a single Indian standing before a sage brush fire over which was hanging a small earthen pot, filled with sagebrush squirrels. Another bunch of squirrels lay near it and close by were his bow and arrows. He was...naked as a worm."

Nov. 1845 "We had made our supper on the antelope [Kit Carson killed] and were lying around the fire[at night]...Carson was lying on his back with his pipe in his mouth, his hands under his head and his feet to the fire, suddenly exclaimed, half rising and pointing to the other side of the fire, "Good God! Look there!" In the blaze of the fire, peering over her skinny, crooked hands, which shaded her eyes from the glare, was standing an old woman apparently eighty years of age, nearly naked, her grizzly hair hanging down over her face and shoulders. She had thought it a camp of her own people and had already begun to talk and gesticulate, when her open mouth was paralyzed with fright, as she saw the faces of the whites...hunger and cold soon dispelled fear and she made us understand that she had been left by her people at the spring to die, because

she was very old and could gather no more seeds and was no longer any good for anything. We gave her immediately about a quarter of the antelope.” [East slope of Toiyabe Range].

“In this region [the Great Basin] the condition of the Indian is nearly akin to that of the lower animals. Here they are really *wild men*. (Emphasis Fremont’s). In this wild state the Indian lives to get food. This is his business. In the Great Basin, where nearly naked he traveled on foot and lived in the sage brush, I found him in the most elementary form...the occupation of the women was in gleaning from the earth everything of vegetable or insect life; the occupation of the men was to kill every animal they could for food...”

Dec. 28, 1843 – “...we found two huts, open at the top and loosely built of sage...eight or ten appeared to live together, under the same little shelter; and they seemed to have no other subsistence than the roots or seeds they might have stored up, and the hares which live in the sage...Herding together among bushes, and crouched almost naked over a little sage fire, using their instinct only to procure food, they may be considered, among human beings, the nearest approach to the mere animal creation.” [Near High Rock Canyon, Washoe County]

Jan. 15, 1844 – “An Indian brought in a large fish to trade, which we had the inexpressible satisfaction to find was a salmon trout; we gathered around him eagerly. The Indians were amused at our delight, and immediately brought in numbers...they were of extraordinary size...generally from two to four feet in length. They doubtless form the subsistence of these people, who hold the fishery in exclusive possession. These Indians were fat, and appeared to live an easy and happy life. I remarked that one of them [the Indians in possession of the fishery] gave a fish to the Indian we had first seen, which he carried to his family. To them it was probably a feast; being of the Digger tribe, and having no share in the fishery, living generally on seeds and roots.” (Mouth of the Truckee at Nixon, Pyramid Lake.)

Jan. 16, 1844 – “We saw a number of dams which the Indians had constructed to catch fish.” [On the Truckee by Nixon].

Jan. 24, 1844 – “He [an older Indian] brought with him in a little skin bag a few pounds of the seeds of a pine tree, which today we saw for the first time [Pinion Pine]. We followed the river for only a short distance...the Indian made us comprehend (a dam) had been built to catch salmon trout.”

Jan. 25, 1844 – “A party of 12 Indians came down from the mountains to trade pine nuts...These seemed now to be the staple of the country...we ascended a long ridge...where the Indians had waylaid and killed an antelope.”

Jan. 29, 1844 – “The Indians informed us that at certain seasons they have fish in their waters...for the remainder of the year they live upon the pine nuts...At present, they were presented to us as a whole people living upon this simple vegetable.” (Walker River near California State line).

Jan. 31, 1844 – “We had scarcely lighted our fires, when the camp was crowded with nearly naked Indians; some of them were furnished with long nets in addition to bows, and appeared to have been out on the sage hills to hunt rabbits. These nets were perhaps 30 to 40 feet long...made from a kind of wild hemp. Indians brought in 2 or 3 rabbits, which were purchased from them.” [Near Topaz Lake].

**BIRDS** – General report, under the chapter “Great Basin” written in 1847: “Sterility...is the absolute characteristic of the valleys between the mountains – no wood, no water, no grass; the gloomy *Artemisia* the prevailing shrub – no animals, except the hares, which shelter in these

shrubs, and the fleet and timid antelope...No birds are seen on the plains, and few on the mountains.”

### **EDWARD KERN – 1845**

Dec.8, 1845 (at Walker Lake). “The Indians are of a much lower grade than any I have yet seen. They are however very friendly. I visited some of their huts near the mouth of the river. They had some very pretty decoy ducks, made from the skin of those birds, neatly stretched over a bulrush float. There were 4 or 5 old women hovering over a fire of a few willow twigs of six or eight inches in length. I thought if the personification of witches ever existed, these were of them. Their withered bodies, almost entirely naked and emaciated, their faces smeared with dirt and tar [pitch], the dull, idiotic stare of their eyes, trembling from cold and dread of our intentions towards them, rendered them to me the most pitiable objects I had ever seen. A couple of children, nestled close to the fire, showed more the signs of wonder in their countenances than fear. Some of the children, notwithstanding the hardships of their lives, only dependent on grass seeds and the few fish they can catch, any large game being unknown hereabouts, have really lively and interesting countenances; but the expression leaves them with youth; their future, being one of continued privation, soon dulls the light of the eye...”

Dec. 14, 1845 – “The boys brought in some roots they found near a couple of Indian huts...The root was some water plant of good flavor. They were plaited together in ropes, something after the manner of doing up onions at home.”

### **CAPTAIN JAMES SIMPSON – 1859**

“These Indians [Goshoots] live in a barren and, in winter, on account of its altitude, a cold climate, and the consequence is that they are obliged to live entirely on rabbits, rats, lizards, snakes, insects, rushes, roots, grass seeds, etc. They are more filthy than beasts, and live in habitations which, summer and winter, are nothing more than circular enclosures about three feet high, made of the...sagebrush...serve only to break off the wind. Anything like an enclosed lodge or wick-e-up of any sort I did not see among them. Their dress, winter and summer, is a rabbit skin tunic or cape, which comes down just below the knee...we found along our routine a number of the Digger tribe, who said they were of Sho-Sho-Nee origin...like the Goshoot, are of a low type and live and dress in the same way.”

“The Washoes...are destitute of all the necessaries to make life even desirable. They are peaceable, but indolent. In the summer they wander around the shores of Lake Bigler [Tahoe] principally subsisting on the fish found in it. In the winter they lay about in the Artemisia...subsisting on a little grass seed.”

“...an Indian came in from his days hunt. His largest game was the rat, of which he had a number stuck around under the string of his waist. These were soon put by the old woman on the fire, and the hair scorched; this done, she rubbed off the crisped hair...pulled out the entrails. From these, pressing out the offal, she threw the animal, entrails and all, into the pot. The rats are caught by a deadfall of a heavy stone.”

“I noticed a species of the food they eat, and which is cake from seeds and roots which they get in the bottoms. I tasted it, but it looking precisely like a cake of cattle-ordure, and having anything but an agreeable taste, I soon disgorged it... These Indians appear in worse condition than the meanest of the animal creation. Their garment is only a rabbit skin cape, and the children go naked...At camp the feast we gave them made them fairly laugh for joy. Near our

camp I visited one of their dens or wick-e-ups...The offal around, and in a few feet of it, was so offensive as to cause my stomach to retch and cause a hasty retreat. Mr. Bean told me the truth when he spoke of the immense piles of feces voided by these Indians, about their habitations, caused doubtless by the vegetable, innutritious character of the food.”

“I noticed the women carrying on their backs monstrous willow baskets filled with a sort of carrot root, which they dig in the marsh, and cacti, both of which they use for food.”

“A great deal of game, such as antelope and aquatic fowl, is said to abound in this region [Ruby Valley] and deer and mountain sheep are also seen.”

“Pass places where the Indians have dammed up the rills to cause them to flood the habitations or holes of badger, gophers, rats, etc, and thus they secure them for their flesh and skins.”

“There are three of these Indians...they are very talkative and lively. Eat rats, lizards, grass seed, etc, like the Go-shoots. The guide says he saw them, after throwing the rats in the fire, and thus roasting them, eat them, entrails and all, the children in particular being very fond of the juices...the old man represents that a number of his people died last winter from starvation and cold.”

“Some 15 or 20 Diggers have come into camp. They are the most lively, jocose Indians I have seen...say two rats make a meal. Like rabbits better than rats, and antelope better than either, but cannot get the latter.”

“An old Digger has visited our camp...I asked him if his country was a good one. He said it was. I asked him why. Because, he said, it had a great many rats.”

“Some Digger Indians he met had kindly offered him three fat rats, but as they had been roasted with entrails and offal unremoved, he said he did not feel hungry enough to accept their generous hospitality.”

“On reaching our camping place, which I called the Middle Gate, saw a naked Indian stretched out on the rocks...I counted 27 rats and one lizard lying about him, which he had killed for food.”

“Carson Lake...Curlew, pelican, and ducks and other aquatic birds frequent the locality, and the lake is filled with fish. A number of Pi-utes, some two dozen, live near our camp, and I notice they have piles of fish lying about drying, principally chubs and millet. They catch them with a seine...their habitation consists of flimsy sheds, made of rushes...the decoy ducks they use on the lake to attract the live ducks are perfect in form and fabric, and I have obtained a couple for the Smithsonian Institute.”

“Some Pi-utes from Walker’s Lake have come into camp to sell or trade salmon-trout...the largest they have weighs about 20 pounds.”

“There are several families of Pi-utes at this Middle Gate, collecting grass seed, which they separate from the husks by first rubbing the hands lightly under stones and then winnow, by throwing it up in the wind. Afterward they convert it into a flour by rubbing it by the hand between stones. I notice they use a variety of seeds in making flour.”

**BIRDS** – “Along the valley...a stream runs...curlew ducks and other aquatic birds frequent it.” [Steptoe Valley].

“Sand hill cranes, Curlews and other marsh birds abound in the valley and antelopes are seen in the distance.”[Ruby Valley]

“Many signs of sage hen and antelope in the valley.” [Kobah Valley]

“...coupled with the bright, bracing morning air, and, at times, twittering of birds, make our morning departure from camp very pleasing.”

“In consequence of the number of swallows which build their nests in its walls, I call it Swallow Canyon.” [Devil’s Gate, Eureka]

“...are groves of tall cedars, birds frequent these groves, and make the air resonant with their music.”

“The twittering of the birds we found here also more resonant and delightful than in any other locality. There is a bird in the mountains a little larger than the Jay, and of a deeper blue color that utters an impudent screaming note...”

**CONCLUSION:** Sage grouse were uncommon before white man arrived in the Great Basin. Populations today still exceed what was found here upon white contact. Listing them as “endangered” when they are probably returning to their historical low levels is unjustified.