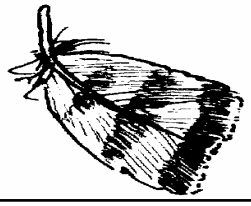
MINNESOTA PRAIRIE CHICKEN SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER
Volume 49 No.3 Summer 2023

The above image of the original watercolor "Fifty Chickens" by your Editor was one of dozens of fund-raising items at this year's 50th Annual MPCS meeting held in Rothsay. Alan Johnson of Fertile helped the cause and now owns this artwork that is another piece of history for our proud organization.

Editor's Note: A sincere thanks to all those who participated in a really enjoyable day at our 50th Annual Meeting this past April! Your support keeps the prairie habitats healthy and the chickens booming! Special thanks to Doug Wells, Doug Hedtke, Stacy Salvevold, Travis Issendorf and others for organizing a great gathering! Have a great Fall! RHH



FEATHER FEATURES

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50th Annual Meeting Review ***by Ross H. Hier***

Board member Doug Wells welcomed attendees to the meeting at 09:28. Then, Rothsay Mayor Joe Tillman, welcomed the crowd to The Prairie Chicken Capitol of Minnesota. He noted how proud the people of Rothsay and the surrounding area were of their pioneer heritage, work ethic, neighborly attitudes and the blend of agriculture and protected grasslands. All of which are represented nicely by the Greater prairie chicken; an emblem of which is represented on all City of Rothsay vehicles, etc. Of course, Big Boomer is known throughout the region and draws travelers from far and wide to be photographed in front of the giant prairie chicken statue that Art Fosse and team built many years ago. Little Boomer (who just happened to be "showing-off his plumage" outside the Community Center (the former Rothsay School)) is a favorite at local and regional parades. Mayor Tillman wished the Society all the best and thanked members for their help in help maintaining Big and Little Boomer.

Stacy Salvevold reported on the early morning field trip. It was a brisk start to the day but the weather was quite nice as the sun rose higher in the sky. The group looked at a

lot of grasslands in the Rothsay area. Snow melt had created numerous ephemeral wetlands in crop fields and in grasslands. They saw many species of waterfowl … 16 species in all! Prairie chickens were observed too and in good numbers; 77 in all. A nice outing on the western Minnesota landscape.

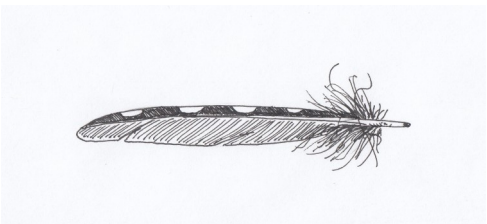
Fittingly, the first talk was entitled "Beginnings", presented by our 2 Directors-At-Large (and Charter Members) Terry Wolfe and Dan Svedarsky. Wolfe quoted from a 1973 editorial in a local newspaper from outside the Minnesota prairie chicken range in which the individual thought it was ridiculous that an organization was being formed to help prairie chickens! Svedarsky had numerous black and white photos and gave verbal tributes to many who helped get MPCS up and running; e.g. the Hamerstroms, Jerry Maertens (first wildlife manager at Crookston) and Grady Mann of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). He also quoted from an important letter from Roger Holmes (Minnesota Dept of Natural Resources) to the Minnesota Legislature requesting funds to acquire habitat in the prairie chicken to initiate habitat protection. That letter was dated 12 December 1974.

The next speaker was Geoff Barnard. He was the Director for The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Minnesota in the 1970s and early 1980s. Barnard gave a very interesting presentation; mixing some of his life history in with the aspirations of a relatively young conservation organization. In the 1970s, there was still much native grassland on Minnesota's west side. Some had knowledge of sites but tying sites together with funding was a major hurdle to be jumped. One of the earliest financial supporters was Katherine Ordway. Barnard told the amazing story of how Katherine's father (owned a plumbing equipment business in St. Paul) loaned 2 men $13,000.00 for a business adventure they had in mind. The venture did well, an understatement, as it became known as Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M) and provided the Ordway family with substantial wealth. Early in his directorship, Barnard oversaw the first fundraising efforts by TNC for a "larger land project" that contained numerous sites for possible acquisition. Funding tied together with native prairie tracts marked on township maps by Richard Pemble got things started in securing some of the prairie tracts. Pemble, Steve Oney, Dan Svedarsky and Terry Wolfe all contributed with scouting prairie tracts. Oney spent much of his time with TNC looking at each and every tract on Pemble's ever-important maps. Thus, the great campaign to preserve grasslands in the prairie chicken range of Minnesota was rolling. Barnard ended his talk with a short story about the Western Prairie tract (now called Rice-Holt Prairie). It was threatened by a powerline that was being built and was configured to go right through Western Prairie. Barnard noted the many "twists

and turns" in the confrontations before TNC was finally able to have the proposed development go around Western Prairie.

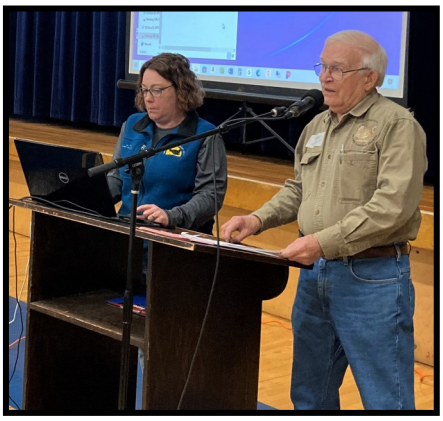
Geoff Barnard

The next speaker was Neal Feeken (TNC); he provided the audience with information about TNC's Prairie Recovery Project in Minnesota. He thanked field biologists Liz Beery and Travis Issendorf for their past and continued efforts in grassland protection and management. To date, approximately 7,734 acres have been acquired and 178,800 acres have been enhanced and/or restored, using Outdoor Heritage (Lessard-Sams) funds. Within the prairie chicken range, 4,233 acres have been protected and 37,548 enahanced and/or restored. Tools used to manage various grasslands for continued diversity and openness include grazing, prescribed fire, woody plant removal and native seed harvest. TNC is part of a native prairie seed consortium and in 2022 there was 35,000 pounds of native seed harvested by various entities in that consortium. TNC also has a partnership with USFWS and that partnership has led to the acquisition of 2,638 acres and 5, 217 acres under protective easements. The partnership's goal is to protect 7, 855 acres.

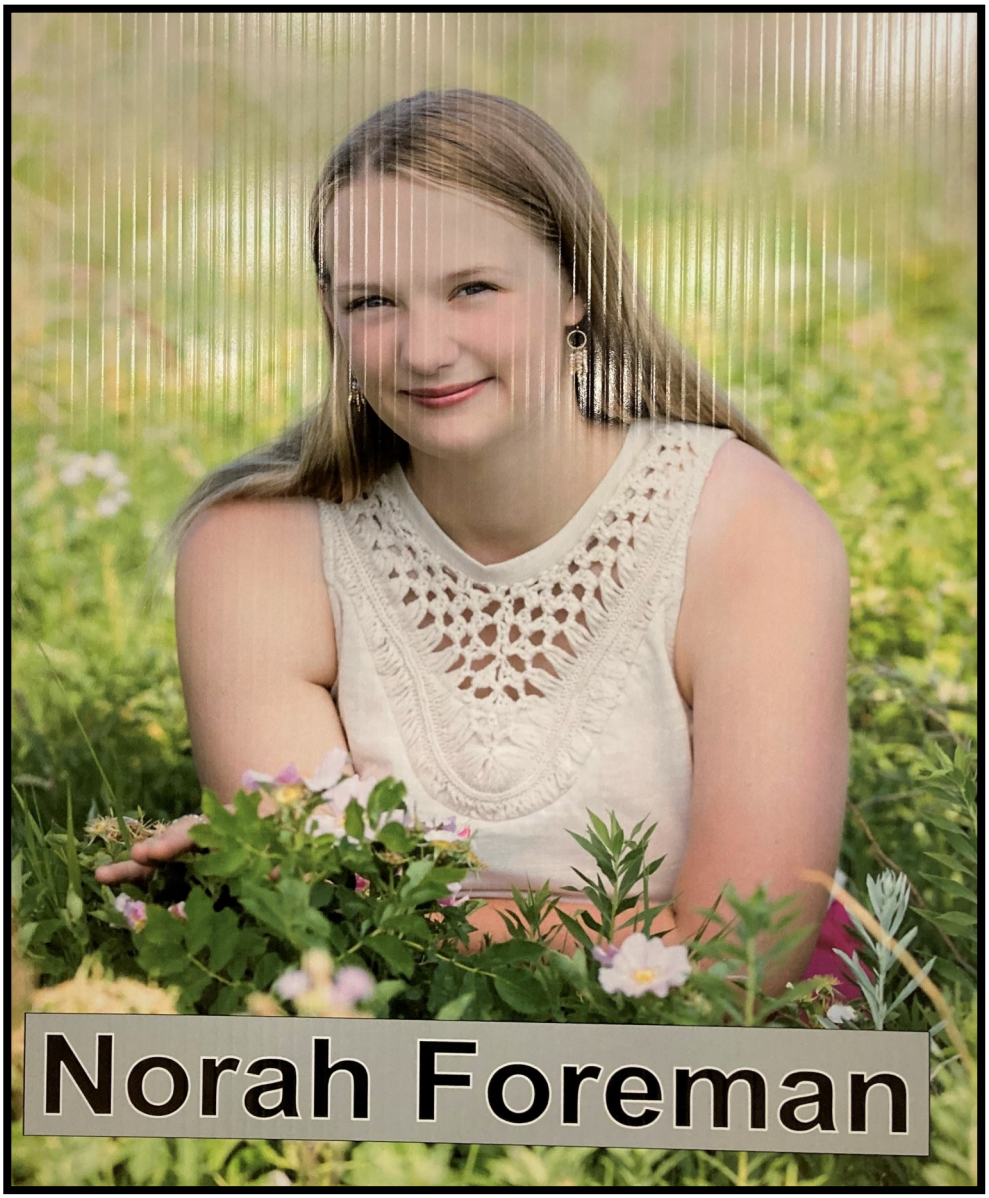


Neal Feeken

Our Annual Scholarship was presented next by Board members Terry Lydell and Stacy Salvevold. The scholarship is for $1,000.00 and MPCS is excited to help out this year's winner. Her name is Norah Foreman. A native of Minnesota, she is currently a Junior at Montana State University in Bozeman where she is majoring in Conservation Biology and Ecology. She is very aware of increased extinction rates of the world's treasury of Nature and hopes to help educate people about this issue in future years. She was unable to attend our meeting but was truly grateful to garner this year's MPCS Scholarship.



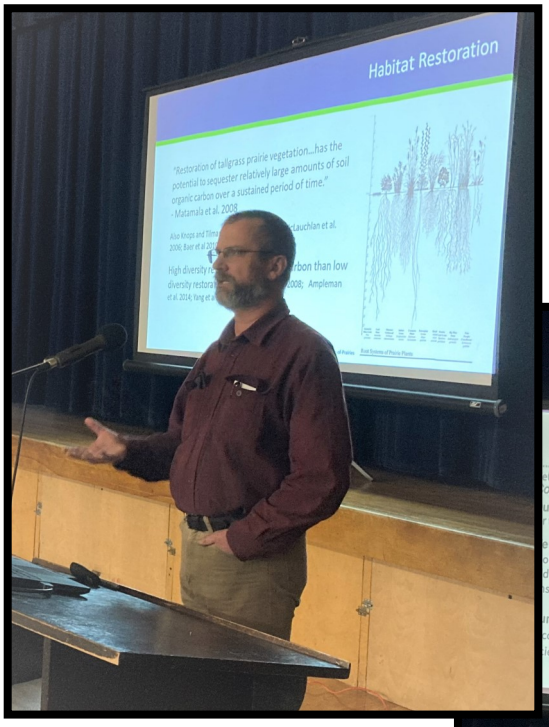
Stacy Salvelvold and Terry Lydell



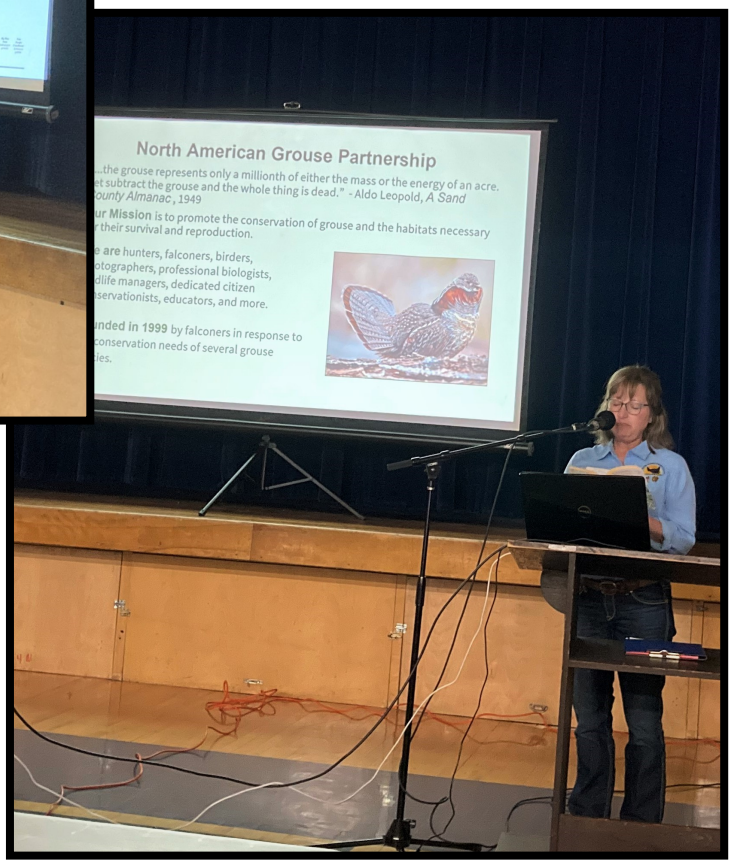
Dr. Greg Hoch of the MNDNR gave a talk on prairie habitat restoration and carbon storage. He noted trees are not the only means for carbon storage on our planet.

Following that presentation was Jodie Provost representing the North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP). Jodie is no stranger to those in prairie grouse circles. She recently retired from the Minnesota Dept of Natural Resources (MNDNR) after years of working diligently on Minnesota's open land grouse species; particularly Sharp-tailed grouse. She explained that the NAGP was founded by a group of falconers in 1999. Currently, the group's efforts are on Lesser prairie

chickens, Sage grouse, Greater prairie chickens and Sharp-tailed grouse. The approach to grouse issues follows science, planning, facilitating management, partnerships and outreach. Examples of their projects include the Lesser Prairie Chicken Landowner Alliance, Interstate Work Group for Greater Prairie Chickens and Sharp-tails, and involvement with The Grouse Trail at this year's Pheasant Fest held this past February in Minnesota.



Dr. Greg Hoch



Jodie Provost

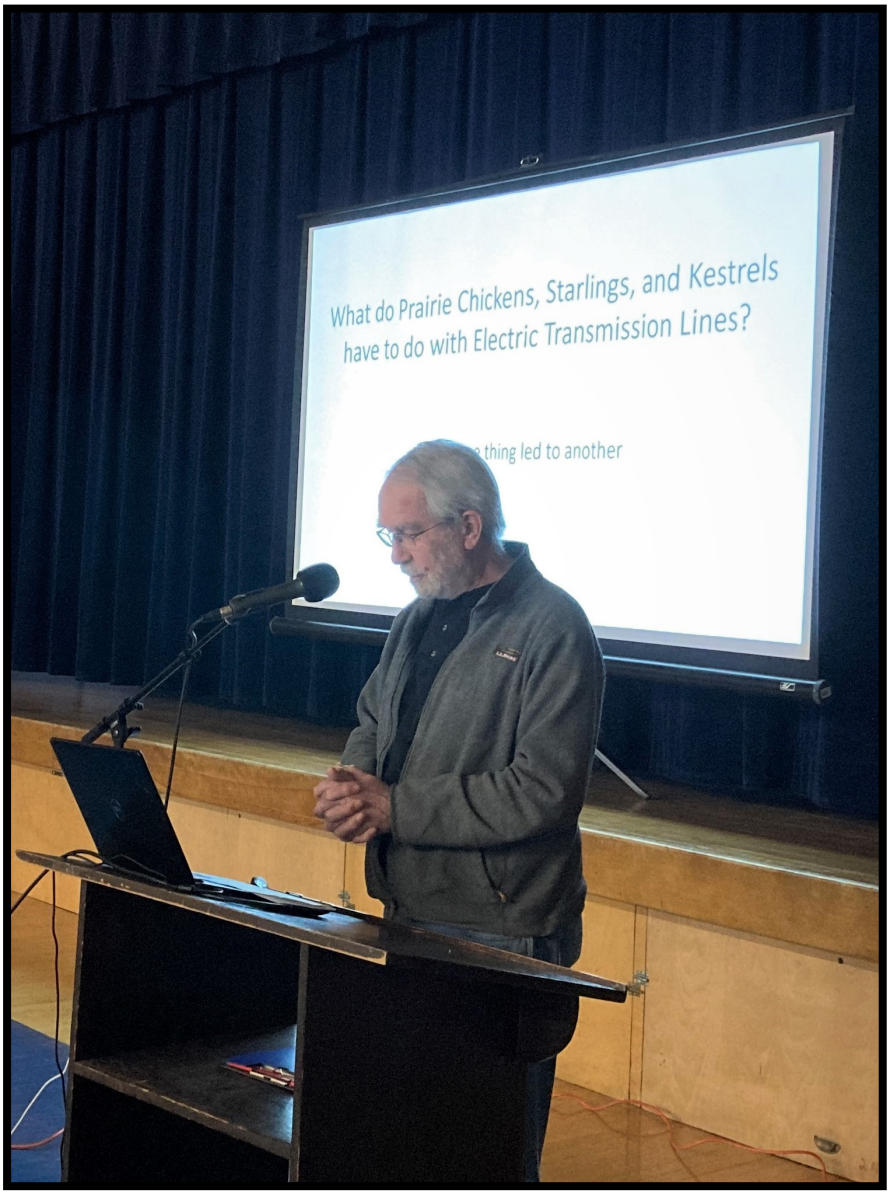
The next speaker was Jim Uhrinak from Wisconsin. He and the late Dr. John Toepfer often talked about knowledge held within the Mandan tribe of North Dakota regarding the westward movement and possible species boundary of Greater prairie chickens as Europeans started to appear on the vast prairies. Jim

noted a Mandan individual named Tony Mandan. Language issues during early years of white explorers did not allow for differentiation between Greater prairie chickens and Sharp-tails. Jim noted there are still geographical locations (e.g., distinctive buttes or lone geological features) that could possibly be tied to narratives and written notes about sightings of Greater prairie chickens or Sharp-tails. He also explained a unique trapping method for these birds using snares set below the "horns" of a Native saddle frame (generally constructed of green rawhide, antler and wood).

Jim Uhrinak

Charter member and former MNDNR Wildlife Manager John Schladweiler gave the next presentation. A thought provoking and very interesting talk on powerlines and bird nesting in an area of southwestern Minnesota. This scientific adventure started after there was word about a booming Greater prairie chicken near Pipestone, Minnesota. This was in 2012 and the bird was photographed displaying on numerous occasions. It was the first Greater prairie chicken observed in this part of southwestern Minnesota since the early 1900s. John took it upon himself to field check the area in 2015,2016 and 2017. A single prairie chicken was seen and heard (potentially more than one bird) during those springtime scouting trips. To ensure these findings were secured for historical context, John wrote an article of his findings and published it in The Loon. It was during these outings that John noticed European starlings carrying nesting material in an area near Pipestone; an area with

few if any trees. Further searching found the birds nesting in the “hollow arms” of extremely large power poles. Many new power lines contain incredibly large metal poles to carry the load of the lines. He found there were 6 “cavities” per pole and many contained nesting starlings. All power lines are “not created equally” but John’s rough estimate for a 15-mile stretch of power lines yielded about 378 potential nesting cavities. He also found American kestrels in association with nesting starlings. Kestrels may also be using these openings for nesting.



John Schladweiler

Prior to lunch, the Society presented one of its coveted “Friend of the Prairie Chicken” Award. Board member Doug Wells presented the award to Ruth Dow of rural Rothsay. She was given the award for her steadfast desire to keep much of her land in grass and floral cover. This, despite strong pressures in much of the prairie chicken range, to convert grasslands to row crop agriculture. She has also been very generous with access over the years for people to watch and listen to prairie chickens on her property. Her land is so important as it adds to the mosaic of excellent habitat for prairie chickens and other prairie wildlife in the Rothsay region. Congratulations Ruth! Well done!

Ruth Dow accepting her “Friend of the Prairie Chicken” award from Doug Wells. Her relatives, Walter and Nate Paler joined-in the celebration.

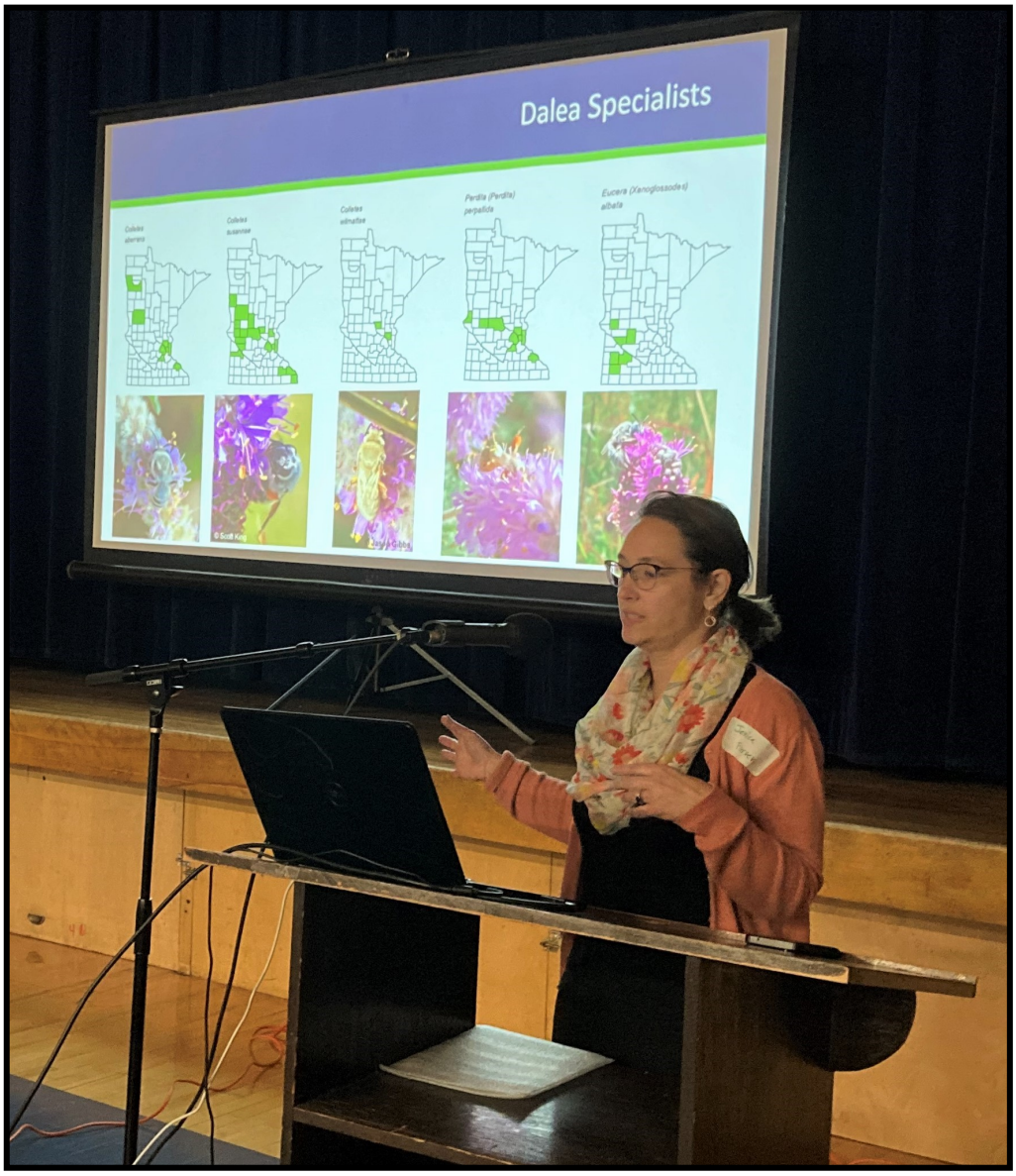
**********Lunch Break for catered Lasagna and sides**********

After a very good meal and chatter, Board member Sara Vacek presented this year's Art Contest winners. The winner of the 6-years old and under was Mayumi Vechirko, age 5 from St. Michael; she was not present. In the 7 to 12-years old age-class, 8-year old Audra Reiffenberger from Sauk Center was the winner. Lydia Holmgren, age 16, was the winner in the 13 to 18-years old age-class. Photos below were provided by Leah Holmgren.

Art Contest winners; Lydia Holmgren and Audra Reiffenberger with contest organizer and Board member Sara Vacek.

Dr. Jessica Petersen, invertebrate ecologist from the MNDNR, gave a very interesting talk on “Bees on the Prairie”. Bees are a group of insects that are some of the most important pollinators on the prairie. While many other insect groups visit flowers, bees are generally considered the most efficient and effective for the act of pollination as their branched hairs assist in gathering and moving pollen. They are also the only creatures actively moving pollen for their larvae. The relationship between plants and bees can be very general or extremely specialized. Some plants have specialized morphologies that restrict access to their pollen to specific bee species. Some specialist bee species feed their larvae pollen from only a certain genus or family of plants. Nearly 30% of Minnesota’s bee species are specialists. Minnesota has over 500 species of bees. Baseline data on Minnesota’s bees is lacking. Before the Minnesota Biological Survey started studying bees in 2015, very little was known about bee species diversity in the state. Bees have been sampled in all Minnesota counties from 2015 to 2022, Over 55,000 specimens have been collected. Results include 26 new state records and many new county records. Many species are specialists on prairie plants (e.g., alumroot, purple prairie clover, leadplant). In general, diverse plant communities support diverse bee communities. Diverse prairie restorations are helpful in supporting bee communities. Prescribed

fire has recently been documented to increase ground nesting bee abundance in prairies. Patchy fires may create the best habitats for numerous groups of bees. There are now numerous venues to learn more about bees including a book by Minnesota author Heather Holm and documentation assistance such as Bumble Bee Watch.



Dr. Jessica Petersen

Tanner Bruse gave a quick review of the “bond between MPCS and Pheasants Forever” along with Sabin Adams via video stream. Needless to say, this has been a marvelous relationship for habitats in the prairie chicken range of Minnesota. MPCS has been able to garner Outdoor Heritage Council (Lessard-Sams) funds and Pheasants Forever has provided the administrative muscle to help secure more prairie habitats in northwest and western Minnesota. Keep supporting the Outdoor Heritage funding.

Tanner Bruse

Our last speaker was Audubon’s Dr. Dale Gentry. He provided an outline of Audubon’s new Conservation Ranching Initiative.

The 50th Annual Business Meeting was called to order at 14:31 by Pres. Brian Winter. The meeting was followed by our annual raffle event; attendees really showed their passion in supporting the Society, prairies, prairie chickens and all native grassland flora and fauna. Thank you for your wonderful support! Thus ended an exciting and memorable 50th Annual MPCS Meeting.

MPCS President Brian Winter and VP/Secr/Newsletter Ed/Archivist Ross H. Hier in front of Little Boomer on the day of our 50th Annual Meeting in Rothsay.

A great photo of Charter Members of MPCS in front of Little Boomer. From left to right are Terry Wolfe, Jim Uhrinak, Chuck Vukonich, Dan Svedarsky and John Schladweiler. There's a lot of grand prairie work done for flora and fauna and humanity by these five individuals over the years!

Got Wings (or Feathers)??

A New Study of Hybridization Between Greater Prairie Chickens and Sharp-tailed Grouse – Hunters, We Need Your Help!

By Katelin Goebel, MNDNR Wildlife Biologist

Researchers from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (led by Charlotte Roy), North Dakota Game and Fish Department, and University of North Dakota are beginning a study to explore whether habitat changes and/or behavior are influencing Sharp-tailed grouse expansion into prairie chicken range in northwest Minnesota. In this region, prairie chicken booming grounds are disappearing, Sharp-tail dancing grounds are increasing, and hybridization between the species seems to be increasing. It is unclear whether Sharp-tail expansion and hybridization is contributing to prairie chicken declines through production of hybrid offspring, if the observed changes are driven by increasing woody encroachment of grasslands, or whether both factors could be at play.

An important first step in our research is understanding the current status of hybrids in the prairie chicken and Sharp-tail populations. To do this, we need your help! **Sharp-tail and prairie chicken hunters are encouraged to voluntarily submit 5-10 large wing or tail feathers from each harvested bird. Feathers from each bird should be in a separate paper envelope (please do not mix feathers from different birds together), labeled with the county of harvest, and mailed to:**

Grouse Research
DNR Regional Headquarters
1201 E Highway 2
Grand Rapids, MN 55744

We will use these feather samples to examine the genetics of prairie chickens and Sharp-tails in northwest Minnesota. This data will allow us to understand the extent to which hybridization is currently occurring across the landscape. Our goals are to inform prairie chicken and Sharp-tail management, so that both species can persist. We will share our findings with you in a future newsletter!

A Different Kind of Lek Visitor in Northwest Minnesota

By Katelin Goebel, MNDNR Wildlife Biologist

On an early, brisk April morning, I set up my ground blind at a prairie chicken lek in Norman County, MN and waited for the show to begin. First one at a time, then in groups of 3-4, male prairie chickens seemingly materialized out of thin air and swooped down to claim their turf. Their cackling calls encouraged others to arrive at the lek, and the prairie was soon alive before me. Birds darted back and forth right outside my window, stomping their feet and booming as they'd been practicing all spring.

As the sun poked above the horizon, the cacophony grew as other birds joined in the call that many prairie-lovers know well. As prairie chickens boomed, clucked, and whooped, I could hear the clicking and popping of a few Sharp-tailed grouse nearby but just out of view. Off in the distance, Sandhill cranes' rattling calls echoed across the open fields. A few meadowlarks belted out their melodic, lilting songs to greet the sun. On this particular morning, though, I was listening for a different sound.

Sure enough, a new call emerged from the edge of the lek. It was neither the echoey boom of a prairie chicken or the snappy "chilk" of a Sharp-tail. It sounded almost as if a prairie chicken was trying his best to boom but ran out of steam halfway through. The sound repeated a few more times, and as if the bird was out of breath, the calls stopped. I knew the bird I came here for was present, but just out of sight – a prairie chicken × sharp-tailed grouse hybrid, a cross between the two species.

The hybrid stepped out from behind a clump of tall, dried grass. Overall, his color was more like a prairie chicken – dark brown, but with a lighter breast. His tail wasn't quite typical of a prairie chicken or Sharp-tail, as it was mostly rounded but came to a pointed tip. The most distinguishing features of this hybrid were his purple air sacs on his neck, which match a Sharp-tail, in contrast to a prairie chicken's golden ones. The hybrid's pinnae were also distinct. On a prairie chicken, these feathers on top of the head stand straight up like bunny ears while displaying. A Sharp-tail has no pinnae. This hybrid, however, had medium-sized pinnae that looked much like cat ears.

In addition to the strange look and sound of the Greater prairie chicken × Sharp-tailed grouse hybrid, its display behaviors showed a mix between the two species. Whereas Sharp-tails hold their wings straight out while stomping their feet and scuttling around (resembling a taxiing airplane), prairie chickens keep their wings tight to their body. The hybrid held his wings mid-way out, awkwardly, as he stomped and called. Other hybrids may blend in more easily with birds at leks, since hybrids' traits and behaviors appear to occur on a spectrum. After a hybrid breeds with a pure prairie chicken or Sharp-tail, its offspring (called "backcrosses") are even tricker to identify because they look more like the pure parent.

This peculiar lek visitor is becoming more common in northwest Minnesota. Both prairie chickens and Sharp-tails are classified as Species in Greatest Conservation Need in the state, as they have faced declines largely due to habitat loss. As prairie chickens have declined in the northern portion of their range, Sharp-tail range has expanded south. Wildlife managers and researchers have observed more instances of Sharp-tails and hybrids at prairie chicken leks in recent years, with reports as far south as Clay County. The number of Sharp-tail dancing grounds has also increased in areas inhabited by prairie chickens.

Wildlife managers report that Sharp-tails are aggressive toward prairie chickens at leks. Fighting is a common behavior on spring mornings, as male prairie chickens spar to gain preferable territory near the center of the lek and increase their chances of successfully breeding. If hybrids and Sharp-tails breed with female prairie chickens instead, however, the results are hybrid offspring – birds that aren't quite prairie chickens nor Sharp-tails. The long-term effects of hybridization on Minnesota's prairie chicken population are unknown, but this is a potential concern for this species that is already declining. As production of hybrid offspring increases, the gene pools of these species mix and the number of pure prairie chicken and Sharp-tail chicks is reduced.

Researchers from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (led by Charlotte Roy), North Dakota Game and Fish Department, and University of North Dakota are beginning a study to better understand prairie chickens, Sharp-tails, and hybrids in northwest Minnesota (see the article on Pg 17, "*A new study of hybridization between prairie chickens and Sharp-tailed grouse – hunters, we need your help!")*. Through this work, we aim to inform management of prairie chickens and Sharp-tails so that both species can persist.

From left to right: Sharp-tailed grouse, hybrid, and Greater prairie chicken. Images courtesy of Jesse Kolar, North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Minnesota Dept of Natural Resources Announces New Resident Gamebird Consultant

The Section of Wildlife is welcoming Nate Huck back to the state as the new Resident Gamebird Consultant. He will be stationed in Brainerd and will serve as the statewide specialist for gamebird management. His work will key-in on management of wild turkeys, grouse species and other resident gamebirds. Originally from Wisconsin, Nate has a B.Sc. degree in Wildlife Ecology from University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point and a M.Sc. degree from Texas A & M-Kingsville where he researched diets of Northern pintail hens along the Texas coast. He previously has worked with the MNDNR and with natural resources agencies in Wyoming and Pennsylvania.

The Adventures of Tympie Nuchus

By Ross H. Hier

Pieces of the Prairie

Curleycup Gumweed (*Grindelia squarrosa*): This native, late summer aster is fairly common in Minnesota prairies but also favors disturbed sites and edges along roads and railroads. It is a biennial or short-lived perennial growing from 6 to 24-plus inches tall. If you come upon it, touch the flower buds or other plant parts and you'll be astonished at how sticky they are … quite amazing. Some Native peoples used this resin as a "chewing gum". More importantly, it has been and is still used to treat skin allergies and burns, respiratory issues (e.g., asthma) and pulmonary problems.

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(Updated 10 September 2023)

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Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society Membership

Your gift membership will help! Any tax deductible contribution or donation will bring you the MPCS Newsletter and supports the Society's efforts to save Minnesota's prairie chickens and their habitats. Renew your membership today!

The Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society is a non-profit wildlife conservation organization exempt from Federal Income tax as described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions made to the Society are deductible by donors as provided in Section 170 of the Code. The Society's Federal Identification number is #41-1327954.

_____ I would like to make a membership contribution.
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Or RENEW ONLINE with PayPal at: https://www.prairiechickens.org/donate

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MPCS Newsletters Now Electronic

After a slow transition period from direct mailing to electronic newsletters, the board has decided to post all newsletters on the newly updated website. Newsletters will now be posted as a .pdf file and be in full color. We recognize that some members may still want to receive direct mailings so please contact Travis for direct mailing. The newsletters posted on the website will allow members to read past newsletters and share them with family, colleagues, educational institutions, or other conservation partners.

Take a look.

www.prairiechickens.org