



# MINNESOTA PRAIRIE CHICKEN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Winter 2004 Vol. 30, No. 1



## FEATHER FEATURES

### **RESTORING GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKENS TO WEST CENTRAL MN**

*A two-part discussion- including  
abstract and progress reports-  
about establishing booming ground  
networks to help chicken  
populations.*

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## **GET TO FERTILE FOR THE 31<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MPCS ON 17 APRIL 2004**

By ROSS H. HIER

Mark your calendars gang! On Saturday, 17 April 2004, the MPCS will hold its 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting. This year's meeting will be at the Fertile Community Center located in downtown Fertile. For those who have never been to "The Flower City" of Polk County, you'll find a

very pretty  
burg tucked  
between the  
glacial Lake  
Agassiz  
Beach  
Ridges to the  
east and the  
ecologically



unique glacial outwash Sandhills to the west. There are plenty of dandy habitats to explore ranging from bur oak studded Sandhills a half-mile from town to abundant native prairies on nearby state, federal and The Nature Conservancy lands. There is great wildlife watching to do, too. This area is part of the Pine-To-Prairie Birding Trail and the Prairie Passage route.

The chickens are more than ready for your visit. They've assured me they will put on a grand show under the "Prairie Big Top," so be ready to "WHOOOP" it up! Watch for more information on the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting in the upcoming March Newsletter.

[www.prairiechicken.org](http://www.prairiechicken.org)

## WHOOPS FROM THE EDITOR: MELANCHOLY MUSINGS By RONDA DORSEY

Last month, I moved temporarily to the Black Hills of South Dakota for a teaching job. Though the abundant fauna of bison, raptors, mule deer, antelope, and wild turkeys have been inherently awe inspiring, there is still a great void in this new high school English teacher's life. Initially, I thought this feeling was simply a case of missing the beauty of Leech Lake and anticipating the first cast of muskie season. I realize now, after putting the pieces of this year's first newsletter together, that my homesickness is a case of the "chicken board blues."

The board meetings are obviously a chance to plan the society's interests and activities. They are also a time to reconnect with people who share a similar vision and passion for the prairie chicken paragon. These members are an eclectic and professional group of biologists, researchers, and educators devoted to keeping the chicken as much a part of Minnesota's history as well as its future. What I have missed, because of my present location, is the camaraderie these leaders and sages bring to the greatest organization I have ever belonged to.

Thus, as the annual meeting approaches, I look fondly at Fertile to provide not only manifold opportunities of chicken watching, but also a chance to fill my intrinsic need to be with folks who, as quoted from a fellow board member, are "IN IT FOR THE CHICKEN!"

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## **ABSTRACT REPORT: RESTORING GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKENS TO WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA**

By J.E. TOEPFER, D. TRAUBA, S. VACEK

Continued habitat loss and subsequent fragmentation are serious threats to prairie grouse populations throughout North America. As wildlife managers work toward re-connecting isolated greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) populations, a better understanding of the techniques to re-establish populations are needed.

From 1999-2003, 306 wild greater prairie chickens were released at nine different sites in vacant grassland habitats throughout the 1,512 km<sup>2</sup> project area in west central Minnesota. Overall, nine booming grounds were established at seven out of nine release sites. Summer releases established six booming grounds and a supplemental spring release in 2003 established two additional booming grounds. The final booming ground was discovered when a spring-released cock moved 28-km outside the project area to an isolated grassland complex already occupied by non-radioed prairie chickens. Movement data from surviving spring-released prairie chickens found that 95% of the hens and 86.8% of the cocks established within a mile or less of one of the established booming grounds. This high localization rate indicates translocated prairie chickens are attracted to resident birds. Managers wanting to re-establish prairie chickens must first concentrate on establishing a network of booming grounds 3-5 miles apart through summer releases before supplementing with fall or spring releases. Dispersal away from release sites is the main reason most prairie chicken translocation projects have failed. *Note to readers: Abstract presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Prairie Grouse Technical Council meeting held in Siren, Wisconsin in September of 2003.*

## **PROJECT UPDATE: RESTORING GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKENS TO WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA**

By DAVID TRAUBA

In 1999, the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society (MPCS) embarked on an ambitious program to restore prairie chickens to vacant grassland habitats located in west central Minnesota. Funding was first made possible by an Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund grant awarded to MPCS that same year. MPCS subcontracted with Dr. John Toepfer, a nationally recognized expert on prairie grouse, to conduct the trap and transplant program. Initially the project focused on releasing prairie chickens on the Lac qui Parle Wildlife Management Area, Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge, and Chippewa and Plover Nature Conservancy preserves; counties involved, Big Stone, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, and Swift. However, as the project expanded and evolved, birds were also released in southern Traverse County and established on their own to western Stevens County.

Historically, prairie grouse have been very difficult to reestablish successfully. Folks have been trying since the late 1800s to move these birds with little success. Prairie grouse are excellent fliers, require large diverse blocks of grass, and have a unique mating system and dispersal pattern. When you add all this together it makes them a difficult bird to work with. Fortunately, Dr. Toepfer has developed a technique that is showing promise here in west central Minnesota and successfully restored greater prairie chickens to eastern North Dakota in the early 1990s.

From 1999 through 2002, the project focused on establishing a series of booming grounds throughout the project area. A booming ground is the center of activity for prairie chickens and they go to this location every day, morning and night, during the breeding season and beyond. If we could not establish a series of booming grounds the project would not be successful.

Wild prairie chickens were captured on booming grounds using funnel traps in the vicinity of Ada, Minnesota. Prairie chickens were measured, banded, and a radio transmitter was placed on each bird and then the bird was released in place. Here is where the labor-intensive part comes in. All these birds, released in spring had to be recaptured during the summer months ONE AT A TIME. The technique used here is called night lighting. You go out at night with a telemetry receiver (used to locate an individual birds radio signal), a headlamp and a large landing net. Basically, you follow the radio signal and "home-in" on the bird until you see the bird hiding in the grass. Once located, you quickly put the landing net on them. Easier said than done and in a good night you will maybe catch 5-7 birds. Keep in mind while you are working hundreds, if not thousands of mosquitoes, are also "homing-in" on your location. Dr. Toepfer and crew deserve a lot of credit, as this is tough fieldwork.

*Continued on page 4*

## OF CHICKENS AND MODERN SOCIETY

By ROSS H. HIER

All of us need a strong foundation to be at our best day-in and day-out. For me, that foundation has always been constructed of love for and from my wife, my family, my friends and Nature. All these entities feed off each other and keep me sane in a world that has likely always been insane but is now busy too (i.e. insanely busy).



For a prairie person, Mother Nature has bequeathed numerous building blocks for construction of spiritual contentment. For me, the prairie flora constitutes the first tier and prairie chickens the capstone of that structure.

I was reminded of this again the other day as I watched over 100 chickens break cover on a frigid January day. Watching a prairie chicken take to the sky is like no other event on this planet. The trademark low angle flush is startling but not extraordinary. Nay, it's what follows that captures one's soul: your feeble brain, having finally registered the chunky, square-tailed bird is off the ground, is suddenly transported to hallowed grasslands of yesteryear. What the chicken does next was perfected thousands of years ago. It goes from a constant wing-beat to one that stutters. Between glides on rigid, horizontal "sails," the chicken beats its "sails" with a fierce will. Awesome to see, but the most mesmerizing part of this is how the birds' head-to-tail axis rotates from port to starboard with each vigorous wing-beat. That, my friends, is soul power.

As it builds up speed, I find myself transfixed in an ancient spell as the bird is suddenly a mile away and shows no sign of slowing down. The modern world with all its' schedules, deadlines, noise, interruptions, triumphs and tragedies no longer exists. I am once again human and a flushing chicken made me so.

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## PROJECT UPDATE: RESTORING GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKENS TO WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA

By DAVID TRAUBA

The question that must come to mind is why not just transport and release the birds when first captured in spring? Well, prairie chickens are excellent fliers and most would leave the release site and head back home. A few may stay, but with no booming grounds established, they would eventually leave the project area as well. By moving birds in the summer, Dr. Toepfer has documented that the chances of those birds staying at the release site and forming a booming ground are greatly enhanced. During the summer prairie chickens are replacing their flight feathers, so it is uncomfortable for them to fly long distances, thereby almost "forcing" them to stay at the release site.

In 2002 we finally had a network of booming grounds located throughout the project area and we were ready to enter the "supplemental" phase. In this phase, established booming grounds were augmented with the large release of spring-trapped birds; these birds were attracted to those grounds thereby keeping them in the project area. We also focused on releasing more hens to kick-start local production.

In this newsletter you will find the abstract Dr. Toepfer, Sara Vacek, and I prepared for the Prairie Grouse Technical Council meeting in September. The abstract summarizes the number of birds released and booming grounds established, so I won't cover those details here. The project will continue another two years and our objective is to release an additional 100 birds in April of 2004 and 2005. Again, these birds will augment those already established and in a few locations hopefully establish new booming grounds. Once the trap and transplant program is complete we will continue to monitor these birds for population trends.

Our project goals have also evolved. In 1999, our thoughts just centered on reestablishing prairie chickens in the project area but that is no longer enough. Our short-term goal is to reconnect the birds we are establishing in west central Minnesota to those that exist in the northwest. The long-term goal is to reconnect the birds in Minnesota with those that exist in eastern South and North Dakota. This goal is attainable and only limited by human motivation to provide the necessary grassland habitats. Work has begun on this important endeavor.

The restoration program is supported by: The Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd., and the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology.

## MINNESOTA PRAIRIE CHICKEN SOCIETY RECEIVES \$25,000 NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE GRANT

BY DAVID TRAUBA

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has selected the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society as the recipient of a \$25,000 federal grant. The grant will be used to continue work toward restoring greater prairie chickens to grassland habitats in west central Minnesota.

The Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society applied for the grant in August. Award was made on the condition that the federal funds are matched by \$25,000 in additional non-federal funds raised by the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society. This condition was made easier when the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology voted to donate proceeds raised at this year's Midwest Birding Symposium to the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society funding will also be used to match the federal funds awarded.

Board members of the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society would like to thank all our members who have made donations toward the prairie chicken restoration project. Your generosity has made it possible to leverage this federal funding and your continued support is appreciated.

## THE ADVENTURES OF TYMPIE NUCHUS

By ROSS HIER



## 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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*I would like to contribute to the Prairie Chicken Restoration Project.*

Amount

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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SHIRTS	Henley	Black ONLY	L-XL	\$15
	Button Down	Natural ONLY	L-XL	\$20

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for shipping &  
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Size \_\_\_\_\_

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