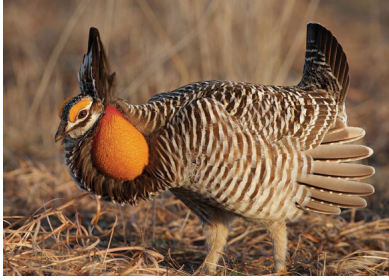


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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

EDITOR'S NOTE: Information for this article was gathered from various sources.

The Lesser Prairie Chicken is a species in the grouse family, with about half of its current population living in western Kansas and the other half in the sandhills and prairies of western Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, eastern New Mexico and southeastern Colorado.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature considers the species “vulnerable” due to its restricted and patchy range, and it is also vulnerable to habitat destruction.

Subfossil remains are known from Rocky Arroyo in the Guadalupe Mountains, outside the species' current range but where more habitat existed in the less humid conditions in the outgoing last ice age.

They disappeared apparently no later than 8000 B.C., soon after the start of human settlement, which also may have contributed to the local extinction.

The U.S. Department of the Interior has proposed creating a LPC preserve as a national monument, but it remains controversial.

Although most populations appear to have stabilized or increased since 1995, populations in northeast Texas and parts of Oklahoma have declined since 2005 and in southeast New Mexico since 2001.

The effects of drought and increasing demand for both fossil fuel and renewable energy development likewise add to the LPC's vulnerability.

The global population is estimated to number 20,000 to 40,000 individuals, a rapid decline due mostly to conversion and development of prairie grasslands.

Croplands have expanded since the late 19th century, and complete conversion is now the principal threat. Areas with more than 37 percent cultivated land are probably unsustainable.

Intensive grazing reduces food and cover, and herbicides reduce shrub cover and acorn production. Market hunting greatly reduced populations of the Lesser Prairie Chicken in the early 20th century.

Numbers declined more severely in the Dust Bowl of the late 1930s and significantly with droughts in the 1950s and early 1990s. Today, recreational hunting is limited to Kansas and Texas, and the conservative seasons produce an annual harvest of fewer than 1,000 birds.

In Oklahoma, 39.5 percent of the prairie chicken mortality recorded was due to fence collisions, while in New Mexico, this figure was 26.5 percent. The species has also been found to avoid power lines, and so it is likely that the erection of other tall structures such as wind turbines will lead to increased habitat fragmentation and reduced home range sizes as well as reduced reproductive success.

Wind energy facilities are increasing in the Great Plains, particularly in states with Lesser Prairie Chickens as these have the highest potential for wind energy development.

The species is legally protected in all range states and is being considered for listing under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Numbers of leks and attending males are monitored.

Reintroduction programs have failed in Texas and Colorado, primarily because of habitat shortages. Some grazing regimes have been successfully manipulated, and croplands have reverted to roughly 2 million acres of grassland under the Conservation Reserve Program and other private land management schemes which have benefited several populations.

Large areas of habitat have been purchased by some states and the Nature Conservancy and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances are being implemented in Texas.

Research has been conducted on its ecology and conservation which all facilitate the production of recovery plans. More than 900 birds have been radio-tracked between 1999 and 2010.

Miles of unneeded fences have been removed in parts of Oklahoma and Texas, and a method has been developed to mark remaining fences to reduce mortality.

Conservation actions are currently being proposed, starting with allowing for habitat regeneration and managing adequate cover and forage for prairie chickens.

Other actions include:

- Continuing to manage occupied habitats on private lands and hastening progress towards effective management on public lands;
- Protecting occupied habitats;
- Developing and promoting effective incentives for land owners to maintain populations;
- Continuing monitoring leks and develop statistically robust methods of estimating population from lek data;
- Regulating the construction of tall structures in or near Lesser Prairie Chicken habitats; and
- Ensuring effective evaluation and mitigation of the impacts of wind turbine and other tall structure installation on the species.

Although populations of lesser prairie-chickens in Kansas have responded positively to the CRP, long-term uncertainty in the future of the program needs to be considered in future management plans.

In addition, it is important to evaluate the reasons why some CRP habitats are used by lesser prairie-chickens and others apparently are not.

Grazing of rangeland can impact lesser prairie-chicken populations significantly when grazing practices do not leave adequate residual vegetation to meet seasonal habitat requirements.

Negative impacts attributed to grazing are exacerbated by drought conditions that periodically occur throughout the lesser prairie-chicken's range.

Grazing practices that are economically feasible for livestock producers and beneficial for lesser prairie-chickens need to be determined.

Prairie systems have been largely converted for the production of row crops across the Great Plains, and the few remaining patches of prairie have been subdivided with fences into grazing allotments.

It has been suggested that "fences are the problem in, not the solution to, conservation of historically grazed ecosystems." In any case, research on the restoration of prairie ecosystems is desperately needed, not only for the lesser prairie-chicken, but for the many other species of wildlife that depend on grasslands for their survival.

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