

Story written about going to the Hamerstroms to observe the prairie chickens by Les Woerpel

Did you ever see a Prairie Chicken dancing? Well, We did. By we I mean my wife, Lu, and I.

Fred Hamerstrom had called about 5pm Monday night & said there would be a blind open the next morning on the North end of the Buena Vista marsh and did I want to fill it.

I wanted some pictures of Prairie chicken and figured this would be a chance to get some - if the weather was right. I told Fred I would be there & he gave me directions to find it, information he wanted us to get and suggested we come to his house just as the chickens quit in the morning.

Because I had a catch in my neck I figured Lu would object if I went out alone after finishing work at midnight so I asked her to go along. She jumped at the invitation, although she had a date to go to a meeting & wouldn't get home much before I would that night.

We got to bed about 12<sup>30</sup> am, with the alarm set for 3 am. All I could think of just before I dropped off to sleep was "What Laps we are to waste good sleeping time to see a few Prairie chickens. Then the alarm went off."

Lu & I climbed laboriously into heavy underwear, Deer hunting cloths & Boots, ate a light breakfast & left for the marsh.

It was as dark as a pocket Out when we parked the Car about a quarter of a mile from the blind, loaded down with Cameras, flashlights & heavy coats and started down the road towards the Blowed field. The blind

was located.

The going was easy on the grass covered, almost unmarked road but the heavy clothes induced Lu to ask for a slower pace. We came to the fence where the plowed field began, took a 45° angle off to the southwest + towards the middle of the field.

We overshoot our mark + when the drainage ditch bank loomed up in front of us we cut back south east. The walk down the Road was bad enough with all the clothes + Cameras, but the plowing was a killer. It was wet enough to be sticky in spots. In other places manure had turned over soil gave you + you would dig them to your knees. Lu asked for mercy, which I was more than glad to give her, but I could see the first faint traces of light in the east + knew we had to get under cover fast. Just as Lu had given up hope the blind showed off to our right.

We quickly loosened the tie down strap, tugged the blind back + crawled under thru the mud. I looked at my watch, it was just 4 am.

I spent the next few minutes trying to get my Cameras + field glasses organized, squirmed around to get comfortable on the six inch high bench + left the front flaps of the blind when I heard the first chicken out front + to the right. At first I couldn't see it, but suddenly caught the movement of the bird coming in at a run, stopping every ten feet or so to inflate his Orange neck Sacks + Broom the air out in two quick efforts.

I pointed him out to Lu, and as I did so other fowls

moving in from both the north & the south. The  
noise increased & all was pandemonium for a  
time in front of us.

Neither Lu or I had seen the birds fly in & land  
wide of the booming grounds before starting their run  
to stake out their territory. One minute the field was  
empty & within 60 seconds the ground in front of us  
was full of activity. The constant booming filled the  
air till you could feel it all around you. The sound  
was deceptive because although it sounded as though it  
was coming from all around the blind there were birds  
only to the west of it & scattered possibly 60 feet across  
& to a depth about the same.

As birds became settled in their territories they started  
to protect them by rushing any neighbors that got too  
close, sometimes flying into a blurring snatch & sometimes  
settling to a squinting position opposite each other until  
one or the other decided to move away or to protect his  
territory against another bird that appeared to be  
getting too close. Facing each other with hackles & ears  
up the birds scolded & clucked at each other unmercifully  
adding to the clamor.

It was still too dark to see more than the outlines of the  
birds & their constant shifting across their territories to defend  
against actual or imagined invaders blurred the picture &  
made it appear that there were twice as many birds there  
as were actually present.

I tried to see them better through my field glasses, but  
the cold lenses fogged as soon as they came near my eyes  
so I gave that up. Tried to relax in the sky 3/4 but

high blind as best I could while I waited for daylight to give me enough light to shoot some pictures.

Every five or ten minutes I would point the light meter out the Camp hole to check the light. In between times I tried to draw a map of the general positions of the birds.

A rough legged hawk landed on a clump of dirt about 30 yards off to our left & sat surveying the commotion, hunched himself up & got comfortable for a long stay. The chickens paid no attention to him.

Now it was getting light enough to see the chickens fairly well, to watch the raising of the ear feathers, the ruffling of the neck feathers & the inflation of the orange sacs, the whom-whoom discharge of air & the lowering grunting & fast patting of the feet.

The light meter showed enough light to start taking pictures on the 35 mm with 160 speed Ectachrome, but still far too little for the movie camera. I tried a few pictures, & then settled back again on the bench to rest from being on my knees & to loosen my cramped muscles.

I had just gotten to my knees again when I noticed the hawk take off & come sailing towards the chickens. As he soared over them the booming was forgotten & they converged on a central point in a bunching effort. The hawk sailed on over them & as he cleared the north side of the grounds the birds started scattering back to their territories, each to his own in a pattern reminiscent of a highly trained chorus line maneuver.

We counted 14 cocks and one hen. The hen wandered from territory to territory paying no attention to the display.

designed to attract her attention. She acted as if she was the only bird present.

As we stiffened up + began to get cold it became increasingly harder to move around to take pictures. The birds quieted down considerably + it looked like the show was over.

However, three more males + a female moved onto the grounds and immediately the place was a beehive again. Orange sacs were constantly visible all over the grounds + a great to do was made over the hen. She, too, disregarded all the overtures + wandered contentedly over the grounds, carrying a great ornament wherever she went.

I noticed something different about the bird holding the outside territory to our right + on closer examination noticed the pale Orange Air Sac with a trace of a tinge of Purple when the sac was fully inflated. The tail, too, was different, coming almost to a point but fanning out sagittally. This was one of the rare hybrids resulting from crosses between Ermine Chidrens + Sharp-tail Goose.

We tried to get better looks at the birds thru the Binoculars, but it wasn't much use. The uneven terrain of the blown ground coupled with the almost black background made detailed observation almost impossible. At times the birds would quiet down + settle in the depressions of the blowing + although we knew there were at least 14 birds in front of us, only 3 or 4 were visible.

As we gradually stiffened up from the cramped

quarters & the cold we began to glance longingly at our watches. 7 o'clock came, & the birds were more active than they had been all morning. By 8 o'clock they began to calm down & settle into silence. By a little after 8 they got up almost as one & sailed over the Blowing to the west & disappeared.

Lu & I crawled painfully out from under the shelter, tightened down the holding ropes & dragged weary Bodies back to the car.