LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN

Tympanuchus pallidicintus (Threatened Colorado)

Colorado is a member of a five-state team working to conserve the habitat of lesser prairie-chickens.

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MOSTLY BROWN IN color with horizontal barring and short, rounded tails, lesser prairie-chickens are about the size of a small domestic chicken. Males have reddish-purple air sacs on the sides of their necks that inflate during courtship displays in spring.

These birds prefer sandy grassland areas that have an abundance of midgrasses, sandsage and yucca. They historically occupied the grasslands of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas and southeastern Colorado.

Populations have declined dramatically throughout their range during the past several decades, and biologists estimate that only about 50,000 breeding birds remain nationwide. As with the other prairie grouse species, the reason for the decline is a loss of native prairie as a result of agriculture and overgrazing by livestock.

Colorado's population currently numbers 1,200-1,600 breeding birds, located for the most part on the Comanche National Grassland near Campo in southeastern Colorado, which is administered by the U.S. Forest Service. In addition, several smaller pockets of these birds are found on private ranches south of Holly, east of Eads and south of the Cimarron River in the extreme southeastern corner of the state. In an effort to establish another population in eastern Colorado, some birds were released east of Pueblo in some sandsage-yucca habitat. This transplant is still being evaluated.

The Division of Wildlife has conducted studies of lesser prairie-chickens in Colorado, and biologists pinpointed the habitat preferences of these bids. By trapping, radio-collaring and releasing some of the lesser prairie-chickens that reside on the national grasslands, researchers have been better able to document the movements of these birds through the mating, nesting and brood-rearing seasons.

A five-state conservation team has been organized to identify management actions that will conserve lesser prairie-chickens and their habitat over all of their currently occupied range.