



Best BETS

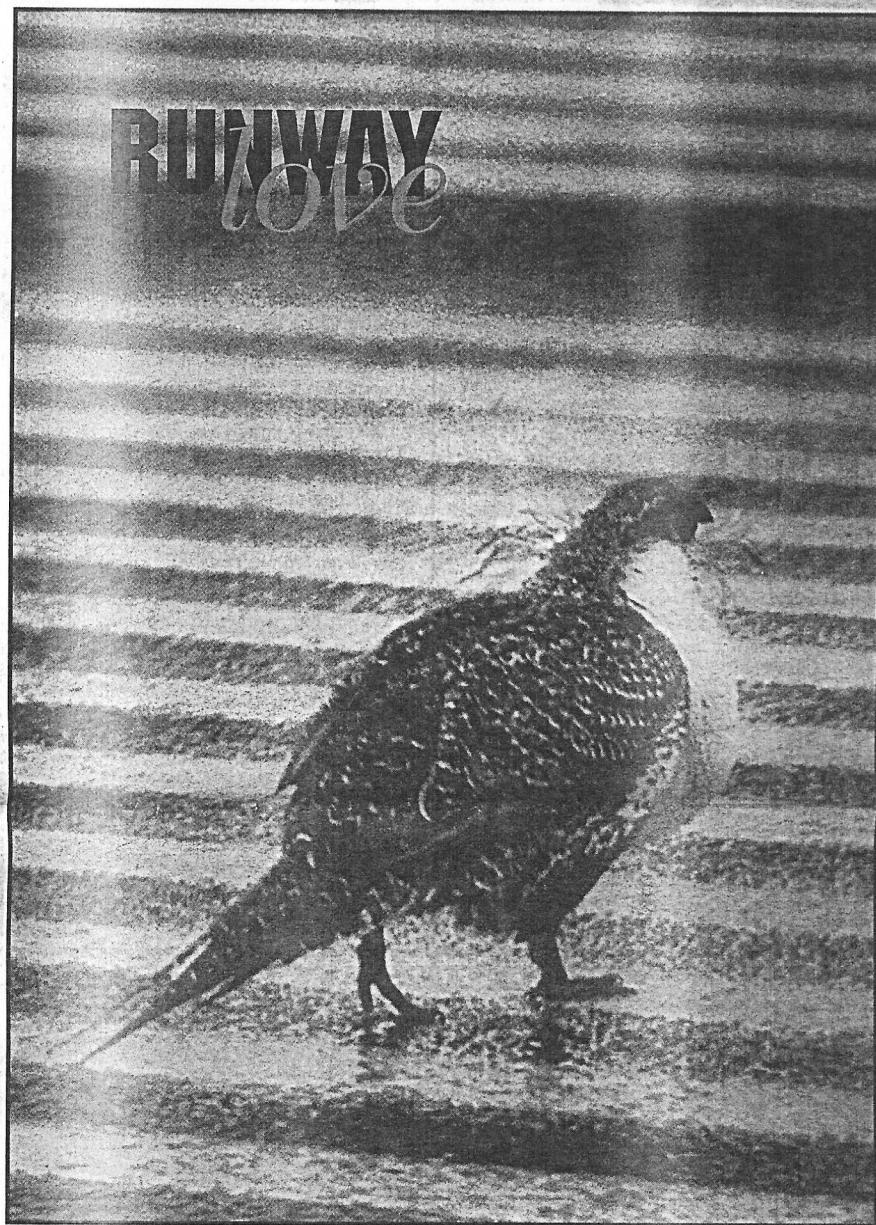
■ **A swarthy duo.** Swarthy Solo Master Bob Greenspan is no longer going it alone. He is pooling his talents with powerful harp player Jeff Newsom in a new band called Greenhouse Effect. The band's name came about because Greenspan and Newsom actually began playing together in a greenhouse. Both bluesmen have performed at many well-known venues. See page 3.



Mouse on Mars cast members

■ **High (school) tech.** Jackson Hole High School actors will perform a comedy called *Mouse on Mars*, about a tiny, backwards country beating the superpowers to the fourth planet. A dazzling array of video and other special effects designed by students heighten the play's satire, demonstrating the fallibility of technology. See page 6.

■ **Nothing fishy.** Herman Melville may have argued that the whale is a fish, but the success of Barbara Novak's new book, *The Art of the Whale*, is a testament to the enduring appeal of the story.



Cleared for take-off or landing on strip No. 1, a male grouse struts along the asphalt.

*At the airport,
courting grouse
let their feelings
runway with
them.*

By Alison Gregor

At 5:30 a.m., a small group of people was assembled on the tarmac at Jackson Hole Airport. They were not there to guide with signal lights small aircraft as they approached what is considered to be a treacherous runway.

They were there to observe the activities of an even smaller aircraft: the sage grouse.

That is, as soon as the sun rose.

The airport is home to one of Wyoming's 100 leks, or sage grouse breeding grounds. The lek lies at the northern end of the airport runway, and a Park Service guide, Susan Kelly, had led the group to a yellow line about 100 feet from breeding activities.

Continuous whooshing and plopping noises, sounding something like soda pop being poured from a bottle, and made by male sage grouse, were the only indication anything more than miles of sagebrush lie in front of us.

We tiptoed along the yellow line, set up small telescopes on tripods and focused binoculars on nothing. Kelly provided background about the birds.

"Believe it or not, they aren't afraid of the big silver birds that land here, but they are afraid of us," she whispered. "The reason we're out here so early is because this is the only time

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Earth Day '95 promises earthy bands, belly dancers

■ **Grassroots environmental activism takes hold in Teton County.**

year in Driggs, it plans to organize more formally this year, Leusch said. Proceeds from the Earth Day celebration will enable it to take an active role in the community.



RUNWAY LOVE

Continued from cover

they do this, though sometimes they'll be out here at sunset — there are no hard and fast rules with wildlife."

Wyoming has one of the country's largest sage grouse populations, also called sage hens or prairie hens, because much of the state is covered with sagebrush. About 90 percent of the sage grouse's diet is sagebrush and other foliage; the other 10 percent consists of insects.

There was the sudden roar of a plane approaching, and a strobe light hit the lek. Twentieth century technology erupted on the scene with the subtlety of a stroboscopic disco, but the birds appeared undisturbed. As the plane taxied, Kelly explained it's not certain whether the lek or the airport came first.

"While the sage grouse nest in areas covered in sagebrush, they breed in areas opened up by old corrals or salt lakes or maybe even the airport," she said. "This is so they can see one another...Grazing and other land uses appear to be compatible with sage grouse habitation because land is left open for breeding."

The strobe gone, we continued to peer into the murky distance. White crescents, weaving in and out, became apparent before a backdrop of the Tetons — the light of the full moon reflected off the pendulous white throat sacs of the male grouse.

"The plumage of the male grouse, when it is in full dress in April, is much more fantastic than that of the female," Kelly said. "The whooshing noise is created when their long wings brush against the shorter feathers on their neck...The plopping is caused by an expansion of the muscles in their esophagus."



A flurry of wings occurs as two males battle for dominance at the grouse mating grounds.

As the sun finally spread its rays over the horizon, about 13 male sage grouse come into view, though their more camouflaged female counterparts were still almost invisible.

The mating ritual of the cock sage grouse begins when it lifts and fans its black tail, surrounding its head with its tail like the sun's rays. The cock then runs forward three or four steps and swells its chest, sometimes until its head almost disappears in a roll of flesh and feathers. The performance is repeated 12 to 15 times a minute.

At about 6:05 a.m., the show was fully under way. Seven dun hens were grouped on the gravel at the edge of the tarmac, loosely surrounding the polygamous dominant male. Several "subcocks" strutted along the perimeter of the lek, about the size of an average room in a house, acting as sen-

Grouse Strut

Ranger naturalists in Grand Teton National Park will lead two more grouse-observing sessions, at 5:30 a.m. this Saturday and Sunday at the Jackson Hole Airport. Reservations can be made by calling the Moose Visitor Center at 739-3399.

tries. Other cocks performed their mating dance, perhaps preparing to challenge the dominant male.

A few minutes later, one did. The dominant male sprinted about 10 feet after the potential usurper — a bluff charge. The two duelers slowly circled one another, and a brief tussle ensued as one leapt.

"In most cases, the subcocks will not try to breed, but sometimes they'll try to challenge the dominant male," Kelly said. "Up in the

park, we've found blood splatters and broken feathers where these challenges have taken place."

The male sage grouse, especially, expends much energy on the elaborate mating ritual. While the female ultimately makes the choice of a mate, the male must struggle to pass on his genes.

"Only the bigger and more expressive males get to pass on their genes," Kelly said.

We didn't see any of the grouse actually mate, but Kelly described the process, which is rather anticlimactic (for non-grouse observers).

"The female squats in front of the male, they flutter for a moment, and it's a done deal," she said.

As for the birds' shyness, Kelly said, "Perhaps they don't like us in their bedrooms — it probably causes performance anxiety."



A sage hen (center) waits to see which of her two flanking suitors will put on the better show.



Early morning observers at the lek.

NEWS PHOTOS / GARTH DOWLING