

Greater Prairie-chicken

Tympanuchus cupido

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 neck has orange sacs that are inflated and black neck feathers that are moved to an upright position during the courtship ritual.

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 greater 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 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 the eggs 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.

Prairie-chickens were once abundant on black soil prairies throughout the northern two-thirds of Illinois, reaching their estimated peak population of about 10 million birds by 1860. The population began to decline soon after this time, and prairie-chickens were considered on the brink of extinction by the early 1900s. Prairie-chickens were a game bird popular with hunters and at one time they were harvested by the ton. Loss of their prairie habitat to agriculture and development also contributed significantly to their removal from the state. The greater prairie-chicken is an endangered species in Illinois, with less than 100 birds remaining. It is only found in Jasper and Marion counties in southeastern Illinois.



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