

ADOPT-A-

Fall 2007

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

Prairie Chicken

NEWSLETTER

News from the Prairie Chicken Front

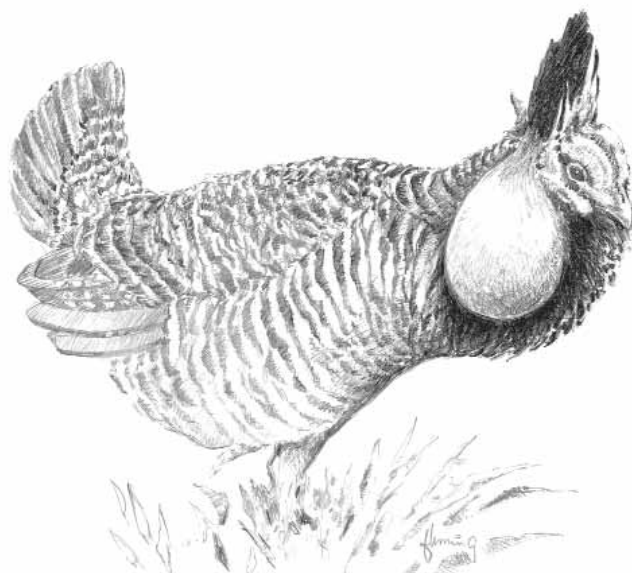
We're Back!

I must apologize to all who have been waiting for news on the most endangered bird in Texas. Between travel and other responsibilities, I have fallen way behind in my commitment to try to get at least three newsletters into your hands each year. I admire the way you have kept your commitment to these birds, in maintaining your contributions even when the news has been lacking, and I will try to do better on my end in the future.

So, what has been happening on the refuges and in the breeding facilities?

Nesting Efforts on the Refuge

Attwater's Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge reports once again that there have been attempts to nest on the prairie. Eighteen nests were found on the refuge this year, two of these being re-nest attempts.



The big difference this time was that some of the young were doing quite well several weeks after hatch. At least 14 chicks survived to six weeks of age, beating last year's numbers. Four unmarked birds were seen in early September, indicating that more than 14 chicks probably survived. Extremely wet weather conditions this summer made it difficult to assess this year's chick production.

The refuge continues to struggle with avian predators, a factor that also played a role in the release news this year, but a big difference is that the snake exclusion devices seem to be working around the nests.

Another big factor may have been the weather. While the refuge did get significant rainfall this year, it was not flooding rain, and as a result, food resources may have been easier for the adult birds to find during incubation and for the young birds after fledging.



PHOTO: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Release Report

This year there were three release sites. A private ranch in Goliad County was willing to release Attwater's Prairie Chickens on their lands, marking the first time Attwater's have been released on private ranch land. This release also marks the return of Attwater's Prairie Chickens to a county from which they had been considered extirpated.

Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge in Colorado County received 97 birds and released 95 birds. Two birds died prior to release.

Texas City Prairie Preserve in Galveston County received 44 birds and released 25. Ten of their birds were returned to a breeding facility for health reasons, and nine birds died prior to release.

The private land in Goliad County received 43 birds and released 36. Four birds died prior to release (one with evidence of apparent snakebite) and three were returned to the breeding facility for health reasons. These birds seem to be holding closer to the pens, with those dispersing being the birds showing up as mortalities.

At the time of writing, released birds seem to be doing well and the mortality rate is lower than in previous years.

Some of these birds were released earlier in the summer and so may be more adapted to the range before avian predators arrive in large numbers. Refuge staff is reporting flocks of 15–20 birds.

Some of the earlier released birds have to be recaptured to change their radios, and those captured to date seem to be in good health with substantial body weights. Of course, this good health makes capturing the birds a little more difficult.

What About the 2008 Nesting Season?

The breeding facilities requested about the same number of pairs this year as last year. If we can have the same success at most facilities, and if a couple of predation incidents can be resolved, next year we should be able to release approximately the same number of birds.

The Annual Census Report

This year our numbers were down slightly—44 birds were reported on the two preserves, down from 50 the year before. The good news is that the numbers were not lower despite weather and predation.

Houston Opens a New Facility

NASA has taken on the prairie chicken recovery effort! (No, we are not sending a bird up on the next shuttle.) Johnson Space Center has given the Houston Zoo a location for a new, larger breeding facility that moves the birds away from the noise and contact they had at the old facility. This is expected to improve production and survival numbers from the Houston facility.

Staff at the Space Center eagerly welcomed the birds. Plans are in place to expand this facility.

A Chance to See the Birds

Each year the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge hosts a single weekend in which they take people into the area normally closed to public access, to a lek where the Prairie Chickens are known to be dancing. This year the weekend will be April 12–13, 2008. While there is never a guarantee that you will actually see this rare beauty, this is probably your best opportunity. No reservations are necessary for these trips.



Whooping Crane Update

As the cranes are returning to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for the winter, staff at that refuge are optimistic this will be another good year for the birds. Reports at the time of writing indicated 50 birds were present, and many more were reported moving through the plains with several pair still well to the north. The Whooping Crane is certainly becoming a recovery success story!

Should you see Whooping Cranes migrating through Texas, please contact mark.klym@tpwd.state.tx.us to help us in tracking the movements of these birds.



Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
 4200 Smith School Road
 Austin, TX 78744

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