



MINNESOTA PRAIRIE CHICKEN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Winter 2003 Vol. 29, No.1

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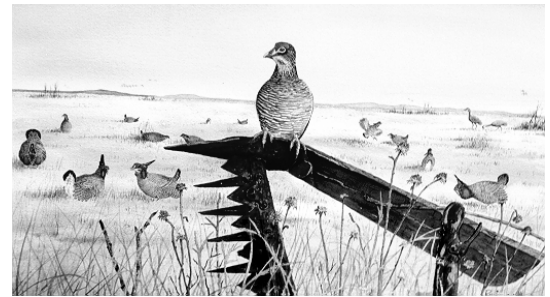
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THE 29TH ANNUAL MPCS MEETING...A FINE TIME

By ROSS H. HIER

The 29th Annual Meeting was held at the home of "the BIG CHICKEN" ... Rothsay, MN. The meeting got underway at 9:35 a.m. President Brian Winter introduced Rothsay Mayor, Paul Fosse. Mayor Fosse gave the group of about 45 people a hearty welcome!



For those that went on the early morning field trip, an excellent outing occurred. Many "Boomers" were heard and seen. Also viewed were several godwit pairs.

Peter Buessler gave an excellent presentation on the Felton Prairie Stewardship Plan. The plan deals with proactively resolving conflicts between gravel interests, native prairies, and natural fens. It addresses approximately 3000 acres of public land. There are 3 pits in the overall public land area and also 3 private pits. The key issue regarding gravel is the cost, e.g., hauling distance, extraction methods. Additionally, mining below water increases costs. Peter went on to discuss the wildlife and plants of the Felton area, which is one of Minnesota's top birding spots for less common prairie birds (e.g., chestnut collared longspur).

Yours truly then presented a slide show high-lighting various watercolors I have done over the years which feature prairie. Mark Chase of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) gave an enthusiastic presentation on woody plant

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30TH ANNUAL MPCS MEETING
SATURDAY, APRIL 26, 2003 TWIN VALLEY, MN
DETAILS IN SPRING NEWSLETTER

WHOOPS FROM THE EDITOR: NEWSLETTER'S NEW LOOK

By RONDA DORSEY

It's been an interesting turn of events since my first sighting of the remarkable prairie chicken prior to the annual meeting this past April. I will never forget sitting in the Rothsay cafe, eating scrambled eggs, and wondering, "Why did I get up at 5 a.m. on a Saturday to look at grouse?" My bewilderment changed to awe the minute I heard the eerie "whoops" across the prairie and watched the lively courting dance of the greater prairie chicken. To say the least, that morning will forever serve as a fond memory and fine introduction to one of many "gifts" the upper Midwest has to offer: the greater prairie chicken.

Now, nearly a year later, my *Tympanuchus cupido* understanding and affinity grows evermore. One of my duties, since joining the MPCS Board back in August, is to serve as editor for the newsletter. I am excited about this issue and future MPCS Newsletters, and I would like to extend my thanks to Peter Buessler, my predecessor, for being more than helpful in passing the torch. In addition, I appreciate the outstanding contributions of all those involved in the creation of this issue.

To ensure that I'm doing my job, I need feedback in all forms, i.e. suggestions, ideas for articles, and criticism. Perhaps the font size is too small, or someone wants to see more of the *Adventures of Tympie Nuchus*. Let me know for I'm just a call or click away. I especially would like to hear thoughts about new features for following issues, such as a Kids' Page, Word Find, and "My first visit to a booming ground." Happy New Year and see you at the 30th Annual MPCS in Twin Valley, Saturday, April 26th, 2003.

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*Interested in doing more with the MPCS?
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Contact President Brian Winter for more information.*

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY: PRAIRIE GROUSE SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

By STACY SALVEVOLD

This year's Wildlife Society Annual Conference, held in Bismarck on September 23-28, 2002, concentrated on prairie wetland topics including grassland management and its effects on prairie grouse (PG). In his *Summary of PG Symposium*, Robert Robel focused on the following: (1) the overpopulation of people in our country is causing a hardship for PG, especially since the center of that population is moving west into PG populations; (2) the best management guidelines, including economic benefits, must be outlined and provided to landowners to move forward in saving these species from their demise; (3) a grassroots effort to establish this plan for PG similar to the North American Waterfowl Management plan must be implemented within the next 10 years or the birds will be lost. Other topics included in the symposium are summarized below.

Weather and Prairie Grouse (B. Flanders) Adequate cover is the best solution in all weather situations. Cover, food (green plants), and availability of water all play a role in grouse survival. Chicks do not have the ability to thermo-regulate in the first two weeks of life; therefore, many die from cold wet weather. This weather also impacts insect production, which affects the food supply for young chicks. Winter population loss is due to lack of food and cover.

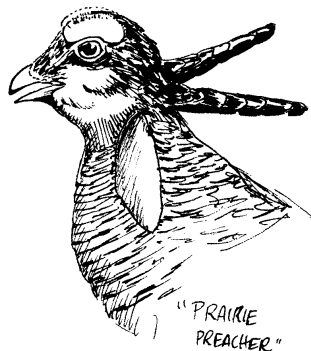
Guidelines for Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitats and Populations (C. Hagen) 92% of lesser prairie chicken habitat has been lost to fragmentation. Nest Success is typically 28%. Chick survival is typically 39%. The percent that make it to first breeding is 45%. The greatest losses occur during the first two weeks of life. An interspersed of native grasses, forbs, shrubs and sagebrush is best for brood rearing. Moderate grazing that leaves the majority of basal cover as grasses and forbs is best. Cautions with herbicides and burning should be exercised to prevent production of monotypic grass stands. Human disturbances, such as oil wells, power lines, fences, etc., need to be evaluated. Areas sized 64km x 64km based on habitat type were ranked according to specific criteria to target research and management of the lesser prairie chicken. One other recommendation was to standardize lek surveys.

Prairie Grouse and CRP (R. Rodgers) The greater prairie chicken population increased with the Brome CRP plantings in Nebraska and Minnesota. The GPC increased in Eastern SD with the planting of wheat grass. Brome and alfalfa can be a good combination at first, but once the brome takes over the non-native planting goes down hill for GPC. Missouri GPC had no response to the tall fescue seedings. Tall grass is too tall in most locations. Little Bluestem seems to be the grass species preferred by GPC. The CRP planting next to native grasses do well. Kansas planted native grasses from the start of CRP and have reaped huge benefits. LPC populations exist mostly in Kansas. Lesser Prairie Chickens had almost 5,000 sq. miles of CRP planted in their range, but the single species seedings were too tall. Colorado planted all side oats grama, but that was too short. Texas has 1+ million acres of CRP and the LPC is still not responding. Little bluestem looks like the best choice for PC. Still need forbs for insect production. Alfalfa in medium height grass seedings seems to benefit PG greatly; as little as 2/10 of a pound of alfalfa in an acre on a new seeding produces good results. Sharp tails increased almost across the board to CRP plantings. The diverse stands that include forbs and alfalfa seem to do the best. The worst CRP Failure is western MN, where we planted hybrid poplar on existing PC leks. The Colombian Sharp Tail has almost 80% of its leks on new diverse CRP plantings. Shin to thigh high grass is best. Include short grasses and native forbs. We need to manage these CRP lands with fire and tree control. We should withhold maintenance fee payments until the proper maintenance is done. The most important thing to remember is forbs=insects= food. Monotypic stands of grass will not benefit PG.

Woody Plants and Prairie Grouse (D. Wolfe) PG use woody cover for food, shade, and escape cover. Yucca, Cacti, Shrubs, and Trees can benefit PG. Sand sagebrush, shinnery oak (in the under story of grass), hybrid oak motts, blackberry, and sand plum can benefit PG. BUT Trees and power poles can provide predator perches. 30% of PG mortality is from power pole, power line, and fence collisions. Continuous stands of woody species will provide mammalian predators with lanes to travel in. Control of woody species using Fire, goats, cattle, herbicides, shredding, chopping, disking, and bulldozing is effective. Burns should be done by patch burning in 1/3's. Greater Prairie Chickens can benefit from buck brush, oak savanna, and blackberry.

Population Estimation for PG (D. Walsh) Average daily lek attendance after tagging was 42% for adult males, 19.2% for year old males, and 3.8% for females. Day 13 of booming is the best day to count. The peak time to count a lek is 30 min after they start booming. This is about ½ hour before sunrise to ½ after

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PRAIRIE CHICKENS BOOMING AGAIN THANKS TO USFWS AREA 3 STATIONS

By DON HULTMAN

Prairie Chicken releases the past few years in western Minnesota are bearing fruit. Steve Delehanty at Morris Wetland Management District reports that there were 4 new leks on 3 sites this spring, and sightings of unbanded birds confirm that reproduction is taking place. Since 1999, 161 prairie chickens have been released on Waterfowl Production Areas, State Waterfowl Management Areas, and Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge in cooperation with the Minnesota DNR and the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society.

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THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY: PRAIRIE GROUSE SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

sunrise. The best time to count is from April 3-26. We need to standardize counts at 1 per day and count from 50 yards or less. The time and date info will vary some with your location and species. This study was on sage grouse. They determined that the lek counts only estimate the male population accurately. Since only 4% of females show up on the lek site, the lek counts are not a good indicator of over all population. The lek count underestimates the number of PG.

Lessons from Attwater's (M. Morrow) Little habitat protection or restoration has occurred for the Attwater's PC. Wildlife professionals were calling for more to be done 50 years ago and nothing was accomplished other than listing in 1967 until 1990. The recovery plan was established in 1983, sixteen years after listing. The lessons: ESA listing does not guarantee recovery progress, listing does not increase funding for recovery. The species needs must be met before the population is too low (60 years ago when the problem was first realized, someone should have taken action). Federal, State, and Private land owners must work together, and private landowners need to be comfortable so that this does not lead to adversity for the recovery process, much like what happened with the spotted owl.

MPCS EDUCATION TRUNK ON TOUR

By RONDA DORSEY

The Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society Education Trunk is currently making its way through several schools in the Moorhead area. In three months, the trunk has helped teachers reach over 400 students in 14 classrooms. The teachers have voiced their appreciation to the MPCS for creating such an exciting tool that supports their science curriculum.

Additionally, the state of Missouri borrowed the trunk this past August to serve as a prototype for creating an education trunk for the Department of Conservation. Roxanne Hoover, Regional Outreach and Education

Supervisor, wrote, "Thanks so much for allowing us to use your prairie chicken trunk. We are really trying to raise awareness

In three months, the trunk has helped teachers reach over 400 students in 14 classrooms.

about prairie chickens before we lose them from our state."

The trunk, created by MPCS members Ross Hier and Joe Gartner, promotes greater prairie chicken awareness. It not only has teacher guides, videos, and books focused on

the prairie chicken in Minnesota, but it also has student stations, a chicken costume, and a taxidermy mount. The chicken trunk will soon have added lesson plans adaptable for K-12 curriculums and a cd-rom informational disc. These additions will strengthen compatibility qualities with the Minnesota High Education Standards.

For additional information concerning the MPCS Educational Trunk, contact Ronda Dorsey at 218-205-9030 or via e-mail at doorsee@hotmail.com.

PRAIRIE CHICKEN REINTRODUCTION PROJECT: 2002 STATUS REPORT

By DAVID TRAUBA

It is hard to believe but the prairie chicken reintroduction project in the Upper Minnesota Prairie Landscape is entering its fifth field season. As with any wildlife restoration project we have had our share of success but we have also had some setbacks. The most important aspect is to learn and adapt with that happening in the field. We have done that. A long-term commitment is also needed. A review of prairie grouse reintroductions found that those with a long-term perspective were most successful. We are doing that also. This update focuses on the 2002 field season.

No better way to start than to talk about booming grounds. Remember the establishment of booming grounds is critical and was the first step of this project. Booming grounds are what anchors birds to the area. Without their establishment this project will not be successful. The analogy I use is that booming grounds are the coffee shops of small town America. If your community loses its last café your town is in decline – the social fabric is gone. Without a network of booming grounds your prairie chickens will disappear.

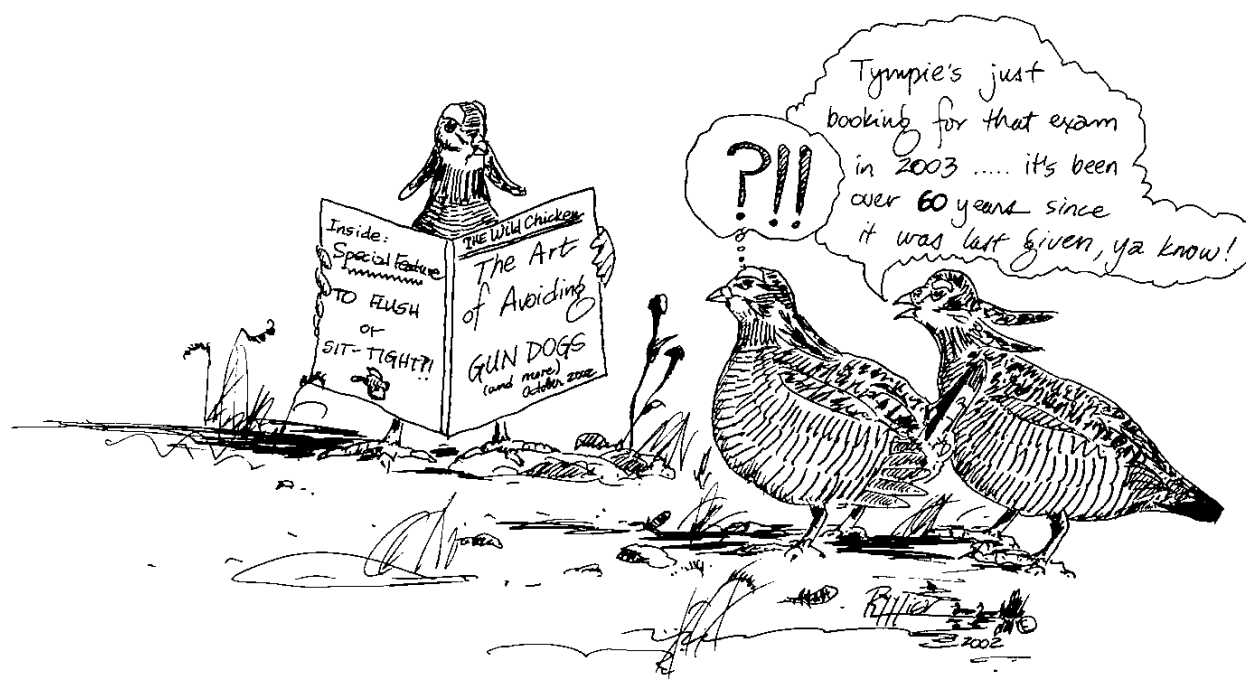
Back in 1999, we believed we could establish a total of 5 booming grounds between the Lac qui Parle Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and nearby Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) alone. The chickens told us otherwise. When birds were first released at different locations only 5 miles apart, they eventually gravitated to our best prairie landscapes – Chippewa and Plover Prairie areas. This is in contrast to what Dr. Toepfer experienced translocating prairie chickens to North Dakota. We needed to adapt so we started to look for grassland complexes 10 miles or greater from the Chippewa and Plovers sites. At that distance, we reasoned, birds would not group with those already established and would form their own booming grounds. That is how this project expanded all the way to southern Traverse County.

In March we were hoping to find booming grounds at 4 landscapes: Chippewa Prairie, Plover Prairie, Victory WMA, and Lawrence Waterfowl Production Area (WPA). Of these 4 landscapes, only Victory WMA and Lawrence WPA had birds released in summer 2001. At Chippewa and Plover Prairies no birds were released, as we wanted to know if they could maintain or increase numbers through natural reproduction.

The Chippewa Prairie is located in Chippewa County and is adjacent to the Lac qui Parle WMA. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) manages approximately 70% of the grassland habitat. *CONTINUED TO PAGE 6*

THE ADVENTURES OF TYMPIE NUCHUS

By ROSS H. HIER



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PRAIRIE CHICKEN REINTRODUCTION PROJECT: 2002 STATUS REPORT

Plover Prairie is also managed by TNC and is adjacent to the Lac qui Parle WMA and Big Stone NWR. Plover Prairie is located in northern Lac qui Parle County. Victory WMA is located in central Big Stone County and most of the grassland habitat is managed by either the DNR or USFWS. Lawrence WPA is located in southern Traverse County and is managed by the USFWS.

The result: Four booming grounds were found at 3 landscapes (3 of 4 landscapes occupied) at the end of the breeding season – Chippewa Prairie, Plover Prairie, and Lawrence WPA. No birds were again found at Victory WMA.

Chippewa Prairie had 2 active booming grounds located 1 mile apart. One ground had 2 males, both marked, and was in the exact location as the booming ground in 2001. The other ground had 5 males (2 marked; 3 unmarked) and was the same location as the booming ground in 2000. This ground also had one sharptail male. The good news was the increase in males (5 to 7) and the unbanded birds that meant natural reproduction.

Plover Prairie had 7 males (2 marked, 5 unmarked) and the booming ground location has not changed since 2000. Again, unmarked birds meant reproduction. This booming ground also had 5 males in 2001 so we saw a slight increase in males. Basically, we learned that at we can raise prairie chickens successfully; we build on

Lawrence WPA had a minimum of 4 males on the ground. These birds were the result of the 22 birds (12 males, 10 females) released in summer 2001. Remember the goal for the first year was to get a booming ground. In that we were successful. The Lawrence WPA is very open and the site is 11 miles from the

No booming grounds were again established in the landscape. This site had 19 (16 males, 3 females) in summer 2001; 7 birds (6 males, 1 female) were released in summer 2000. This was disappointing as this site lies between WPA and those at Plover Prairie and is considered an important link. The site contains well over 3,000 acres of protected grassland habitats spread over 2,000 acres of protected grassland habitats. Private grasslands are also common. In general, the birds stay at Victory through the winter months but when spring arrives they disappear. I believe this site bears out the importance of habitat work, specifically tree removal, prior to moving birds. Little tree removal work has taken place here compared to the other release sites. Area would be best described as a savannah, and I believe the scattered trees may be the primary factor for the birds not establishing. We have not given up on this landscape but no birds will be released until all the scattered trees are removed.

One of the more important discoveries in late May was the presence of 2 male prairie chickens on a WPA in eastern Big Stone County - our fifth booming ground? Birds were first located from an airplane during a search for missing birds. It gets even more interesting when you consider one bird was first released at Lawrence WPA, 20 miles to the northwest. The other male was first released at Victory WMA, 9 miles to the southwest. So, here you have 2 prairie chickens from different release sites ending up in the same grassland complex. The birds were telling us something and it didn't take long for us to decide we needed to release more birds into this area. Site consists of over 1,200 acres of protected grassland/wetland habitats; landscape is very open. Private CRP fields do exist. Dismal Swamp and Odden WPAs are the largest grassland blocks and are located within 1.5 miles of each other. I am pleased to report USFWS and DNR personnel immediately removed the scattered trees that did exist.

Prairie chicken releases this past summer focused on augmenting existing booming grounds. Nineteen (12 males, 7 females) were released at Dismal Swamp WPA. Seven (4 males, 3 females) were released at Lawrence WPA. We again released birds into the Sleeping Bison landscape. Birds were first released here in summer 2000 and had good survival but the birds eventually moved to Chippewa and Plover. However, prairie chickens are occasionally observed here so we believe the site deserves another chance – 5 males were released. Three hens were released at both Chippewa and Plover prairies to bolster natural reproduction. These birds were moved by the traditional method – first captured on spring booming grounds and released in place. Then recaptured by night lighting technique and transported and released within 24 hours.

We also tried something different this year and moved birds in late November and early December. Birds were trapped on fall booming grounds and immediately transported to the release site. Remember these birds are now in excellent condition as opposed to those released after the breeding season and in molt (summer releases).



Chippewa and Plover this booming ground.

10 females) released is to get a booming WPA complex totals landscape around the South Dakota border.

Victory WMA birds released in released in summer the birds at Lawrence important link. The Site contains well over over a 4-sq. mile area.

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THE 29TH ANNUAL MPCs MEETING...A FINE TIME

reduction/removal on their lands. They have initiated work on many sites to re-open grassland vistas, remove raptor perches, and help fire to be a more efficient tool in areas where woody plants (e.g., willow) have created large, moist shadow zones that fire can no longer burn in. The USFWS is using numerous tools to reduce woody cover invasion. These include large, mechanical drum choppers, feller-bunchers, and chainsaws. Mark explained that the mechanical tools are simply "resetting the clock," and it is imperative that managers follow-up woody plant reduction with fire.

The next speaker was Dr. John Toepfer. Dr. Toepfer has worked many years on prairie grouse and recently has done much work radio tagging and translocating greater prairie chickens into the Upper Minnesota River Valley. He noted that species whose habitat has not been destroyed, have returned in strong numbers once the problem (e.g., DDT and egg-shell thinning) has been taken away. Prairie chickens and sage grouse are suffering from large-scale habitat loss and will be more difficult to maintain in large numbers. Dr. Toepfer stated one of his favorite sayings; "Remember, it's called the Prairie Pothole Region; not the Pothole Prairie Region" referring to the fact that all the prairie endemics rely on vast quantities of grasslands. Dr. Toepfer has trapped over 3,824 prairie chickens from 1996 – 2001. He described various measurements taken. Nest success does not appear to be a problem for prairie chickens as it still averages about 50% in most populations. However, it does appear that over the long-term brood size and fledging rates have decreased. Of Minnesota, North Dakota and Wisconsin, the latter has the lowest average brood sizes. Winter survival is high in all 3 of these states. Cutting lone, tall trees has helped open vistas and increase winter survival.

Don Hultman of the USFWS spoke next. He gave a very eloquent, philosophical review of prairie chickens and their habitats.

We broke for lunch (catered by The Power House where our meeting was held). Very good! From there we walked over to the Big Chicken and presented Art Fosse (designer and master craftsman of the famous landmark) with the only "Friend of the Prairie Chicken Award" given by MPCs in 2002. He briefly described the effort it took to design and build the Big Chicken. We headed back to The Power House and started the 29th Annual Business Meeting at a little before 2 pm. President Winter started the meeting by giving a prairie chicken lapel pin to long-time member and ardent supporter of MPCs Russ Fitzgerald. He has seldom missed an Annual Meeting (if ever) and has always donated generously to MPCs. Our thanks to you, Russ!

PRAIRIE CHICKEN REINTRODUCTION PROJECT: 2002 STATUS REPORT

Nonetheless, our hypothesis is that these birds will join with those already established. Birds were released at our best landscapes: 3 males released at both Chippewa and Plover, 6 males released at Sleeping bison and 2 males released at Heglund WPA. Technique is certainly more cost-effective and requires less labor but it will not work unless you have booming grounds already established. Will be checking on these birds in the next few weeks.

The total number of prairie chickens released this summer is 51 (35 males, 16 females). Total birds released since 1999, 205 (134 cocks, 65 hens, 6 young of the year). General plans for next year are to continue to augment certain release sites (traditional method) but we will also be starting spring and/or fall releases – the final step. Opportunities to connect birds at Lac qui Parle with those in northwestern Minnesota or eastern South Dakota need to be explored. General discussions on this aspect have already occurred. Connectivity is needed for long-term success. I would argue not only for prairie chickens but for other grassland species as well.

One of the more gratifying aspects of the project has been the habitat work. Our (DNR, USFWS, private) grasslands are in better condition due to the prairie chicken project. Partnerships and dialogue has occurred on a whole range of grassland management issues where none existed previously. My notes tell me over 13,500 scattered trees have been removed from 11 prairie landscapes. The change has been incredible. Lets be honest, this work would not have been undertaken had it not been for the chickens. Birds were the "kick in the rear" we needed to get started. Finally, I thank Dr. John Toepfer, principal investigator, for all the fieldwork he has done on our behalf. John's energy and dedication to management of prairie grouse is exemplary and his enthusiasm is contagious. The information for this update, provided by Dr. Toepfer, should be treated as preliminary, especially the grassland acreage figures. Project has been made possible through a Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund grant, 1999-2001; funding from the MNDNR, USFWS, TNC, Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, and the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society.

Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society Membership

Your gift and membership will help! A \$10 or more tax deductible contribution will bring you the MPCS Newsletter and supports the Society's efforts to save Minnesota's prairie chickens and their habitats. The number in the upper right hand corner of your mailing label shows the year of your most recent membership. Renew your membership today!

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Winter 2003, Vol 29, No. 1

Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society Newsletter
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