

# A rare, rare chicken

BUENA VISTA MARSH TURNS OUT BRUNETTES AND A BLOND.

*Story and photos by Hans G. Schabel*

Prairie chickens once boomed both vocally and in terms of sheer numbers throughout the vast grasslands from southern Canada to Texas. Within a few decades, however, overhunting and the conversion of native prairie into agriculture, roads and cities, brought these magnificent birds to near extinction. As a matter of fact, one of three subspecies, the heath hen, did become extinct during the 1930s.

Even today, following decades of conservation efforts in several provinces and states, the remaining prairie chicken populations hang on precariously in isolated pockets. In Wisconsin this includes a relatively stable stronghold of the greater prairie chicken in the Buena Vista Marsh south of Stevens Point. Every April, avid birders flock from near and far to attend the prairie chicken festival in the Golden Sands, hoping to see this rare bird perform its quirky early-morning ritual dance on traditional, communal mating grounds called leks or booming grounds.

Hidden in blinds near these short-grass dance floors, visitors can watch the spirited displays up close, as the cocks

pull all their visual and vocal registers to impress the hens. To make themselves look bigger, the birds fluff their feathers, spread and drag their wings, flip up their fanned tail and erect two bundles of long feathers, the pinnae, horn-like from behind their head. Bowing low, cackling and whooping noisily, the show peaks with a crescendo of foot stomping and eerie, moaning booms resonating from the pumped up, bright orange-purple air sacs along the neck.

After this exercise has warmed up the party in the early morning chill, pairs of

cocks square up for battle to defend their territories or even capture prime real estate. Facing each other, they crouch low before leaping high into the air to gain the upper hand, while flapping their wings and trying to kick their opponent or attract the attention of hens. All the while, “the ladies” stroll among their suitors seeming nonchalant and disinterested, as they size up promising mates, which invariably are cocks dominating inner territories on the lek. Once a hen has made a decision, she invites her prince for action in the early morning sun.

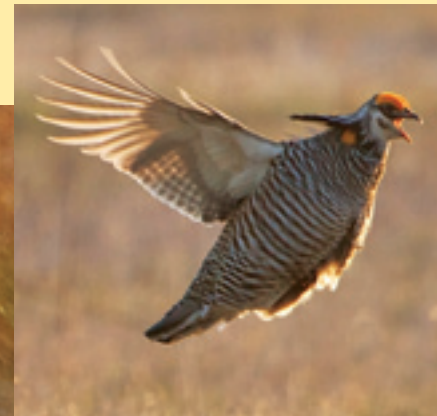
Just witnessing an assembly of these rare creatures on their mating grounds is a birder’s dream come true. And to see one that is out of the ordinary makes the experience even sweeter. That is what happened when, in April 2012, a leucistic prairie chicken showed up on one of the leks on the Buena Vista Marsh. This bird was mostly white, with an irregular mottling of light brown throughout, while its air sacs and eyebrows were the normal bright orange. Unlike albinos,



A leucistic greater prairie chicken. Leucism is an abnormal plumage condition caused by a genetic mutation that prevents pigment from being properly deposited on a bird's feathers.



Male greater prairie chickens erect their pinnae to impress the hens.








While leucism can be unusual for a birder to see, according to bird expert Melissa Mayntz in her column “Bird Leucism” ([birding.about.com](http://birding.about.com)), “Birds with the condition face special challenges in the wild. Lighter plumage may rob the birds of protective camouflage and make them more vulnerable to predators.” She adds, “Because plumage colors play an important role in courtship rituals, birds with leucism may be unable to find strong, healthy mates.”

where a genetic mutation totally suppresses pigment formation, leucistic, and piebald specimens experience only a partial loss of melanin in some or parts of their feathers. While albinism is extremely rare in birds, leucism has been observed in many species, from ostrich and penguins to hummingbirds. Even so, it is still a rare phenomenon, especially for the prairie chicken.

Irrespective of his seductive booming and belligerent demeanor, the blond bird apparently did not succeed in asserting himself in 2012. As a “bird of another feather” he seemed relegated to the fringe of the lek and was not observed to mate. Surprisingly, he did make another showing in 2013, obviously having overcome his seeming vulnerability for predators. With careful management, at least his brown-barred brothers are likely to assure that crisp spring mornings in Central Wisconsin will continue to resonate with the wild booming of their sonorous love song, even though they are no longer booming in terms of former abundance. 

*Hans G. Schabel is professor emeritus of Natural Resources at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.*

Mark your calendar for the Central Wisconsin Greater Prairie Chicken Festival in April, 2016. Bookmark [pcf.goldensandsrca.org/](http://pcf.goldensandsrca.org/) for more information closer to the festival.

