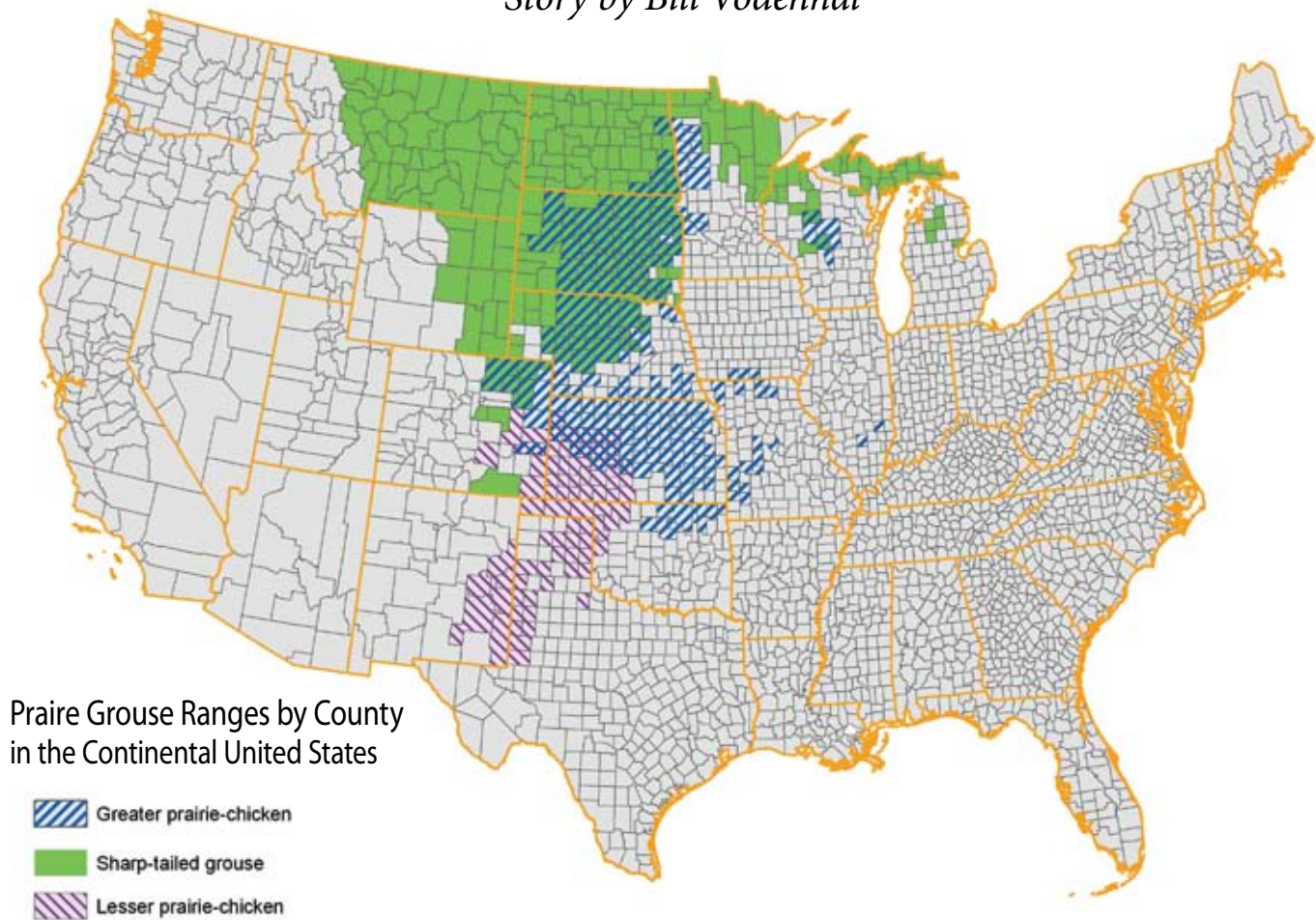


A North American Strategy

Biologists Prepare Prairie Grouse Plan

Story by Bill Vodehnal



Historical accounts say that in 1874, 50,000 greater prairie-chickens were shipped to market from just six eastern Nebraska counties. Back then, it wasn't uncommon for a hunter to shoot 50 to 200 birds per day. We'll never experience a similar abundance of prairie grouse, but it is fun to dream about that wonderful past and the heritage we've inherited. Lesser and greater prairie-chicken and sharp-tailed grouse numbers have plummeted from those vintage years, but through the Prairie Grouse Management Strategy, we can strive towards habitat and population goals that will sustain prairie grouse in perpetuity.

The Prairie Grouse Management Strategy is part of the larger effort by the North American Grouse Partnership to conserve the 11 species of grouse in North America. Primarily funded by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, The North American Grouse Management Strategy is a cooperative effort between state and federal agencies, academic institutions, private individuals, and non-governmental organizations to restore and manage healthy populations of grouse throughout North America. The strategy was endorsed at the 2005 North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conferences by the Resident Game Bird Working Group.

The planning goal for prairie grouse is to manage, conserve, enhance, and restore grassland ecosystems within the Great Plains and prairie grouse habitat in other regions for greater and lesser prairie chickens, and sharp-tailed grouse. Ultimately, this conservation work will create habitat conditions to support viable and thriving grouse populations throughout their native range.

Work began on the Prairie Grouse Plan during the summer of 2005 with formation of a steering committee to develop a draft outline and timeline for the plan. The goal is to have a draft plan completed by the 2007 North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference. It is an arduous but attainable goal, because dedicated professionals across the grouse range are working to make it happen. Prairie grouse biologists across the Central Great Plains were asked to provide guidance, knowledge, data, writing skills, and time towards this effort, and they graciously agreed to do so.

The planning process began with a status report of the current distribution and abundance of the three prairie grouse species. Each state and province within the range were asked to solicit staff input in order to update range maps and provide a general abundance value based on known prairie grouse leks. This map will continue to be updated and a protocol will be developed to better address distribution and abundance.

When complete, the Prairie Grouse Management Plan will have six chapters: Introduction, Ecosystem Diversity Assessment, Greater Prairie-Chicken Conservation, Sharp-tailed Grouse Conservation, Lesser Prairie-Chicken Conservation, and Issues and Strategies of the Grassland Conservation Plan for Prairie Grouse. The Issues and Strategies chapter will address partnership development; monitoring populations and distributions; inventory and monitoring of ecosystem diversity conditions; private lands management needs; public

land management coordination and planning needs; harvest strategy evaluation; outreach, education, information transfer and technical assistance needed for landowners and public; and research needs.

Jon Haufler and Ecosystem Management Research Institute (EMRI) were contracted for the ecosystem diversity assessment for the plan. The assessment works under the premise that if adequate amounts of all historic ecosystems occur on the landscape, we can provide habitat for all native grassland species. Prairie grouse are the flagship species for grassland ecosystems.

EMRI uses an ecosystem diversity matrix computer program—a conservation planning tool that classifies ecosystems within a landscape according to ecological site and successional pathways, in response to historical disturbances. Essentially, it looks at how various ecosystems changed over time due to various fire and grazing regimes. Using this tool, we can decide how and where to enhance or restore habitats to sustain prairie grouse populations.

Along with the ecosystem diversity focus, individual prairie grouse plans will address needed amounts and distributions within the Great Plains, additional specific actions, and conservation actions for prairie grouse outside the Great Plains. The plan will utilize Bird Conservation Regions (BCR), similar to past management plans, to regionalize conservation actions.

Last summer, a planning session was held during the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies meeting. All state and provincial prairie grouse biologists were invited to attend. The intent of this meeting was to familiarize biologists with the ecosystem diversity assessment component of the plan; identify species-specific conservation needs, issues, and strategies; develop writing teams for each Bird Conservation Region; and develop a timeline for completion of the draft plan.

Prairie Grouse Steering Committee

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