

Back in the day

Hunt from a bygone era.

Kathryn A. Kahler

Once abundant in southern Wisconsin, greater prairie chicken numbers were decimated by over-hunting and loss of habitat.

Readers who recall this magazine's past stories about efforts to restore habitat and preserve greater prairie chickens in Wisconsin may be shocked to see these photos of hunters with fistfuls of the birds.

Prairie chickens are a threatened species in Wisconsin and have been managed over the last 75 years by public and private groups focused on restoring large, open grasslands that provide a diversity of habitats to meet the complex seasonal requirements of these birds. While huntable populations still exist in some states to the west, Wisconsin's efforts are focused on a small, isolated remnant population in the center of the state.

However, they were once plentiful in the southwest half of the state. As European settlers moved westward into the Great Plains, farmers who cleared forests and maintained grasslands helped to boost the birds' numbers. They were harvested in great numbers by market hunters and by the 1850s their numbers began to decline.

In June 1928, the Wisconsin Conservation Department, transitioning from its early focus on fisheries, law enforcement, forests and parks, added a Division of Game, and under it a Research Bureau. The very first research effort undertaken by members of the bureau — who were then unpaid volunteers — was a study of the status of prairie chickens in Wisconsin. The study was led by Dr. Alfred O. Gross, shown in the photo above right with wildlife artist Owen Gromme. Dr. Gross was an internationally known ornithologist from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine.

In his book "The Gamekeepers," retired DNR wildlife manager David Gjestson tells the story of this first nongame research project in Wisconsin: "Prairie chickens had been hunted in Wisconsin for hundreds of years, but because of decreasing prairie chicken numbers, closed seasons were applied to an increasing number of counties from 1905 to 1928 until it was apparent that total protection was needed.

"The first prairie chicken report, entitled



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DNR FILES



AUGUST MILLER

Once abundant in Wisconsin, greater prairie chickens were harvested by market hunters and for sport until 1955. Dr. Alfred O. Gross (shown in the photo above right with wildlife artist Owen Gromme, right) led the first research study of the species in Wisconsin in 1930.

'Progress Report of the Wisconsin Prairie Chicken Investigation,' was completed by Dr. Gross in 1930 and presented to the Conservation Commission. The commission chair, William Mauthe, wrote in the preface of the report, 'with science replacing sentiment and efficiency replacing expediency in the administration of conservation affairs, it is becoming increasingly more important to know and use the facts in formulating policies and directing programs.'"

New laws restricted hunting of prairie chickens in the early 1900s, and between 1921 and 1955, hunting was allowed only during short open seasons. The last prairie chicken season in Wisconsin was in 1955.

Dr. Gross' efforts would lead to further study of the prairie chicken in the 1930s and '40s by the first-ever husband and wife team hired by the Conservation Department, Frederick and Fran Hamerstrom. After studying prairie chickens for two decades in central Wisconsin, the Hamerstroms were hired to head a Prairie Grouse Management Research Unit and were instrumental in saving the species.

The land used by the Hamerstroms as a basis for their studies would eventually become a 50,000-acre complex of state-owned wildlife areas — Buena Vista, Leola Marsh, Paul Olson and Mead — spread out in grassland reserves over Portage, Wood, Adams and Marathon counties. These areas make up the core of the Central Wisconsin Grassland Bird Conservation Area. Current management strategies are directed toward habitat improvement and include grazing, mowing and controlled burning in an effort to provide dense vegetation for protective cover while still maintaining open grasslands for displaying males looking to attract a mate.

While you won't see prairie chickens in numbers that once existed, you can see and help count them each April on their booming grounds on Buena Vista Marsh. The annual census helps researchers keep track of population trends and evaluate the effectiveness of management practices. Visit www.uwsp.edu/wildlife/pchicken/ for more information.

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