

WALK ON THE WILDSIDE

The Minnesota Conservation Federation

March 2015

Prairie chickens booming on the prairie

More than a century ago, Minnesota's prairies began disappearing as farmers plowed them up to make room for crops. Today very little of the state's native prairie remains and only a small fraction of the wildlife that inhabited that prairie can still be found in Minnesota.

One notable victim in the loss of Minnesota's prairie habitat is the greater prairie chicken. In the 1800s when settlers first arrived in the state, prairie chickens were abundant in the western and southern regions, but over-hunting and loss of habitat led to a crash in the prairie chicken's population. By the mid-1900s only a handful remained and hunting prairie chickens was outlawed to protect the few that were left.

In the late 1900s, prairie restoration efforts and the protection of existing prairie habitat helped to boost prairie chicken numbers in a few locations in the western portion of the state, but the bird's populations will likely never flourish, unless dramatic changes are made in land-use practices in



the farming community.

The good news, however, is that the prairie chicken is making a comeback, and two years ago the state Department of Natural resources declared it healthy enough to start a limited hunting season.

Are they chickens?

Although chicken is in its name, the prairie chicken is not related to the familiar farm bird. It is instead a member of the grouse family, which includes the ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse and spruce grouse, which also are native to Minnesota.

The prairie chicken does bear some resemblance to a chicken in general shape, but it is a much different bird. It is about 14-16 inches in length with brown and white bands of feathers across its body.

The male has yellow combs of feathers over its eyes and a featherless yellow air sac on each side of its neck that it inflates when displaying. The female lacks the yellow comb over the eyes and the neck patch, and is better able to blend in to its surroundings, which is important during the nesting season.

Prairie chickens eat mainly seeds and prefer the seeds of prairie grasses, but they also eat insects, berries, leaves, acorns and plant buds.

Mating ritual

Like other grouse species, the prairie chicken has an unusual mating ritual it performs each spring.

The mating behavior is known as booming. Early in the morning, the male prairie chickens gather on the breeding grounds, which are called a lek. Each male defends a courting area, where it hopes to attract females. Usually the larger and more experienced males end up doing much of the mating.

During the mating ritual, the males can be heard letting out two

Continued on page 3

Finding uncommon birds in Minnesota

The western Minnesota landscape is different than any other part of the state with its tallgrass prairie dotted with ponds and wetlands, so it is understandable how the region attracts bird species, which are not found in any other area of the state.

The western portion of Minnesota is on the eastern edge of the great prairie, so its wildlife habitat more resembles that of South Dakota than the various wooded habitats typically associated with Minnesota.

For birdwatchers, this portion of Minnesota offers a unique opportunity to spot birds that can't be seen anywhere else in the state. Here are just a few of those species.

American avocet

The American avocet prefers a habitat of flat, shallow lakes and prairie ponds, so it is right at home in extreme western Minnesota.

It is a large, slender wading bird with a long, curving bill. The bill of the female curves upward a little more than that of the male.

The American avocet feeds by pushing its bill under water and moving it back and forth to stir up insects on the bottom.

American avocets nest in colonies of 10 to 12 birds.



The American avocet is among the birds that may be found in western Minnesota wetlands.

Snowy egret

The great egret is common throughout much of Minnesota during the spring and summer, but its cousin the snowy egret is typically seen only in far western portions of the state.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the plume on the back of the snowy egret's head was a popular item in ladies hats and the bird was nearly hunted to extinction.

The snowy egret can be distinguished from the great egret by its black bill and yellow feet. The great egret has a yellow bill and black feet.

Wilson's phalarope

Named for the ornithologist Alexander Wilson, the Wilson's phalarope usually visits only the west and west-central portions of Minnesota. The bird prefers this region because of its wetlands, which are ideal nesting habitat.

The Wilson's phalarope is un-

usual, because it has partially webbed toes, which allow it to spin its body on the water's surface to create small whirlpools. The whirlpools stir up food items, such as insects, which the phalarope picks off the surface.

Salt lake

Even more unusual are the birds that are found at Salt Lake in western Minnesota.

That's right, Minnesota has a lake that has salt water! The lake is about one-third as salty as the ocean.

This 312-acre Lake is located on the border of Minnesota and South Dakota in Lac Qui Parle County. It is Minnesota's only *alkaline* wetland. The salt comes from saline ground-water discharged from deep bedrock aquifers and shallow glacial aquifers.

Because it's has salt water it attracts an unusual assortment of birds. Piping plovers, sand pipers, willets, yellowlegs and the American avocet, along with over 150 additional species of birds have been identified on Salt Lake.

This unusual Minnesota habitat is preserved as a state Wildlife Management Area, which ensures these uncommon Minnesota visitors will have this lake to enjoy for generations to come. It also offers plenty of viewing opportunities, so visitors can watch these unusual visitors to our state.

Spring is the time for birds to build their nests

Each spring, all of the birds that spent the winter in warm southern climates return to Minnesota and begin building. They build thousands upon thousands of nests, from the Canadian border to Iowa. Everywhere birds are busy preparing for the arrival of the next generation.

Each bird species builds a nest unique to its species. Some are large, some are small, some are flat, others are round.

Birds use a wide variety of materials to build their nests, from the large tree branches used by bald eagles, to the mud barn swallows use to build their nests, to delicate spider webs used by humming birds. Each bird species has its own signature style.

Some birds, such as bluebirds or woodpeckers, prefer to nest in hollow trees. Bald eagles and ospreys prefer to build their nest high atop of large trees. Cliff swallows dig holes in the sides of limestone cliffs to nest. Grebes build floating nests. Cowbirds do



not build nests, but use the nests of other birds.

Some birds, such as the bald eagle, return to the same nest each year and add to it every spring. Others, such as the cardinal, build a new nest every year.

There are some birds that nest together like the great blue heron, which creates groups of nests called rookeries. Dozens of pairs of great blue herons gather each spring to nest and raise young.

There are birds like the crow that seem to be careless in their nest building. Their nests are sloppy and poorly built. In contrast, the Baltimore oriole works care-

fully to weave a hanging nest.

Some species of birds will nest in houses or boxes created by humans. These birds include wrens, wood ducks, chickadees and bluebirds. One of the best ways to watch birds nest is to put bird houses in your yard or at school. You will be able to watch the birds carry nesting materials, see

when baby birds are born and watch the mother feed the babies.

If you don't have a bird house, you can look for nesting birds. But once the leaves begin to pop out on trees during the spring, it can be difficult to spot nests. One of the best ways to locate a nest is to watch bird activity. If you see birds caring material such as grass or twigs, watch where they go. You should be able to spot their nest, but don't get too close, you may scare them away.

If you find an active nest, use a pair of binoculars to watch the parents and young from a safe distance.

Prairie chicken

Continued from page 1

distinct mating calls. One is a low "whoom-a-oom" and the other is a high pitched yodel. They also inflate the sacs on their necks, raise the feathers on their head to look like large horns, and stamp their

feet, as they dance to attract the females. They often leap and whirl in the air, and charge at other males with their heads down.

The females make their nests in the tall prairie grass. The nests are typically well-hidden indentations in the ground, which are lined with the stems of prairie grass and leaves. Usually they lay about one

dozen eggs sometime between April and June. The eggs hatch in 23-24 days.

Because the prairie chicken nests on the ground, its eggs and young often fall victim to a variety of predators, including coyotes, foxes, badgers and skunks.

Watch for spring's earliest blooming flowers

The temperatures are beginning to warm, the snow will be disappearing and spring is coming. Soon Minnesota's wild places will be sprouting with life as plants emerge for a new growing season.

Among the earliest signs of spring is the first wave of wild flowers to awaken in woods and fields.

The spring's earliest wildflowers are typically lightly colored white and yellow delicate flowers. Even before leaves appear on trees, flowers begin blooming.

► **Dutchman's breeches:** One of the earliest to emerge is the Dutchman's breeches, which gets its name because the flower looks like a pair of pants hanging upside-down. The flower blooms and disappears in April before many plants even begin to emerge. The flower is highly dependent on bumblebees for pollination.

► **Bloodroot:** Another early spring wildflower is the bloodroot,



which blooms in late April and early May. It has a similar shape to a tulip before it completely opens, but its color is always white, with a slight touch of violet. The bloodroot's toxic juice was used by Native Americans as a dye for clothing and as a face paint.

► **Early meadow-rue:** Lightly colored green, purple or yellow, the early meadow-rue resembles a jelly fish with its many pedals hanging downward. It is found in the woods in April and May.

► **Trout lily:** One of early spring's most beautiful flowers is the dwarf trout lily. It has pedals that are yellow outside and a bronze inside.

The flower gets its name from the mottled markings on the leaves, which resembles the markings on a trout. The flower is found in woodlands in April and May.

The dwarf trout lily is one of Minnesota's most endangered species.

► **bellwort:** With its long drooping yellow flower and leaves it is easy to see how the bellwort got its name. Its hanging flower closely resembles a bell. The bellwort is another woodland flower.

► **Marsh marigold:** One of the most brightly colored flowers of early spring is the marsh marigold. Its bright yellow pedals are hard to miss during a walk in wet areas during April and May. The marsh marigold is also known as the cowslip, because it is poisonous to cows.

Learn more about the Minnesota Conservation Federation...

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