

Bird's-eye View



Conserving
bird habitat
for over
80
years

Spring
2015

Mark your calendars!
Illinois Spring Bird Count
Saturday, May 9

Newsletter of The Peoria Audubon Society . . . Chapter of National Audubon since 1981
Chapter of The Peoria Academy of Science since 1930

www.peoriaaudubon.org

Contact the Peoria Audubon Society at audubon@peoriaaudubon.org

These are some of the upcoming events listed at
www.peoriaaudubon.org/calendar

Please join us for our monthly meetings at Forest Park Nature Center. Between the months of September and May, we meet the second Wednesday of the month at 7:00 PM.

Wednesday, April 29, 7:00 PM Trivia Night at Mashie's Pub

Come out and eat, drink and test your Trivia knowledge while helping support the Peoria Audubon Society! Just show up and tell them you are with PAS and you will receive 10% off your meal purchase and 10% of dinner sales will be donated to support our cause. Trivia starts at 7pm. Call Melissa at 309-472-3561 with questions. Mashie's Pub and Eatery, 1620 Summit Drive, Pekin, Illinois 61554.

Saturday, May 2, 9:00 AM Field Trip: Dixon Waterfowl Refuge

We will be taking a field trip to Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin-Hopper Lakes. Contact Mike Miller at 309-681-2858 for more details.

Saturday, May 9, All Day- Illinois Spring Bird Count

This statewide survey of birds is timed to be at the peak of spring migration. The Peoria Audubon Society organizes teams to participate in the Peoria area. Contact Mike Miller, Peoria County Compiler, at 309-681-2858 to volunteer and for more information.

Wed, May 13, 7:00 PM Membership Meeting: The Bison are Back!

Bill Kleiman, Project Director for the Nachusa Grasslands will be here to present "How the Bison Came Back. Stewards and Scientists Restore Humane and Natural Communities at Nachusa Grasslands."

Saturday, May 16, 9:00 AM Field Trip: Oak Bluff Prairie Nature Preserve

Oak Bluff Prairie Nature Preserve is a privately owned sanctuary for birds, insects and prairie plants located on a high quality prairie-savanna remnant along the Illinois River bluffs in rural Marshall County. Maury Brucker will lead the tour that will meet at the Forest Park Nature Center parking lot and carpool to the site. Bring a lunch and dress for the weather. Call Maurv at 309-696-5490 for more information.

Notes From the President

Dennis Endicott

One of my early memories of growing up in Southern Illinois was when some type of "museum truck" stopped by our small, rural grade school. I was probably in 3rd or 4th grade and this small panel truck was a museum of displays on wheels. The displays were put together to showcase our early history. One displayed Native Americans digging/mining for materials to make arrowheads. Before I saw this display, I couldn't visualize how arrowheads could be made. Another display consisted of a stuffed Prairie Chicken. The display said the bizarre looking birds were native to the Illinois prairies further north from where we were. Seeing such a bird and learning they are Illinois birds seemed cool. I had no idea that Illinois was called the Prairie State. I just knew I would like to see one of these strange chickens when I was older.

Fast forward 50 more years of living in Illinois and knowing that I had never seen a Prairie Chicken, I decided to get serious and see one. Three years ago, I signed up to go on a field trip to the Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, outside of Newton, Illinois (about 30 miles SE of Effingham, IL) with the Illinois Audubon Society.

I met up with the rest of the tour group early in the morning at an Effingham motel and we carpoled to the viewing area at Prairie Ridge Natural Area. Since the Greater Prairie Chicken is state endangered, we were only able to watch them on the distant lek through spotting scopes. It was March and the male chickens were busy

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Notes From the President
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“dancing” around their potential mates on their communal lek of open grassland. The males would display their ear-like feathers above their heads, inflate the orange sacs on the sides of their throats and dance in what looked like a random pattern in all directions. When the females got close, the dancing became even more intense and erratic. It was cool to watch, but there were so few of them to see.

Illinois, the Prairie State, once had so many prairie chickens that hundreds of thousands were harvested and shipped to Chicago and cities in the east each year. Peak Illinois abundance was estimated to be 10 to 14 million from 1850-1860. Populations decreased after the advent of the steel plow, yet by 1912 there continued to be healthy populations in nearly every county in Illinois. By 1933, the Illinois hunting season was closed after only an estimated 25,000 birds remained. With a continued decrease in habitat, the Illinois population continued to decline, bottoming out in 1994 with only 46 birds remaining. About this time, an effort began to translocate Greater Prairie Chickens from Kansas, Nebraska and Minnesota to Illinois’ two remaining refuge locations.

Between 1992 and 1998, 271 prairie chickens were relocated to Jasper County while an additional 235 were released in Marion County. The combined population rebounded briefly, but continued to struggle through a number of issues and a series of cold, wet springs made it difficult for newly hatched chicks to survive. (The adult birds are quite hardy and can “dive” into deep snow to keep warm.)

More recently, because of the 2012 drought, the Illinois population continued to decrease below a critical threshold. From a previously signed agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service, it was time to take action to again translocate the Greater Prairie Chicken to Illinois. In 2012, Prairie Chickens in Jasper County fell below

the 50 threshold with a spring population of 42 birds. In Marion County, the spring count decreased 20% from 2011, leaving the population at 64 birds.

The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan that was approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to translocate up to 300 Greater Prairie Chickens from Kansas was enacted for a three year (2014-2016) period. External funding was found that included a grant from the Illinois Audubon Society and The Nature Conservancy. A small amount of additional funding was also provided from a fund to replenish endangered species as a portion of Illinois hunting licence fees (Kansas still has a very limited, permit only hunting season for prairie chickens.)

According to Bob Gillespie of the Illinois Natural History Survey, in 2014, 12 flights were made between Kansas and Effingham, Il. The flights were made with small planes from the Illinois Department of Transportation air fleet at a cost of just over \$7000. The 4-hour flights were safer and less stressful to the birds than the alternative 10-hour car ride. “The use of aircraft was pivotal to the survival of the birds.”

The plan to keep Prairie Chickens in the Prairie State has now become a political issue. In June 2014, gubernatorial nominee Bruce Rauner held a press conference where he used three caged domestic “barnyard” chickens- NOT prairie chickens- as a prop to reveal his plan to cut wasteful spending in Illinois. Rauner indicated the birds were meant to add visual oomph to his complaint that Illinois spent more than \$100,000 (actual cost was \$7000 according to reports in the Effingham Daily News) to bring prairie chickens to Illinois using state aircraft (see photos).



Gubernatorial Nominee (now Governor) Bruce Rauner at press conference. Photo by Chicago Tribune

At the time, Gov. Pat Quinn stated that the federal government supports this program and that state taxpayers did not pay a single dime for this endangered species program.

I am not sure what will become of the Greater Prairie Chicken in Illinois. One can only hope that the vulnerable populations in the Plains States can remain viable. As I was researching the details of the story, I learned of the Heath Hen, which was a distinctive subspecies of the Greater Prairie Chicken. Heath Hens lived in the barrens of the states along the eastern coast. The last Heath Hen, which may have been a distinct species, became extinct in 1932. So sad.

A bit of optimism- This year, the birds translocated in 2014 seem to be doing well. While DNR funding issues remain uncertain, the translocation process was put onto a hiatus for one year and the original contract extended for one year. This calls for continuing the process in 2016 and 2017. The Illinois Audubon Society stepped in, and using donations will see that the Illinois Prairie Chicken population remains viable. Details are still being worked out, including contingencies for light aircraft. The repatriation of the Greater Prairie Chicken to Illinois is an example of how your donations and the dedication of volunteers is making a difference.



Three domestic “barnyard” chickens used as a prop at Bruce Rauner’s press conference using the reintroduction of the Greater Prairie Chicken as an example of wasteful spending.

Photo by Chicago Tribune

Interesting Facts

Greater Prairie Chicken

Compiled by Dennis Endicott

- The Greater Prairie Chicken is a grouse of open grassland known for their mating dance. Males display together in a communal lek, where they raise their ear-like feathers above their heads, inflate orange sacs on the sides of their throats, and stutter-step around while making a deep hooting moan.
- Each male maintains a small territory on the lek and returns to the same lek each year. During courtship, males leap, flap, drum their feet, strut and make low-frequency booming sounds to attract females.
- A female displays to a potential mate by dropping her wings and squatting. Mating occurs on the lek, after which hens leave to nest. A hen builds her nest in thick vegetation, creating a depression in the substrate and lining it with dried vegetation and feathers.
- Current total US population is thought to be about 459,000 individuals.
- Prefers open sweeps of permanent tallgrass with a minimum of brush and trees. Needs grass 10 to 18 inches in height for roosting and nesting.
- Diet consists primarily of seeds and fruit, but during the summer they also eat insects and green plants.
- They spend their entire lives within a relatively small area of several hundred acres where all of their needs of food, cover and water are met, flying several miles between food and cover sites if necessary.



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Male Greater Prairie Chicken “dancing” and displaying for potential mates at Prairie Ridge State Natural Area outside of Newton, Illinois. Photo by Chicago Tribune.



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