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# Interspace/Undercanopy Foraging Patterns of Beef Cattle in Sagebrush Habitats

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## Abstract

Forage selection patterns of cattle in sagebrush (*Artemisia* L.) communities are influenced by a variety of environmental and plant-associated factors. The relative preference of cattle for interspace versus under-sagebrush canopy bunchgrasses has not been documented. Potential preferences may indirectly affect habitat for sage-grouse and other ground-nesting birds. Our objectives were to investigate grazing patterns of cattle with respect to undercanopy (shrub) and interspace tussocks, determine the influence of cattle grazing on screening cover, and relate shrub morphology to undercanopy grazing occurrence. Eighteen-day replicated trials were conducted in the summers of 2003 and 2004. Findings suggest cattle initially concentrate grazing on tussocks between shrubs, and begin foraging on tussocks beneath shrubs as interspace plants are depleted. Grazing of undercanopy grass tussocks was negligible at light-to-moderate utilization levels (<40% by weight). Grass tussocks under spreading, umbrella-shaped shrub canopies were less likely ( $P < 0.001$ ) to be grazed than those beneath erect, narrow canopies. Horizontal screening cover decreased ( $P < 0.001$ ) with pasture utilization. At the trial's end, removal of 75% of the herbaceous standing crop induced about a 5% decrease in screening cover in all strata from ground level to 1 m with no differences among strata ( $P = 0.531$ ). This implied that shrubs constituted the majority of screening vegetation. Our data suggest that conservative forage use, approaching 40% by weight, will affect a majority (about 70%) of interspace tussocks and a lesser proportion (about 15%) of potential nest-screening tussocks beneath sagebrush. Probability of grazing of tussocks beneath shrubs, however, is also affected by shrub morphology. These findings will help managers design grazing programs in locales where habitat for ground nesting birds is a concern.

## Resumen

El patrón de selección del forraje del ganado en comunidades arbustivas de *Artemisia* L. tiene influencia de unos factores asociados a la planta y otros ambientales. La preferencia relativa del ganado por gramíneas en inter espacios de arbustivas comparado con aquellos que se localizan debajo de los arbustos no ha sido documentada. La preferencia potencial puede afectar indirectamente el hábitat del urogallo y otras aves que anidan en la superficie del suelo. Los objetivos de este estudio fueron investigar los patrones de pastoreo del ganado con respecto a manchones de gramíneas que se localizan debajo de los arbustos y el espacio entre ellos. También se determinó la influencia del pastoreo del ganado sobre la cobertura vegetal relacionando la morfología del arbusto con la ocurrencia del pastoreo debajo del mismo. Se hicieron ensayos repetidos de 18 días en el verano de 2003 y 2004. Los resultados sugieren que el ganado se concentra inicialmente en el pasto entre los arbustos y comienza a pastorear debajo de los mismos en la medida que se agotan las plantas entre los espacios. La cantidad de macollos debajo de los arbustos fue insignificante con niveles de utilización ligera y moderada (< 40% por peso). Los macollos, debajo de arbustos con forma de sombrilla, fueron menos susceptibles ( $P < 0.001$ ) de pastorear que aquellos localizados debajo de arbustos erguidos y estrechos. La cobertura horizontal disminuyó ( $P < 0.001$ ) con la utilización del pasto. Al finalizar el estudio, la remoción del 75% de la producción forrajera indujo una disminución del 5% de la cobertura vegetal en todos los estratos desde el nivel del suelo hasta 1 m, aunque no se detectaron diferencias entre estratos ( $P = 0.531$ ). Esto implicó que los arbustos constituyeron la mayoría de vegetación estudiada. Nuestros datos sugieren que el uso conservador del forraje, cerca del 40%, en base a peso, afecta la mayoría (cerca de 70%) de los manchones y en menor proporción (cerca de 15%) de los manchones potenciales para anidar debajo del arbusto. La probabilidad de pastoreo de manchones de zacates debajo de los arbustos se afecta por la morfología del arbusto. Estos resultados son de utilidad para el diseño de programas de manejo del pastoreo a nivel local donde existe la preocupación por el hábitat para aves que anidan en la superficie del suelo.

**Key Words:** bunchgrass, forage selection, grazing behavior, ground nesting birds, sage-grouse

## INTRODUCTION

Caespitose grasses in the northern Great Basin occur in interspaces and beneath canopies of sagebrush (*Artemisia* L.) with no reported spatial trend or pattern. In these communities, forage selection by cattle is affected by plant availability and bunchgrass structure (Ganskopp et al. 1992; Ganskopp and Rose 1992), and at larger scales, geospatial characteristics like slope, aspect, topography, and distance from water affect

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