

greater prairie-chicken *Tympanuchus cupido*

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Galliformes

Family: Phasianidae

ILLINOIS STATUS endangered, native

FEATURES

The greater prairie-chicken averages 17 to 18 inches in length (tail tip to bill tip in preserved specimen). It looks like a chicken with brown and white bars all over it. It has a short, dark tail that is black in males and barred in females. The male has orange neck sacs that are inflated and black neck feathers that are moved to an upright position during the courtship ritual.

BEHAVIORS

The greater prairie-chicken is a rare permanent resident in southern Illinois. It is only found in Jasper and Marion counties. The call of this bird (“booming”) is much like the sound produced when blowing across the top of an empty, glass, soda pop bottle. The breeding season occurs from April through early June. During this time the males put on a display on the “booming grounds,” strutting, dancing and calling. The hens mate with one or several cocks (males). The prairie-chicken nests on the ground in grasses, and the nest is usually hidden by grasses. A natural depression in the ground or a shallow depression made by the female serves as the base for the nest. The female lines the depression with feathers, grasses and other plant materials. The 12 to 17, darkly spotted, green-brown eggs are laid at irregular intervals. The total time needed to produce the eggs is about double the total number of eggs produced. The female incubates the eggs for the entire 23- to 24-day incubation period. The nest may be parasitized by the ring-necked pheasant. The pheasant lays eggs in the prairie-chicken nest, then leaves them for the prairie-chicken to incubate and raise. In fall, prairie-chickens gather in flocks in stubble fields or fence rows. The prairie-chicken eats waste grain, weed seeds and tree buds. The greater prairie-chicken is endangered in Illinois. This bird was once abundant throughout prairie regions in the northern two-thirds of the state. Approximately 10 million prairie-chickens were present in Illinois in 1860. By the early 1990s, they were nearly extirpated from the state. Hunting, egg collecting and habitat destruction all led to this species’ decline. Predators and the introduced ring-necked pheasant have also been detrimental to prairie-chickens. By 1994, only about 40 prairie-chickens were left in Illinois. These birds only exist on preserves managed for their survival. This small population was suffering from genetic problems related to inbreeding and loss of alleles. In an effort to increase genetic variability, greater prairie-chickens were trapped in other Midwestern states where they are more plentiful and released on the sanctuaries. Nest success and survival rates improved for a while before environmental factors killed more of the birds. Increasing the size of the preserves, maintaining existing booming grounds, prairie management techniques, control of the ring-necked pheasant and continued protection for these birds are all crucial factors in its survival in Illinois.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

none

Woodland Habitats

none

Prairie and Edge Habitats

black soil prairie

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