

Prairie chicken release bolsters iconic native

Forty-five greater prairie chickens were trapped in Nebraska in recent weeks and released at The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Dunn Range Prairie in northwest Missouri. The release will bolster small flocks of prairie chickens within the Grand River Grasslands, which includes Missouri Department of Conservation's (MDC) Pawnee Prairie. This is the second year of a three-year, bi-state program with Iowa to help an endangered and once-common species rebound in the two states.

The prairie chickens were released on a lek or booming ground where males do a courtship dance for females in spring. Six hens released on April 11 took flight with the ranch's bison herd grazing nearby, a scene reminiscent of pre-settlement times when prairie covered most of north Missouri and prairie chickens numbered almost a million statewide. Habitat losses due to farming and urban sprawl have reduced native grasslands to mere fragments and prairie chickens to only a few hundred birds.

Earlier restoration efforts in nearby Iowa prompted some prairie chickens to return to traditional lek sites At Dunn Ranch and Pawnee Prairie in Harrison County. Biologists were encouraged by the trend and counted as many as 65 birds in the spring of 2008. But harsh winters followed and heightened natural mortality. Extremely rainy and cool nesting seasons also occurred, eliminating nesting success. The spring lek counts dwindled to only a few birds.

Conservation partners in the Grand River Grasslands began a translocation of prairie chickens trapped in Nebraska and released at Dunn Ranch and at public grassland in Iowa to the north. All birds translocated are given leg bands. Hens released in Missouri are also outfitted with small radio telemetry transmitters. Biologists track them through nesting, brood rearing and summer seasons to learn habitat preferences, which can guide future land management.

During one count this spring, TNC staff found 12 prairie chickens on the lek, seven males and five females. No females had radio collars, which could indicate survival of original birds and reproduction success from last spring. Two of the males had leg bands showing they were released last year, and one male was released two years ago in Iowa.

"I'm hopeful and encouraged by what we've seen so far," said Dave Hoover, MDC wildlife management biologist. "We're seeing that we're getting some survival and some reproduction."

This spring's release at Dunn Ranch included 25 males and 20 females. On April 14, Hoover was able to track 14 of the hens on radio and more may have been just beyond range. The tracking will enable biologists to count how many hens nest in the area and possibly to later spot broods. A similar prairie chicken release was done this spring at Iowa public lands north of Dunn Ranch.

The Grand River Grasslands was started to help all prairie species and waterways in a cooperative effort between MDC, TNC, private landowners and conservation agencies in Iowa. This year, MDC is increasing efforts in the area with a Comprehensive Conservation Strategy. Habitat management will be heightened on public lands. But also a focus area for expertise, grant and cost-sharing services will be broadened for private landowners wishing to improve native grassland habitat and stream management.

Prairie chickens are an indicator species for overall grassland health. The birds, considered a grassland grouse, have shown a propensity to travel long distances and intermingle between flocks, Hoover said. Working on a larger scale to restore a functioning grassland ecosystem will help all prairie species. The Grand River Grasslands also offers people a unique and scenic place for people to enjoy nature and the outdoors.

For more information on native prairie plants and creatures, go to <http://www.mdc.mo.gov>. Information on TNC's Dunn Ranch and the Grand River Grasslands: <http://www.bit.ly/RmQ4Rr>.