

Handout for Conference, 3 December 1983
"Priorities for the Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund"

Workshop I - Species

B. Birds

PRAIRIE CHICKENS - - Why?

1. Endangered status
 - Millions statewide a century ago
 - 155 cocks (possibly 300 prairie chickens total) primarily on or near sanctuaries in Jasper and Marion counties in spring 1983.
2. Heritage value
3. Sight value
4. Scientific value (Ecology, Ethology, Evolution)
5. Moral obligation
6. Maintaining species diversity
7. Responsive and adaptable species
8. High densities demonstrated in Illinois
 - Goal of 100 cocks/mi² of nest cover is realistic.
 - Illinois can maintain "more booms for the bucks" than other states, presumably because of the high inherent productivity of Illinois habitat.
9. Prairie chicken management is unique in that it is largely self supporting, except for the needed manager position, major equipment, and new land.
10. Benefits coincident with prairie chicken management include:
 - A. Other non-game species - - upland sandpiper, Henslow's sparrow, northern harrier, short-eared owl, (all threatened or endangered), redwing, meadowlark, dickcissel, field sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, sedge wren, goldfinch, prairie-horned lark, small mammals, and other prairie fauna.
 - B. Game species - - pheasant (unfortunately), bobwhite, mallard, mourning dove, and cottontail.
 - C. Prairie flora
11. On-going research (21-yr.+ data base) and management program.

Prepared by
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Workshop II - Habitats

C. Grassland/Agricultural

PRAIRIE CHICKEN HABITAT

1. Hatching success is the most vital aspect of the population dynamics of prairie chickens in Illinois. The prairie chicken population at Bogota each spring has been closely dependent on the number of nests hatched the preceding summer. Thus, habitat management must emphasize the development and maintenance of quality nest cover to maximize nesting effort and nest success within the limited nest habitat.
2. To achieve the primary objective of preserving 2 separate flocks of native prairie chickens, averaging about 300 birds each, about 1,500 acres are required in each of 2 counties (Jasper and Marion); about 1,080 remain to be acquired at an estimated cost of \$1.5 and \$2 million. The land needed and costs may be reduced, but not eliminated, with (A) better management of existing sanctuaries and (B) implementation of a sustained, effective program of prairie grass management on private land within the range of the remnant flocks in Jasper and Marion counties. However, the creation and funding of a sanctuary manager and operational budget for management must take precedence over the need for additional habitat. We must be able to adequately manage existing sanctuary land before more land is added to the management burden.
3. The goal of 1,500 acres of managed sanctuaries in each of 2 counties allows for (A) possible cyclic lows in the populations at intervals of about 10 years, (B) a possible minimum population size (genetic threshold) of about 50 birds, and (C) annual renovation of about 25% of the sanctuary area through plowing, cropping, and reseeding or prescribed burning.
4. The vegetative component of prairie chicken nest habitat is generally not available for purchase or lease on private farmland. However, the prairie chicken is sufficiently adaptable to quickly respond to seeded and managed stands of redtop, timothy, brome, prairie grass, and red clover.
5. High densities have been demonstrated in Illinois.
 - Goal of 100 cocks/mi of nest cover is realistic.
 - Illinois can maintain "more booms for the bucks" than other states, presumably because of the high inherent productivity of Illinois habitat.
6. Benefits coincident with prairie chicken habitat include:
 - A. Other non-game species -- upland sandpiper, Henslow's sparrow, northern harrier, short-eared owl, (all threatened or endangered), redwing, meadowlark, dickcissel, field sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, sedge wren, goldfinch, prairie-horned lark, small mammals, and other prairie

- fauna.
- B. Game species - - pheasant (unfortunately), bobwhite, mallard, mourning dove, and cottontail.
 - C. Prairie flora
7. On-going research (21-yr.+ data base) and habitat management program.

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Workshop III - Program Functions

B. Management

PRAIRIE CHICKEN MANAGEMENT

1. The greatest present need for the preservation of Illinois prairie chickens is the creation and funding of a full-time SANCTUARY MANAGER to :
 - A. Adequately manage 1,921 acres of existing sanctuaries.
 - B. Develop new acquisitions for sanctuaries.
 - C. Possibly assist private landowners near sanctuaries with prairie grass management (for pastures, waterways, odd areas).
2. Other threats to the future of prairie chickens in Illinois include pheasants and human disturbances on sanctuaries, inbreeding, nest predation, and others, but the best means of addressing these threats is to adequately deal with the challenges of accomplishing adequate acquisition and sustained management of sanctuaries.
3. At present, management of nearly 2,000 acres in 14 separate tracts scattered over 2 counties is conducted by 2 INHS research biologists on a research budget. Some 250-300 man days of needed management operations do not allow for adequate research or management
4. The use of DOC Parks personnel at Newton Lake or Forbes Park is not the best answer to the management problem because:
 - A. Logistics
 - communication difficulties with INHS research personnel and local farmers.
 - office and equipment availability at the DOC-owned Grassland Wildlife Research Laboratory located on the McCormick Prairie Chicken Sanctuary in Jasper County.
 - ~~B. Dangers of Misplaced Priorities~~
 - food patches are not necessary
 - reluctance to cut trees and remove brush
 - tendency to leave grasslands in an undisturbed, unmanaged condition that is unattractive to nesting prairie chickens, but favorable to the undesirable pheasant (on prairie chicken sanctuaries) and mammalian predators.
5. The multiple ownership (TNC, DOC, INHS, and individual) of sanctuaries, buildings, equipment, and commodities requires a cohesive management - research effort.
6. DOC Parks personnel can provide valuable help and a sanctuary manager can help them (i.e. on the 200-acre CIPS Sanctuary), but a separate fund is needed to support a manager based at the Bogota Lab to work under the close advisory capacity of research biologists.

7. High densities demonstrated in Illinois.
 - Goal of 100 cocks/mi² of nest cover is realistic.
 - Illinois can maintain "more booms for the bucks" than other states, presumably because of the high inherent productivity of Illinois habitat.
8. Prairie chicken management is unique in that it is largely self supporting, except for the needed manager position, major equipment, and new land.
9. Benefits coincident with prairie chicken management include:
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