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## Ranching For The Birds

Jane B. Koger

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PRAIRIE CHICKENS  
*Wade Parsons*

## *Ranching For The Birds*

After 30 years raising cattle in southeastern Chase County, I've started telling people that ranching is for the birds. Let me give you some context.



When my great-grandmother, Victoria Norton, was raising her family a few miles east of here in the late 1800s, *The Home Comfort Cookbook* (put out by the Wrought Iron Range Company) contained this recipe for the then-plentiful signature grouse of America's tall grasslands, the greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*):

*Boil in hot water until quite tender in all the joints except the breast; take out and rub all over with butter; salt, and pepper, and boil briskly with the breast; then take out again and with a lump of butter on each piece set in the oven for a very short time.*

Today the recipe for this increasingly rare bird focuses on conservation rather than cookery:

*Manage large, unbroken grassland blocks with areas of differential grazing intensity. Conduct controlled burning every three to four years to retard invasion of woody vegetation, remove accumulated residual and maintain prairie plant vigor.*

In early-day Chase County, greater prairie-chickens were a common sight and probably had been for thousands of years. Indian and pioneer alike undoubtedly gave sincere thanks over a plate of wild chicken during the lean seasons.

December 20, 1872

Chase County Leader

Wanted: At French's restaurant 1,000 prairie chickens and 1,500 rabbits.

Over time, hunting for sustenance gave way to sport and market demand. Although leaner, tougher and smaller

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Twenty years ago Kansas had an estimated census of over 500,000 greater prairie-chickens. Less than a decade later there were only 160,000.

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than domestic chickens, these exotic prairie game birds became popular on the menu in fancy restaurants from Chicago to New York City and were shipped out of Kansas and other Midwestern states by the barrelful.

Ironically, just over a century later avid birders now travel from those same urban locales to watch the last of a disappearing species do its annual mating dance in rural Kansas.

Although market exploitation took a toll on greater prairie-chickens, loss of habitat has always been more detrimental

to grassland birds than hunting.

My grandfather Roy Beedle had an abiding respect and affection for prairie-chickens and hunted them well into the mid-twentieth century—with his shotgun in the fall and with his camera in the spring. To be honest, because I didn't hunt greater prairie-chickens, they never really caught my attention until about six years ago, and by then they were already in trouble.

Scientists admit it's hard to estimate the population of a bird as secretive as the greater prairie-chicken, but counts taken in the spring—when the males are single-mindedly engaged in their colorful, dramatic, and noisy spring courtship displays—estimate that even here in the last bastion of tallgrass prairie, their numbers have declined dramatically.

Twenty years ago Kansas had an estimated census of over 500,000 greater prairie-chickens. Less than a decade later there were only 160,000. In our neighboring state of Missouri, the



BOBWHITE QUAIL  
*Wade Parsons*

population has dwindled to fewer than 500 birds.

By the time this came to my attention, I was in my early 50s and starting to give consideration to what kind of legacy I wanted to leave. I realized the planet already had enough Big Macs, but not nearly enough intact tallgrass prairie with diverse plants, animals and insects.

For the first time, I took a bird's-eye view of my land after spring pasture burning and asked myself: if I were a ground-nesting bird, where could I

safely lay my eggs and raise my offspring?

The answer was immediate and clear.

Although fire has always played an important role in the tallgrass prairie region, burning all my pastures every year—a practice popularized in the early 1980s—might be good for cattle, but it is terrible for the birds.

The answer to the next question that came to mind was not quite so clear: *Do ranchers have to choose between making a living or saving the grassland birds?*

In 2004, I started a seven-year

October 8, 1874

Chase County Leader

Dr. W. H. Cartter and Col. C. N. Sterry  
organize two hunting parties for a prairie  
chicken hunt. Dr. Cartter's party wins by a  
score of 92 to 87. The affair is followed by  
a game dinner.

experiment that I hoped would provide an answer I could live with. Instead of entirely burning my ranch every spring, I now burn only one-third of each pasture—a technique called patch-burn grazing—which attempts to mimic natural cycles and is actually more like how my grandparents and great-grandparents managed their pastures.

The good news is that this method creates not only the variety of landscapes the greater prairie-chickens require, but also suitable habitats for most other grassland birds, such as eastern meadowlark, grasshopper sparrow and bobwhite quail. The best news of all from a rancher's perspective is that we are getting satisfactory performance with our cattle, but not at a sacrifice of

habitat for the wilder residents.

I know it will take time for this new approach to catch on among other ranchers and pasture managers. Traditions die hard and patch-burning requires more time, labor and equipment. Still, I'm encouraged that the technique is being used at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and I know several other ranchers in the Flint Hills who are giving it a try.

I know I can't single-handedly save the prairie-chicken from extinction, but at least this is a place to start.

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*Jane B. Koger is a fourth-generation Chase County cattle rancher. She takes guests out on her land each spring to see the annual greater prairie-chicken courtship display, which can be arranged online at: [http://www.tallgrassretreats.com/Prairie\\_Chickens.html](http://www.tallgrassretreats.com/Prairie_Chickens.html)*

NOTES



LITTLE BLUESTEM  
*Wade Parsons*