

PLAINS SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Tympanuchus phasianellus jamesi (Endangered Colorado)

THE PLAINS SHARP-TAILED grouse is a bird of Colorado's eastern grasslands. Sharp-tailed grouse closely resemble prairie-chickens except that sharp-tails have pointed tails, and the air sacs on the necks of males are a purplish color.

During the breeding season, March to June, sharp-tailed males congregate on specific areas known as leks in the early morning to impress nearby female grouse. The male performs a dance in which the wings are extended, the tail is raised vertically, the head is lowered and the entire body is horizontal to the ground. The bird's feet move rapidly and the tail feathers make a clicking noise. As an invitation to the females, sharp-tailed males cackle loudly and jump three to four feet in the air, rapidly bat-

ing their wings. This display is called the "flutter-jump."

In Colorado, plains sharp-tailed grouse formerly nested over much of the northern two-thirds of the eastern prairie, but the present population consists of several hundred birds in northern Weld County. Possibly a very few birds remain in Douglas County. No males have been seen on leks in the spring in recent years, although an occasional bird is seen in the county. The decline in Douglas County is the result of the conversion of grassland to housing and suburban developments. The resurgence of a population in northern Weld County is due to the restoration of agricultural croplands to grasslands, largely from lands enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and from habitat improvements made on Pawnee National Grasslands.

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Plains sharp-tailed grouse can be distinguished from prairie chickens by their purplish air sacs and pointed tail feathers.

