

PAUL SMITH

Smith: It's make-or-break time for prairie chickens in Wisconsin. They'll need help to keep booming on state grasslands.



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VILLAGE OF RUDOLPH - At 4:30 a.m. the moon hung in the sky like half a juicy tangerine.

Fifteen minutes later a shooting star etched the central Wisconsin sky.

With these celestial precursors, you might think what followed on a grassy few acres of Paul J. Olson Wildlife Area near Rudolph couldn't have been even more sensational.

But those were mere warm-up acts. And distant ones at that.

There is no way to adequately prepare for the other-worldly breeding ground displays of the greater prairie chicken.

"I think it's the greatest show on earth," said Jim Keir of Wisconsin Rapids. "Simply has to be seen to be believed."

I've been privileged to have a front row seat three times previously at Wisconsin prairie chicken "booming grounds."

I would only add this qualifier to Keir's assessment: I think it's possible to witness the spectacle and still doubt your eyes and ears.

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At 5:15 Keir led Suzanne Schicantek of Milwaukee and me through a willow thicket and into a grassy opening where a viewing blind – a weathered 5- by 5- by 15-foot rectangular plywood box atop a hay wagon – was placed at the public property.

Two wildlife photographers, Bruce Danz of Appleton and Bob Haase of Eldorado, shared the blind on the other side of a partition.

We sat on wooden benches and looked south into the purple of pre-dawn.

At 5:20 a staccato "kak-kak-kak-kak" broke the silence. Then another. And another.

Ten minutes later as pink brightened the eastern sky the source of the sounds became clear. Chicken-sized birds whirled across the tan dance floor, feet rapidly tapping the earth and white butts glowing like neon.

Prairie chickens gather to compete for mating rights on leks, or breeding grounds, each spring.

Cocks spar with other males in an effort to control prime real estate at the site. The goal is to tempt receptive hens into the area for breeding.

Every few moments the males dropped their heads, bowed forward and emitted an eerie "whhooo-doo-dooommhh."

Feathers on their heads stood up like horns and throat sacs swelled to the size and color of oranges.

Cocks faced off at the margins of their territories. Sometimes they'd back away after a stare down. Other times they jumped and kicked and flipped and squawked at each other in an avian version of kung-fu fighting.

If you didn't know by now, this is no ordinary chicken.

It's also no ordinary time for the species.

As its name implies, prairie chickens live in open, grassy areas. The species was historically found throughout Wisconsin and was abundant in the 1800s, according to the Department of Natural Resources, and relied on the extensive prairies and oak openings found at the time in the state.

Into the 1940s it was documented in all 72 counties.

But habitat losses due to increased agriculture and forest encroachment have caused large shifts in the range and abundance of prairie chickens. Today the birds exist only in isolated areas in a small portion of central Wisconsin.

The prairie chicken is listed as a species of greatest conservation need and was listed as state threatened in Wisconsin in 1979.

The DNR is in the process of updating its management plan for the species. Many feel it's make or break time for prairie chickens in Wisconsin.

"I'm hopeful enough people now are aware of the plight of these birds," said Keir, a retired DNR wildlife biologist who led the agency's prairie chicken program for 20 years. "And that we can provide the will and resources to do what's required to keep them on the landscape."

Keir is retired but remains an advocate for the species. As a volunteer with Wisconsin's Green Fire, he serves on the DNR's prairie chicken committee.

He also attempts to get people such as Schicantek, a mother, grandmother and retired chef who wants to focus her energies on environmental and conservation challenges, into the field to see the birds.

This isn't the first time prairie chickens have been at a crossroads in Wisconsin.

Distributed in pockets statewide as late as 1948, the population and range of the native bird decreased dramatically over the following years and the species was holding on only in the grasslands and failed farming regions of central Wisconsin, according to a history prepared by the George Miksch Sutton Avian Research Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

Arguably prairie chickens are present in the Badger State today only because of actions taken in the 1950s and 60s, including by the namesake of this public property.

Paul J. Olson was an elementary school principal in Madison and secretary of the Dane County Conservation League.

He saw prairie chickens for the first time in the spring of 1958 when he was taken to a booming ground in Portage County near the home of storied wildlife researchers Fred and Fran Hamerstrom.

Analogous to the physical changes displayed by male prairie chickens on the leks, the viewing experience was transformational for Olson.

"Like nearly everyone else, I came off the marsh 'bug-eyed,'" Olson wrote of the outing. "Here was something so grand, so exciting, I could put my restless energy to work."

At the time prairie chickens were in decline primarily due to forest regrowth and conversion

Olson knew the only way to save the birds was to save their habitat. He bought 40 acres and then spent a year raising money to pay for it, according to his biography in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

He then talked a friend into buying another 40 acres and convinced Bill Pugh, a wealthy Racine businessman, to provide what Olson called "90% of the muscle," the money, for additional purchases.

Between 1958 and 1984, Olson almost single-handedly raised \$140,000 to help the Dane County Conservation League purchase 5,000 acres in the Buena Vista Marsh area of Portage County, according to the Hall.

This work was multiplied by another like-minded conservation organization – Milwaukee-based Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus (Latin name for prairie chicken) – which bought about 7,000 acres to assist the species in central Wisconsin.

It took years for the additional habitat to make a difference, but after dropping from 782 cocks on booming grounds in 1950 to a low of 181 in 1961, the numbers then climbed fairly steadily to a high of 1,121 in 1981, according to the DNR's annual prairie chicken report.

Since then it's been a struggle. The DNR has not achieved its goal of buying and managing more grasslands. And the quality of the existing habitat has declined.

Compounding the population drop are a loss of connectivity between the remaining flocks and an overall decline in genetic diversity.

In 2021, the prairie chicken count had fallen to 251 males.

The DNR offered four prairie chicken management options to the public earlier this year. The proposals included: a \$4.2 million a year plan which would attempt to add 12,500 acres of grassland habitat to the central Wisconsin area, including half by acquisition and half through leasing as well as dedicate two DNR employees to the project; a \$2.8 million option with lower goals for land acquisition and habitat work; a \$130,000 proposal which would not seek any additional lands, either by purchase or lease, and have only one employee; and an option to reduce work on the species, including cessation of the annual prairie chicken survey. It would save the DNR about \$4,700 a year compared to current activities.

Keir said an overwhelming majority of the 365 public comments received were in favor of option one, the most aggressive proposal to save the species.

He also said the amount of input was impressive; a ruffed grouse plan update a couple years ago received just 50 comments, according to Keir.

The DNR is now finalizing its draft of the updated prairie chicken management plan, said Alaina Gerrits, DNR wildlife biologist who is coordinating the work. It's expected to be released to the public this year.

"We know there is good public support for these birds," Gerrits said. "Now we need a workable plan and the resources to put it in action."

A "game changing" bill called the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, now advancing in Congress, could provide funding for prairie chicken management. Wisconsin is forecast to receive \$18 to \$20 million annually under the proposed legislation.

By 6 the booming ground was teeming with 32 birds, including six hens.

Golden rays of sun streamed over the grassland, making the cock's orange throat sacs glow even brighter.

The birds darted and flapped and strutted. No theatrical stage has ever been graced by more impressive performers.

"I'm seeing (the prairie chickens), and I'm awestruck," Schicantek said. "It's so unique. And then I think about how it's been going on for hundreds of years on grasslands in Wisconsin but has now become an extremely rare sight. We've got to make a better future for these birds."

And what's good for prairie chickens also benefits a broad suite of grassland-reliant species, many of which are threatened or declining, Schicantek added.

At 6:30 a pair of the hens left the lek. By 7 all the hens departed.

But most of the males stayed, and several continued confronting their rivals.

At 7:45 the five of us agreed it was time. We swung open the doors of the blind and stepped out.

The birds flushed and flew 200 yards south. We walked back to our vehicles, attempting to process what we had just seen and heard.

Keir said the males would be back on the lek within minutes after we departed.

The challenge is to give the prairie chickens what they need to make sure they'll return year after year for generations to come.

Let's make sure this time the plan and the resources are up to the task.