



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Lesser Prairie-Chicken

Flap-flap, then glide. A lesser prairie-chicken flies over a sand dune, a shadow on the flat landscape. In spring mornings and evenings, these birds display a colorful ritual of courtship, the males puffing out air sacs on their throats and spreading their wings while they strut.

Lesser prairie-chickens (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) are natives of the eastern New Mexico plains. These birds have wings about 8 inches long and tails about 4 inches. Adults weigh about 2 pounds. Once abundant, their numbers declined in the decades around 1900 as their native rangeland was converted to cropland. Attempts to trap and transplant birds during 1932 to 1947 were unsuccessful. No hunting was allowed during this time. Numbers fluctuated, largely in response to periods of good precipitation and periods of drought.

Sufficient numbers allowed hunting in 1948 and 1949 in Roosevelt and Lea counties, but another decline prohibited hunting from the early 1950s until 1958. Populations recovered through the 1980s, and hunting was resumed. A significant downturn began in 1989 and the hunting season was closed in 1996.

Lesser prairie-chickens occur in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas, as well as New

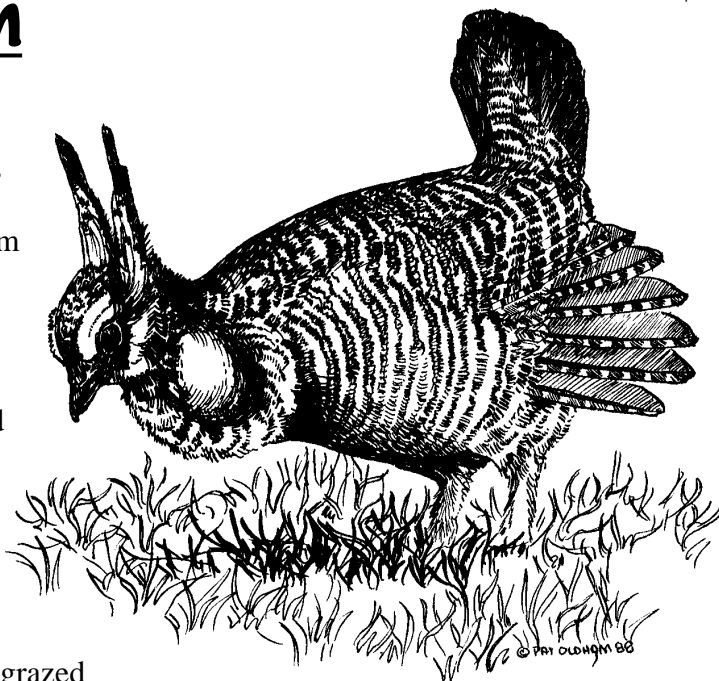
Mexico.

Throughout this area, they have disappeared from over 90 percent of their former range. Conversion of rangeland to cropland and other uses has been a major cause of the decline.

Also, lesser prairie-chicken habitat must be grazed conservatively in order to maintain critical nesting habitat. In New Mexico, these birds seem to have disappeared from their former range in Union, Harding and Quay counties. Populations are also much reduced in southeast New Mexico.

The Department of Game and Fish purchased restoration areas beginning in 1940. There are 20 areas in Lea, Roosevelt and Chaves counties, totaling 21,000 acres. Public hunting is allowed for species with open seasons. The areas are also open to public viewing. Photographers wanting good pictures of mating rituals are advised to get to the "booming grounds", or "lek sites" before sunrise, and to use a blind to conceal themselves. April is the best month.

There are also prairie-chick-



ens on U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands in southeast New Mexico. However, 74 percent of the occupied prairie-chicken range is privately owned or state leased land. Prairie-chickens remain most abundant near the small towns of Milnesand and Crossroads.

The main prairie-chicken habitat is shinnery oak/grassland. The presence of small amounts of agricultural land may enhance habitat, but prairie-chickens have disappeared from areas with more than about 37 percent of the land in tilled fields. These birds eat insects, buds, leaves and flowers during spring, summer and fall. Young chicks are especially dependent upon insects. The diet includes grain, seeds, buds and

shinnery oak acorns in late fall and winter.

In spring, males assemble and display on the booming grounds where vegetation is sparse. A male will inflate air sacs on each side of this neck. These sacs turn a yellowish red, and males give a booming sound as they dip their wings to the ground and strut. Hens are attracted by the displaying males, and breeding occurs on

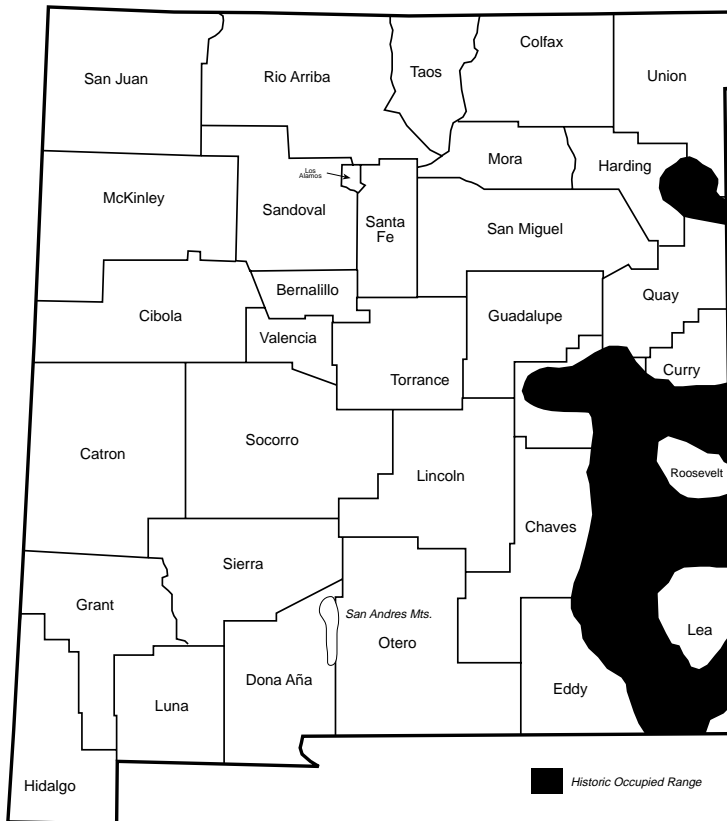
the lek sites.

Females select nest sites within 2 miles of the booming ground. Nests are established in April and early May, mostly before the season of new plant growth. Thus, a nest must be concealed in "residual" vegetation, often bluestem grass, that grew in the previous year and persisted through the winter. Healthy rangeland with large

clumps of tall bluestem interspersed with shinnery oak provides the best nesting habitat.

Usually, 11 to 14 eggs are laid, hatching in 23 to 24 days. Weather conditions and predation may claim half or more of the hatched chicks. Major predators of adults, chicks and eggs are coyotes, foxes, skunks, hawks and owls, ravens and crows, and even snakes and ground squirrels.

*Revised 2002*



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the Department of Game and Fish.  
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