

Species Profile...

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Lesser Prairie Chickens in the Panhandle



It was daybreak on the prairie at Steve Rader's ranch in the Texas Panhandle near the town of Canadian. My wife and I rode with Rader in his truck across a rolling prairie that stretched like an ocean from horizon to horizon. We were on the lookout for the lesser prairie-chicken, an uncommon bird that's uncommonly exciting to watch.

It was overcast and windy, not the most favorable conditions for finding prairie-chickens. However, Rader had previously staked out their booming grounds.

He said, "Look! There they are over on that ridge."

At first, we could only see the silhouettes of roosters strutting along the short turf of the ridge. As the sky lightened with the dawn, we began to have a clearer view of the birds. Nevertheless, my wife fretted because the heavily overcast sky made photographing

the birds difficult.

Rader inched the truck within 25 feet of the roosters. We could see their pale, grayish brown color that matches the tan-brown grasses where they live. We noticed delicate fine barring running laterally across the under and upper parts of their bodies.

In courtship display, called booming, the roosters erect elongated neck feathers that look like miniature antelope horns. There's a patch of red-orange bare skin on each side of their neck that bellows in and out like twin red balloons.

The roosters bluff and charge at each other, stamping their feet hard enough on the ground to make an audible drumming sound. They leap up in the air as though they were jumping on a trampoline (to use Rader's words). Their vocalizations have a sweet resonate tenor that sounds to me like big droplets of water falling into a small pond.

Their antics on the lek are part of an age-old ritual to establish dominance and attract a female. The females, or hens, normally hang out in the grassy clumps surrounding the lek.

Soon, we saw four hens saunter right in front of the dancing roosters. The hens didn't have the flashy feathers of the males, but were nonetheless, attractive with their soft brown coloring and dark neck markings.

I thought about the plight of the lesser prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*), a member of the grouse family. Like its cousin, the greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) its numbers have severely declined over the last 100 years. In the Houston area, the Attwater's race of the greater prairie-chicken is nigh to extinction.

Numbers of lesser prairie-chickens exceeded three million back in the 1890s, with perhaps two million present in Texas. They

ranged over the grasslands of the Great and Rolling Plains of North America. Today, there remain less than six thousand birds in the plains with three to four thousand in the Texas Panhandle.

The decline of the lesser prairie-chicken occurred concurrently with agricultural alteration of the prairies. Large farms altered the prairie landscape by displacing native grasslands with cultivated fields. Early ranchers allowed cattle to over graze the grasses. The drought of the 1930s decimated the land.

Wholesale aerial spraying of herbicides and insecticides killed off native grasses and grasshoppers, things important to the survival of lesser prairie chickens.

However, modern ranching and farming practices in the eastern Panhandle allow native grasses and shrubs to return to the plains. Hence, there is currently a growing population of lesser prairie-chickens in that area. Hemphill County, where the town of Canadian is located, hosts the greatest concentrations of lesser prairie-chickens in North America.

Ranchers like Jim Bill Anderson have led the way in modern agricultural practices that have restored the native prairies and consequently facilitated a robust population of lesser prairie-chickens. Anderson's Frying Pan Ranch has upwards of 26 breeding leks where lesser prairie-chickens boom freely every spring.

Anderson says, "There's not a conflict between the economics of ranching and creating prairie-chicken habitat. We're basically grass farmers. I tell people that if you can increase your forage production rate with the same fixed costs, it's a lot better for wildlife and it's sure a lot better for ranchers."

Having had extensive conversations with Anderson and Rader, I can assure you that the ranchers around Canadian love their land and the critters that live there. I can also tell you that no birdwatcher I've ever seen gets more excited about watching lesser prairie-chickens than ranchers like Anderson and Rader.

Our final views of the prairie chickens were at Anderson's ranch. We joined a group of birdwatchers at 4 o'clock on a chilly Saturday morning. Many of our friends from Houston were there along with other people from across the state.

Anderson led us to a lek on his ranch. We then piled into a cattle trailer parked beside the lek to conceal ourselves because booming chickens are spooked by human presence. It was cold, but the wind was light, the sky was clear, and the nearly full moon hovered over the western horizon. My wife was ecstatic because she knew the rising sun would illuminate the birds for stunning photography. I counted close to 30 roosters dancing on the lek. The scene reminded me of something akin to a Broadway show. Nearly 30 roosters all drumming the ground, inflating their red patches, and intoning their telltale bubbling sound made for a theatrical event that only nature can provide.

John Schwetman, an English professor at Sam Houston State University, said, "The courtship display is fascinating. To sit there and watch the roosters and say to yourself, they all look alike but somehow they know that this guy is better than that guy...it's amazing."

Remelle Farrah, President of Texas Prairie Rivers Region, Inc., invites you to visit the beautiful ranches near Canadian and watch the unforgettable courtship display of the lesser prairie-chickens. Call her at 806-323-5397.

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