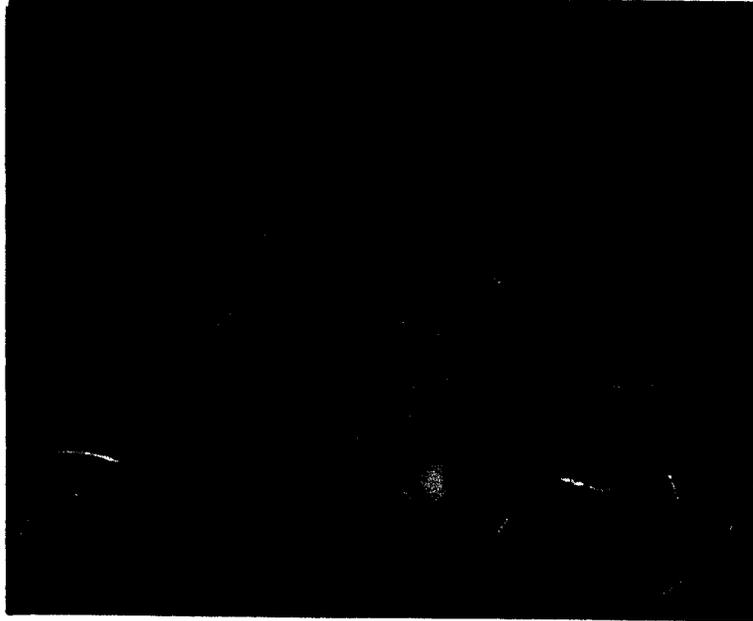


U.S. Department of Agriculture
Soil Conservation Service
Agricultural Center Building
Stillwater, Oklahoma 74074

PRAIRIE CHICKEN

MANAGEMENT

GUIDE



Prairie chickens native to Oklahoma are still present in small numbers. There are two distinct subspecies, the greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) and the lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pallidicinctus*). The greater occupies portions of northeast Oklahoma--mainly in Osage, Washington, Craig, Nowata, Ottawa, Mayes, and Wagoner Counties. Highest concentrations occur in Craig, Nowata, and Osage Counties. The greater prefers the tall grass prairies and oak savannah vegetative cover types. The lesser prefers the short-mid-tall grass shrub vegetative types with low to high density variations in western and northwestern Oklahoma--mainly in Woodward, Harper, Beaver, Texas, Ellis, and Roger Mills Counties. The prairie chicken is truly a bird of well managed grassland prairie.

Prairie chickens in Oklahoma began to decline after opening of the state for settlement about 1890. The prairie grasses were plowed up and crops were planted. Many of the crops such as cotton and small grains offered little supplemental feed for the chickens. Fencing promoted overgrazing of some of the remaining grasslands. The first territorial legislature in 1890 set up a very generous 4-month hunting season with practically no way of enforcement. The birds continued to decline until in 1915 when the legislature passed laws prohibiting hunting.

At the present time, a limited season is opened almost every year, particularly when the population is on the incline.

MATING AND NESTING

Prairie chickens are polygamous, that is, a cock mates with several hens. An area is chosen on a knoll or high ground usually with short grasses, which becomes a gathering place (booming or gobbling ground) for cocks that try to attract hens by their strutting, dancing, and booming. When a hen becomes receptive, she joins the harem of one of the cocks and mating takes place. The display grounds are an important component of the habitat. Nests are usually hidden in previous year's growth of tall grasses. They prefer cover heavy enough so there would be some overhead concealment. An average of 10 eggs are laid and incubation begins.

POPULATION DYNAMICS

The population of chickens vary from year to year as habitat changes due to climatic conditions, intensity of land use, and other factors. Indications of populations trends can be determined by observing numbers of cocks on display ground in late summer or early fall. Flocks that congregate on choice feeding areas, such as sorghum fields, alfalfa fields, and oak mottes with a good acorn crop, also indicate size of population.

PREDATORS

Some of the most destructive nest predators are skunks, raccoons, crows, opossums, and snakes. Coyotes, bobcats, hawk, owls, and house cats are probably predators on young as well as adult birds. When flying, some birds are killed by striking transmission lines.

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Rather than list all plants that chickens use, it may be safely stated that chickens take some part of almost all plants occurring in their range. They take a considerable amount of green forage during the year when it is available. They habitually move to small grain and alfalfa fields in the wintertime in search of green vegetation. An abundance of insects are essential to the young during the early weeks of their lives. Adults also make heavy use of insects, especially grasshoppers during summer months.

Since chickens roost on the ground, a cover of well managed grasslands is very important.

Chickens old enough to fly can fly considerable distance to water and feeding areas. Water should be provided in ponds, dugouts, streams, or windmills.

LAND MANAGEMENT

It is impractical to attempt to manage for chickens on small acreages such as could be done for quail. However, if other habitat components

are nearby, certain needed components such as a watering source, supplemental feeding areas may be provided to attract the birds from outlying areas.

Small grains, grain sorghums, peas, and millet plantings will be beneficial to the flocks, particularly in winter.

Ecologically, prairie chicken are so closely associated with the wide variety of plants on native grasslands that it would not be wise to use pesticides indiscriminately over a wide area if chicken populations are to be maintained.