

The Greater Prairie Chicken on Fort Riley

Among the tall grass and burnt prairie is a remarkable ritual taking place - revealed only with a keen ear and watchful eye. It is the bustling view of courting prairie chickens; a delight to the conservationist and a reminder that Fort Riley is a crown jewel for grassland birds. Although the parlor has changed over the years, the calling, dancing, and courting have not.

The greater prairie chicken, (*Tympanuchus cupido*), is a species of grouse that was once common throughout the Midwest. However, the conversion of fertile tallgrass prairie to plowed fields has led to their demise over much of their former range. The State of Kansas is the last stronghold of the greater prairie chicken, but that too is starting to wane. Fort Riley has a population of 350-400 birds. By comparison, the population in the entire state of Missouri is only around 1,000 birds.

The habits of prairie chickens are what really set them apart. Most striking of which is their breeding ritual. Beginning early in the spring, the male prairie chickens begin to visit "lek" sites in order to establish territories. This isn't peculiar in itself, except the manner in which they do it. Just at daybreak, the males come together at established lek sites. They strut around, jump up in the air, stomp the ground and fight over the territory.

The males inflate orange air sacs known as tympani in their throats. They look something like oranges tucked beneath their chins. The sound they make is similar to blowing across the top of an empty pop bottle.



Right on time, females emerge from the tall grass and then the males get serious.

They jump straight into the air, bump breasts and fight in bursts of feathers. They fill the dawn with cackles and hoots.

Mating occurs at the pinnacle of the booming season. The hens lay 12 eggs on average, with an incubation time of 3 weeks. The clutch will break up after 8-12 weeks. Their diet is made of insects, forb seed and grain from crop fields.

Greater Prairie Chickens can be found in a variety of habitats. However, their reliance upon tallgrass prairie is paramount to their survival. It may also lead to their ultimate demise. An average size flock requires around 2,000 acres of quality tallgrass prairie. Even then, there must be additional flocks in the vicinity to keep reproduction genetically viable.

Prairie Chickens can still be hunted in Kansas, but that may change soon. The Lesser Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*), which can be found in the Western half of Kansas was just recently listed as a Threatened Species on the National Threatened and Endangered Species list.

Fort Riley has chosen to be proactive developing a plan to increase the overall population of Prairie Chickens, including protecting small satellite leks. This means that hunting may be closed in some of those areas when the majority of the prairie chicken population is not in an open hunting area. Fort Riley also recommends that hunters consider harvesting less than the daily bag limit and their season total. Further guidance is given in the annual fact sheet.

Prairie chickens have persisted in Kansas largely because of the unbroken Flint Hills, including Fort Riley. Unfortunately, they have declined even in this region due to changes in how native pastures are grazed and burned, as well as urbanization. While they are safe on Fort Riley for the time being, the greater prairie chicken faces an uncertain future across the remainder of their original range.