

Prairie Chickens Move to Missouri

By Jo Seltzer, special to the Beacon

Posted 12:16 p.m. Tues., Sept. 29

Mobility—it’s part of modern American life. So perhaps it’s no surprise that 500 prairie chickens will relocate from Kansas to Missouri in the next few years.

Prairie chickens are the ‘poster bird’ of prairie restoration. In 1890, hundreds of thousands of these colorful grouse inhabited the native grasslands that covered about a third of Missouri. Nature lovers know of the prairie chicken for its entertaining courtship display, in which males dance, make a “booming” song with inflated orange air sacs, and joust for female partners. (Click for a [video](#) of the display.) Today, as few as 100 of these birds remain in the state. They are classified as one of the state's endangered species.

Their habitat, native grassland, has been reduced to half a percent of what is once was. A number of conservation groups—state agencies, The Nature Conservancy and the Missouri Prairie Foundation among others-- have been cooperating in an effort to restore some grasslands to their natural state.

That natural state includes restoring populations of native animals such as the prairie chicken. Kansas, where up to a million of these birds reside, has agreed to allow the Missouri Department of Conservation to move 100 prairie chickens each year for five years into the Wah-Kon-Tah prairie in the western part of the state.

Chasing the birds

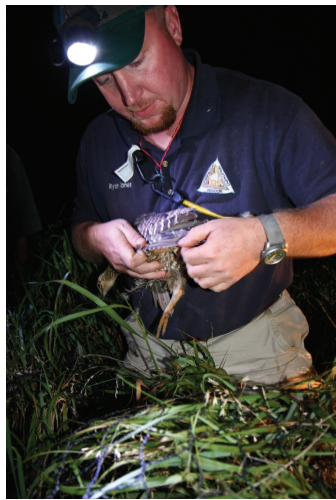
Repopulating restored prairie land with its native birds is an effort that combines high technology with low tech human antics.

Each spring, MDC personnel go to prairies near Salinas, KS after the mating season. They create fences and pens with chicken wire and funnel the birds into them. Males are banded, weighed, and fitted with transmitters before being transported to a release point in Wah-Kon-Tah.



Male prairie chicken in courtship mode.

Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation



Working a bird
*Photo courtesy of Missouri
Department of Conservation*

Females, however, need to remain where they will nest and raise their young. So they are fitted with a specially-designed lightweight radio collar hidden under their neck feathers and released—for a time. Each bird can be identified by the frequency of the beep transmitted from her collar.

In late July, it is time to recapture those moms and chicks. So again the Department of Conservation sends a team to the prairie. Their mission: locate these families where they sleep and capture them for the journey east.

The birds are tracked in trucks fitted with big receivers. Each individual's approximate location is known before the netting crews start their work at about 10 PM. Equipped with glow sticks and a portable telemeter, the crews set out on foot. Teams of four carry a huge net, about 20 feet wide and 40 feet long supported by PVC pipes. Other crew members carry oversize butterfly nets. Telemetry gives the crew the precise location of the roosting bird,

At the “go” signal, they run as fast as they can and drop the net. Immediately they turn on their headlamps and flashlights to look for the bird. If they are successful, the hen and sometimes her brood are weighed, banded, and put in a carrier.



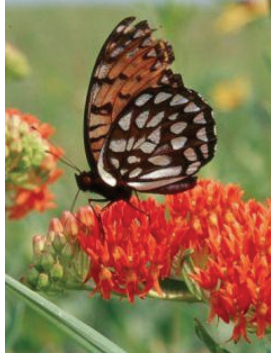
The giant net.
*Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of
Conservation*

The percentage of successful runs is about 33%. Before dawn, any captured birds are taken first to a vet, and then to the prairie. And the next night, the chase is on again.

Why worry about the prairie chicken?

Aside from its entertainment value, the prairie chicken is seen as a symbol of our prairie heritage. From a scientific viewpoint, this bird is regarded as the canary in the mine. Only a well-maintained prairie will support a prairie chicken population. A healthy prairie will provide the habitat for other creatures, like the upland sandpiper, the eastern meadowlark, and the regal fritillary butterfly.

The ideal prairie for a prairie chicken population needs to be about 10,000 acres of patchy grasslands, with tall grasses for cover, and flat areas (leks) for courtship rituals. It needs to be treeless, otherwise hawks and other predators will sit in the branches. Trees will also shelter raccoons and opossums that may destroy nests.



The regal fritillary
Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

It will have a succession of broadleaf flowering plants that change every two weeks. Birds want the seeds from the flowers. Other prairie creatures depend upon the blossoms. Regal fritillary butterflies, for example, need violets in the spring for the larvae to feed upon. In the summer, the adults butterflies suck the nectar of coneflowers. In addition, with the suite of wildflowers come the insects that munch them. These insects, of course, provide protein for the bird

Fires on the Prairie

Fire is a primary tool of prairie management. After a section of prairie is burned, the ashes return nutrients to the soil; growth the following season will be especially lush and varied. (Some seeds require fire to germinate.) In succeeding years, the numbers of flowers decrease, and grasses develop into thatch. It may be time to burn again.

Prairie chickens and other birds are not harmed by controlled burns. They simply fly to a safe area nearby and will often return to burned areas to raise broods. Grazing helps ensure the cover will not be too dense for broods. Today cattle often serve the same purpose as buffalo in an earlier day.

population. Etc., etc., etc.

Why should we care about prairies?

First, the prairie, with all its diversity, is part of our natural heritage. It wasn't that long ago that buffalo roamed these grasslands. (In fact, Prairie State Park near the Kansas border does have grazing bison, as well as about 60 native prairie chickens.) State Parks are charged with preserving our history, and voters clearly want to continue that preservation. A constitutional amendment levied a one-tenth-of-1-percent sales tax for parks and efforts to prevent erosion in 1984. The tax was re-approved in 1988 and 1996, with a two-thirds majority.

Second, prairies are beautiful. Fields of flowers stretching to the horizon can be spectacular.

Sentiment aside, prairies sequester more carbon than forests, according to Stephen Clubine of the Missouri Department of Conservation. The root systems store 2-3 times more carbon than the above-ground greenery. And these areas require no fertilizer and infrequent mowing. Large sections of Forest Park in Saint Louis have been turned to prairie, exchanging high-maintenance, heavily fertilized lawn for wild grasses and flowers that can be left alone.

Finally, prairies have become attractive to some farmers. Beef cattle are healthier and more fertile when their usual diet of tall fescue is supplemented with the variety of grasses on the prairie. And many farmers are enthusiastic about providing cover for game birds.

Having these 'poster birds' of prairie restoration make the Missouri grasslands their new home will not only bring some entertainment back to the prairies (have you watched that YouTube video yet?), but will have ecological benefits that ripple throughout the region.



Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation