The Des Moines Register Online

Prairie chicken show worth the hassle

desmoinesregister.com /story/entertainment/2015/04/02/prairie-chicken-festival/70794642/



Male prairie chickens, like these at McCook, Neb., inflate their orange air sacs and raise their pennae (wing feathers that raise above their heads like jackrabbit ears) when dancing. Males try to out-perform one another to determine a pecking order that wins the prize: the hen. A hen will casually enter the lek and seemingly ignore the males vying for her attention. Despite her aloofness, she's sizing up one as her best potential mate. (Photo: Carol Schlegel/Special to the Register)

Rising at the unholy hour of 4 a.m., bundling in layers for an unseasonably cold spring day, then jostling down a gravel road to a prairie hinterland to shiver away the next two hours, sans coffee and restroom facilities — can we all agree this kind of cruel and unusual punishment is strictly for the birds?

In fact, it is. And when those birds happen to be male greater prairie chickens gathering for their annual courtship dance, which they perform at dawn from March to April on restored or virgin Midwest prairie, even caffeine deprivation and bladder inflation are forgiven.

A week ago, I huddled in an unheated rusty cattle trailer-turned-bird blind on the private pastureland of rancher Angus Garey in McCook, Neb., to view the courtship ritual (it'll be in Iowa this weekend) for the first time. Who'd have thunk, a pathologically late sleeper like me? But trust me, people. It was worth every inconvenience and the $100 cost to sit within spitting distance — maybe 10 feet — from the avian action.

Sometime before sunup, our group of a dozen birders heard the first rustle of wings. The prairie chickens swooped in one by one to the lek, their stage for the courtship dance. The lek is a patch of short-grass prairie (buffalo grass, in our case) on high ground that's surrounded by taller grasses like bluestem. It offers a clear view of any potential predators lurking at its perimeters because, let's face it: When you're a greater prairie chicken dancing for the ladies, the last thing you want is to have a coyote cut in.



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Every day during the season, at every lek, the show begins just as the stars start to fade and the sky turns from inky to indigo. Feathered bird legs stomp the earth. Pinnae — wing feathers that lift up above the head — snap to attention to resemble jackrabbit ears. Orange air sacs puff up like balloons on both sides of the neck. Then — wait for it — boom-boom-boom! The three-note booming calls begin, all for the love of a good hen, who may or may not show up. If she does, the dancing ramps up, each male doing his best to outperform the rest.

"They establish a pecking order, if you will," said Garey, a third-generation Hereford cattle rancher as lean, well-made and reliable as a Winchester. This is his fourth year to host tours on his virgin prairie, and he only schedules eight each season, with the last one April 18. But he's been watching the prairie chickens his entire life. "The hen stops in to shop, and the actual mating occurs elsewhere. She's entirely casual about the whole thing. She acts aloof, but the she's sizing them all up to see which one will make the best mate," he said.

Nebraska is the nation's stronghold for indigenous greater prairie chickens, but you don't have to travel there to catch the birds' spring courtship dance. Any time now through the middle of April, Iowans can witness the ritual closer to home and free of charge. The site is the Kellerton Grasslands Bird Conservation Area in Ringgold County, where nearly 2,000 acres of restored prairie grasslands host a sizable greater prairie chicken population reintroduced to Iowa from Nebraska.

This Saturday, April 4, will be an especially propitious day to attend. It's the 12th Annual Prairie Chicken Festival, and knowledgeable folks will be on hand to answer questions.



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There's no blind at the Iowa facility, so viewing can't be as up close and personal as what I experienced in Nebraska. (The Cornhusker State offers a total of five small-group tours like the one I attended, in various parts of the state.) Instead, it takes place from a viewing platform about 200 yards from the lek. Spotting scopes will be set up and binoculars will be available. But if you have your own optics, bring them.

Here's the good news: You'll see a lot of birds. "Monday, we saw about 35 males," said Stephanie Shepherd, a wildlife diversity biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

The dancing begins around 6 a.m., so arrive a little early to catch the full show. The birds start to disappear into the higher grasses at about 9 a.m. but the festival watch continues for another hour.

This avian performance, with its fancy footwork, stare-downs, booms and bird brawls, is hypnotic. It's also one of the few encounters with prairie life we share with our ancestors, who knew the vast native grasslands before agriculture diminished them. For these and reasons more personal, I'll gladly tumble out of bed at prime snooze time and brave the starry skies to attend this spectacle a few more times before the courting season ends.

Enjoy the dance.

If you go

WHAT: 12th Annual Prairie Chicken Festival.

WHERE: The bird-watching platform at the Kellerton Grasslands Bird Conservation Area, two miles west and one mile south of Kellerton. From Des Moines, take Interstate Highway 35 to the Iowa Highway 2 exit, travel west to to

two miles west of Kellerton, and go south about one mile on 300th Avenue. (If you pass the Ringgold Conservation Office, you've gone too far.)

WHEN: Saturday 6 to 10 a.m.

CHARGE: Free. The site is handicapped-accessible.

IN DES MOINES: From noon to 2 p.m. Saturday, head to Blank Park Zoo, 7401 S.W. Ninth St. in Des Moines, to watch the traditional prairie chicken dances performed by members of the Sioux Nation's Yankton Tribe.

Prairie Chicken dance tours in McCook, Neb.

For scheduling, contact, Carol Schlegel, executive director of McCook/Red Willow County Tourism, at 308-345-1200, ext. 318, or go to GoToMcCook.com.

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