

Time Running Out?

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The prairie chickens of Marinette county are reduced to a remnant. With changes in land use continuing, their prospects are not bright.

One hundred years ago there was probably none, 40 years ago they darkened the skies, and now in 1959 they are reduced to a furtive handful scattered in the brushland coverts along Green Bay—the history in brief of the rise and fall of the prairie chicken in Marinette county.

All wildlife, they tell us, is a product of the land and its use. Nowhere is this truism better illustrated than the history of prairie chicken in this county.

Marinette county in 1850 was one vast forest and we can guess that under these conditions, the prairie chicken, a bird of more open country, could not exist. Logging began on a limited scale in the 1850's, reached its peak in the eighties and by 1900 had exhausted most of the virgin timber in the county.

Fire and plow followed the axe and where once stately Norway pines flour-

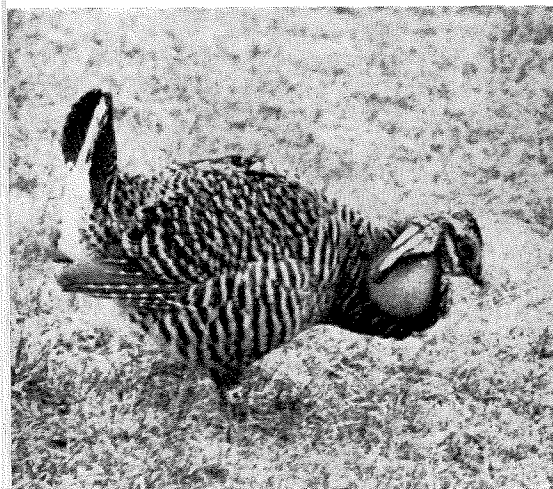
ished, potatoes and corn struggled up through the sandy soil. This "pioneer" farming may not have been economically sound, but it was good for prairie chicken. So long as these farms lasted, the prairie chicken and its cousin, the sharptail grouse, did also. However, by the late 1920's, the sands had, literally, run out on these farms in the northern and central parts of the county.

The fields converted to brushlands and eventually to trees and those that were too heavily sodded for natural reproduction were planted to pine. The heyday of the prairie chicken passed in the county and by 1935 the species was on a definite downgrade. By 1950 the scattered flocks and individuals has disappeared from the county with one exception.

Along the shore of Green Bay between Marinette and the village of Pensaukee in Oconto county are vast tracts of brushlands and swamp interspersed with small farms. It is in this type that the "chicken" is making its last stand. In 1956 we calculated a remnant flock of some 60 birds scattered in this area, of which about half were centered in the marshes and brushland that form the Peshtigo Harbor public hunting grounds.

We are certain they have not increased since that year, and very likely have decreased somewhat. Management at Peshtigo Harbor public hunting grounds, which is primarily a waterfowl area, will definitely take this species into consideration.

What is the future of this remnant flock? Anyone realistic will have to admit it is anything but bright. The birds may already have passed a security threshold that will make it impossible for this flock to exist. A generation of



The prairie chicken needs extensive open grassland to survive—and finds little of it these days.

hunters is coming up who never hunted or, for that matter, have never seen a prairie chicken. Old timers wistfully recall the days when the roar of their wings was like thunder along the bay shore marshlands.

We can, and most certainly will, try to hold on to the birds that still remain. If we can stabilize them at their present

level, fine. They came into this area as a result of an ecological change that now is moving in the opposite direction. Perhaps the situation now has reached a point where we do not have much to say about it, and a monument to the creature in this corner of northeastern Wisconsin might well read: The Prairie Chicken, 1870-1970.

The Wild One

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The sandhill crane, a strange bird, once was rare. Now it's coming back in central Wisconsin. Watch—and listen—for it!

If one bird living in Wisconsin today could be singled out to typify wildness, it would probably be the sandhill crane.

To many, the crane is "that long-legged grey bird you see standing in creeks and shallow water waiting to grab a fish or minnow." I wonder how insulted the sandhill crane would be if he knew the public had him confused with the great blue heron? The two species do have a few similar physical characteristics but there the comparison ends!

Both have long necks, legs, mandibles, and predominately grey bodies. However, the sandhill wears a red beanie and although he would probably be called grey most of the time, he varies from grey to a bright reddish tan. The tan coloration is obtained from his habit of preening his feathers with rust-stained water.

Distinguishing between the two in flight is relatively simple. The sandhill flies with both neck and feet extended; the blue heron flies with neck drawn back to the body and just his feet extended



The sandhill crane shows these paradoxes: It is highly dignified, but sometimes a clown; a symbol of the wild, but has been known to become as friendly as the family dog.

