



MINNESOTA PRAIRIE CHICKEN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Volume 48 No. 2, Spring 2022



SPRING Issue ... your Editor apologizes for the tardiness of the Spring Issue; he was simply following the pattern of all things in Spring of 2022 (i.e. all of Nature and human related activities have been at least 2 weeks “behind a normal Spring”).
RHH



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Review of the 49th Annual Meeting –22 April 2022

Numerous prairie and prairie chicken enthusiasts made tracks to the Minnesota State University Moorhead's Regional Science Center to attend the 49th Annual Meeting. Attendees were greeted by a blustery but sunny April morning after a "rough and tumble" night of thunderstorms throughout northwest Minnesota just hours before early dawn.

MPCS President Brian Winter started the 49th Annual Meeting at 9:40 by welcoming a good crowd (nearly 70 attendees) to our annual event. Brian had actually been up very early to lead some prairie chicken viewers to the Bluestem Prairie viewing blind. The group battled 25-40 mph Southeast winds that followed the strong thunderstorms earlier in the night. Of course, despite conditions, the chickens still put on a fine show!

MPCS Secretary, Travis Issendorf, led an early morning field trip. Despite the windy weather, the group of 8 observed numerous booming grounds along with other prairie wildlife.

Dr. Greg Hoch (Minnesota Dept of Natural Resources (MNDNR) gave the first presentation. Greg has long been fascinated with prairie ecology; particularly in a historical sense. After many years of doing prairie research, he told the crowd "the more I learn about prairies the less I know about them". Over time, humans have drawn many conclusions about prairie formation and human interaction with North American prairies. Some of these "taken for granted" statements are simply not true. One example Greg used to exemplify that was the term "pre-settlement prairies". This term is often in reference to European arrival to the prairies but sometimes it describes settlement by native peoples in recent centuries. Neither is accurate as very early indigenous people were moving onto prairie landscapes as soon as glaciers from the last glacial period receded northward. The tallgrass prairie plants we know today actually moved to this area post-glaciation from what is now southeastern and southwestern USA. Also, most of the fires that helped maintain the prairie landscape in recent centuries were mostly initiated by native peoples; not lightning.

The next speaker, Gregg Knutson (US Fish & Wildlife Service), provided a review of some very important research done at Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge ((NWR) in Polk County. The study examined the hydrologic responses to grassland and wetland restorations on a large, agricultural landscape over time. Much of what is now Glacial Ridge NWR had been pasture lands until the 1990s when large parts of it were converted to row crop agriculture. A great percentage of the farmed ground was composed of marginal soils; soil erosion from wind, snow-melt and heavy rain events was prevalent most years. In 2000, the NWR had approximately 20,000 acres of restored grasslands and wetlands. Of today's 23,000-plus acres, nearly 12,000 of them are in some form of wetlands. The City of Crookston has 6 drinking water wells on the refuge and these provide what has been rated as "the best drinking water in Minnesota". The hydrologic study involved

numerous researchers. From 2002-2006, pre-restoration hydrology was examined while post-restoration hydrology was researched from 2012-2015. General results showed a 33% reduction in run-off and 23% reduction in area ditch flows from pre-restoration through post-restoration. Groundwater recharge increased after restorations. As for water quality, Nitrate levels were reduced by 73% in groundwater and 53% in ditch water. Nitrates in ground sediments was lowered by 54%.

Our next speaker was Jesse Kolar who is an upland game biologist for North Dakota Game and Fish (NDGF). He updated the audience on the state of Greater Prairie Chickens (GPC) in northeastern North Dakota. Numerous years ago, NDGF had a substantial effort to restore chickens in North Dakota. The area of the project was centered in the Manvel, North Dakota area (north of Grand Forks). At the time, much of the landscape was in hayland and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP grasslands) acres. The birds did quite well for some time; population growth even warranted an annual hunting season. The area has generally been surveyed each Spring for booming and dancing grounds (surveys administered by NDGF and University of North Dakota personnel (including biology students)). In recent years, the area has lost habitat as CRP acres have been put back into crop production. Also, Sharp-tailed grouse have steadily increased after being in very low numbers when the restoration effort started. Surveyors are observing more hybrid grouse (GPC x Sharp-tail) during surveys the past few years. This Spring (2022), only 6 GPC cocks were observed. This pattern is similar to that observed the past 4-5 years in Polk and Red Lake counties in northwest Minnesota. GPC surveyors south of US Highway 2 have been reporting more Sharp-tailed grouse the past couple years too.

Rob Baden (MNDNR Wildlife Manager) presented the final talk before lunch. Rob gave an overview of the great work our society is doing in conjunction with Pheasants Forever (PF) to secure more grassland habitats in the GPC range of Minnesota. Funds granted by the Outdoor Heritage (Lessard-Sams) Conservation program. Since 2015, our relationship with PF has netted 14 tracts totaling 3,800 acres. Our very first tract (615 acres) is called the Prairie Dunes Wildlife Management Area (WMA). One of the last tracts was the 956-acre addition to Cupido WMA. This Spring, there were 4 booming grounds on that tract and adjacent protected grassland habitats. We have “closed” on our first 5 grants; all funds used for lands managed either as WMAs or Waterfowl Production Areas. All lands are open to hunting, bird-watching, etc. GPC numbers have been on the increase in many of the areas acquired with the grants as restoration efforts on them increases grassland diversity and wetland areas. All the restoration efforts are directly tied to local contractors (e.g. wetland restorations, field prep and native grassland seeding).



*****Broke for an excellent lunch catered by Smokin' J's*****

Prior to the afternoon session of presentations, various awards were handed-out to numerous individuals who have supported grasslands, GPC and other prairie wildlife.

"Friend of the Prairie Chicken" Award

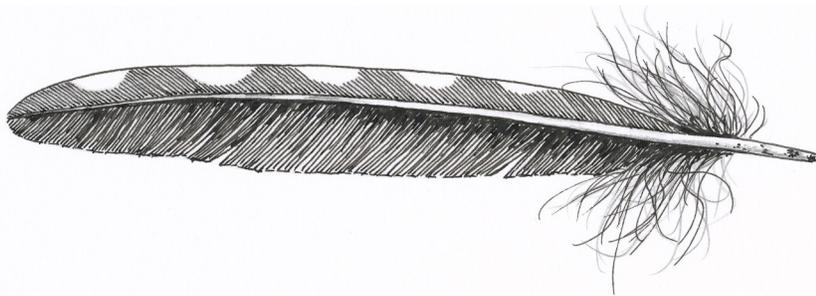
This year, your MPCs Board presented 2 of these coveted awards. The first award going to Jason Ekstein and the second award to Matt Mecklenburg; both individuals have been involved in the management of northwest Minnesota grasslands for several decades.



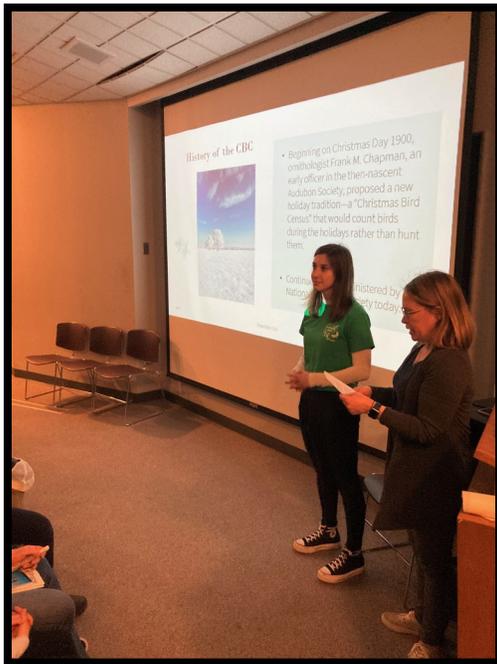
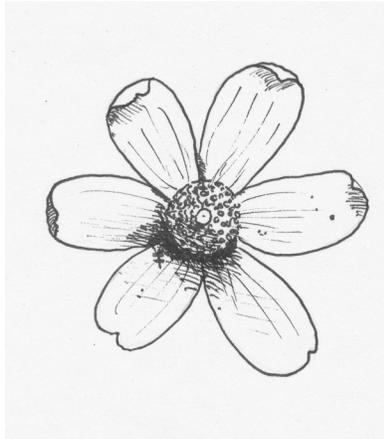
Jason Ekstein receives his "Friend of the Prairie Chicken" Award from MPCs President Brian Winter. Jason has supervised the MNDNR's northwest Roving Crew for many years; a position he led with the first of now several Roving Crews scattered throughout the state. His crew does anything and everything "habitat management-wise" while working in conjunction with Area Wildlife Managers. A native of Nebraska, Jason and his wife, Becky, originally moved to Polk County when he took the position with The Nature Conservancy to lead the massive restoration effort of the landscape now known as Glacial Ridge NWR. Congratulations, Jason!



Matt Mecklenburg receiving his “Friend of the Prairie Chicken” Award from MPCS President Brian Winter. Matt has long been involved with prairie habitat work having lead prescribed burn crews; prairie and wetland restorations and more during his years with The Nature Conservancy at Bluestem Prairie Preserve. He has led the Christmas Bird Counts at the Preserve and nearby Buffalo River State Park for many consecutive years. He also assists with GPC booming ground surveys every Spring. Matt now works for the MNDNR as a Roving Crew Supervisor. Congratulations, Matt!



Annual MPCs Scholarship Recipient



Cailey Isaacson was the recipient of the 2022 MPCs Scholarship. Cailey hails from St. Michael, Minnesota and is about to complete her undergraduate studies at the University of North Dakota. Above, she receives her \$1,000.00 scholarship from MPCs Board Member, Sara Vacek. Cailey graciously accepted the scholarship and told attendees of her future plans to further her education in wildlife studies. Cailey will be jumping right into a PhD study in western North Dakota at several study areas researching wild turkeys that can be a great nuisance to local ranchers during winter. Birds will be captured, radioed and monitored. "Control birds" will remain on site while others will be released in areas where nuisance issues are not expected to arise. Other aspects will be the human dimension, blood work and carcass necropsy. Cailey hopes to land a job as an upland bird biologist in the future. Her advisor, Dr. Susan Felege, noted Cailey is a "Rock Star" and will do very well in her field work and studies and will be a great asset to the field of wildlife management. Congratulations, Cailey!

Annual Art Contest Winners



Adaline Merkord was the winner of the 6 years-old and under for a colorful prairie landscape piece she entitled "The Prairie is a Place You Can't Forget". She is from Moorhead, Minnesota and is 6 years-old. Above she receives prairie related items as her winning prize from MPCs Board member, Sara Vacek (Sara created the Annual Art Contest and administers it each year). Congratulations, Adaline and well done!





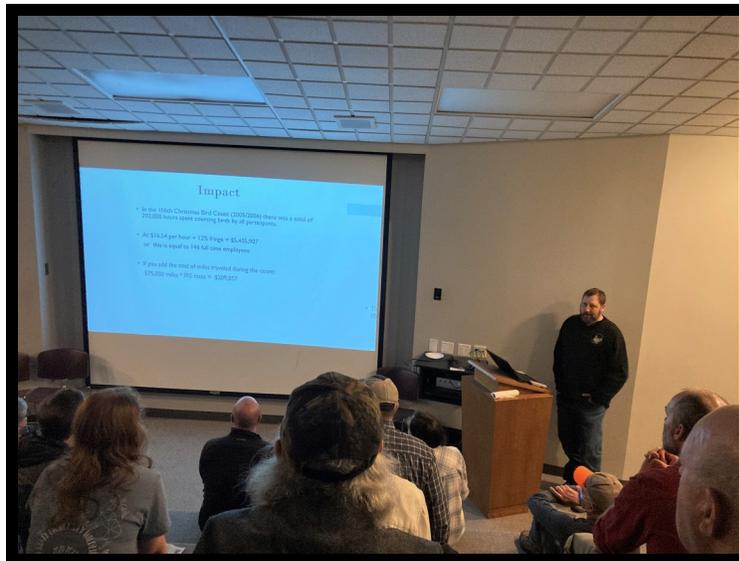
Tilly Stenhjem of Detroit Lakes, Minnesota was the winner of the 7-12 years old group. Tilly, age 11, won for her excellent photo of a winter scene on one of the tallgrass prairie areas she likes to explore. Above, she receives her prize winnings from MPCs Board member, Sara Vacek. Congratulations to you, Tilly and well done!



After the awards ceremony, the audience was treated to several more great presentations. Sonia Winter (from The Nature Conservancy's Bluestem Prairie Preserve) gave an outstanding slide show of just a "small sample" of GPC photos mostly taken from the Preserve's viewing blind. Annually, thousands of photos are taken of displaying GPC at Bluestem Prairie and the photographers often send Sonia photos for her collection. Some photos are simply elegant and beautiful but many are comical.



The next talk; ‘Christmas Bird Count History: For Buffalo River State Park and Bluestem Prairie’ was presented by Matt Mecklenburg. This unique count, was started in 1900 when Frank Chapman started to influence wealthy northeast Americans to count birds instead of shooting them over the Christmas Holiday. The shooting of birds at Christmas time being a traditional activity in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1900 the first count had 27 participants and was completed at 25 sites. The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is now administered by the National Audubon Society. The CBC is a volunteer effort and anyone can participate. There are now participants from Canada through Latin America. Counts need to be completed between the 14th of December and the 5th of January. Each count site is delineated by an area 15 miles in diameter. CBC’s data is very critical for understanding various patterns in bird populations (e.g., changes in breeding ranges) and it is used in hundreds of peer-reviewed articles. Minnesota has 18 counting sites. The Bluestem Prairie count site has a cumulative total of 72 species observed over the years. In 2021, the highest species count ever occurred with 49 species observed.



Matt Mecklenburg telling the audience about the Christmas Bird Count. Matt has been instrumental in initiating and maintaining the annual count at Bluestem Prairie and Buffalo River State Park.

The final presentation was given by Dr. Chris Merkford of Minnesota State University Moorhead. He talked about the changes in grassland breeding bird abundances and the composition of the avian community at Bluestem Prairie Scientific and Natural Area (SNA). Grassland bird populations have been declining since 1966. Given the loss of grassland habitats, this is not surprising. Many preserves in Minnesota were surveyed for grassland birds in 1979-1980. We are fortunate to have that data. Chris surveyed the Bluestem Prairie SNA in 2019 and found the following species: Savannah sparrow, Grasshopper sparrow, Western meadowlark, and Upland Sandpiper still in decline but smaller declines than those observed in previously surveyed years.

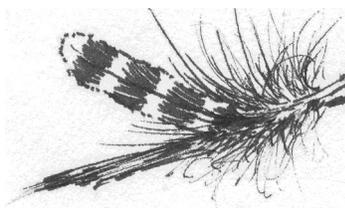
After a short break, the Annual MPCs Business Meeting was held followed by the raffle. A special thanks to all the presenters and to those who gave to the raffle! The 49th Annual MPCs Meeting ended around 3:45. Thanks to Brian and Sonia Winter along with Travis Issendorf for putting together a great meeting.

The Adventures of Tympie Nuchus

By Ross H. Hier



*Editor's Note: The Spring of 2022 was one of the most windy Springs any of our intrepid surveyors had ever encountered. Winds were consistently blowing in the range of 20-35 mph nearly everyday from late March through April. The most remarkable phenomenon being wind direction; nearly every 12 hours the winds would switch from north to south (and back to north) with nary a calm or decreased wind speed in-between. Very strange! Our next article is a testament to Dr. Charlotte Roy (MNDNR) and her crews who worked so hard capturing and radio-tagging female prairie chickens as part of a research project in the prairie chicken range. They battled very cold temperatures, extreme rainfall events and ridiculous winds ... they persevered and did tag numerous hens.



A Good Day in the Life of a Prairie Chicken Trapper By Charlotte Roy

My alarm clock jars me awake hours before sunrise and I fumble to get myself out the door. This morning is the culmination of many mornings. Our crew scouted each booming ground weeks ago to determine its exact location, and placed traps around the center of male activity based on concentrations of fecal pellets on the ground. We watched birds at each trap set for an entire morning to fine tune trap placement and orientation. We are targeting hens, so we placed chicken wire fences to intersect arriving hens and lead them into the funnel entrance of our traps. The traps are perfectly set now. We don't want to disturb the birds so we arrive at the site, walk out to the lek, set up a portable blind, and get settled within 1 hour before sunrise. We will stay until the birds leave for the morning, usually around 9:00, so my coffee will have to wait for later ...

As I sit in the blind in the darkness, I can hear the sounds of early morning that assure me that I'm on time ... snipe winnowing in several directions, AND prairie chickens assembling just south of the lek! The males are calling to one another, and just seconds later, a fly-by of the blind delivers an almost palpable wind on my face. The booming begins! It is still too dark for me to see more than a few stout figures out on the booming ground, but the sounds tell me that there are many more birds than I can see ... males are eager for the arrival of hens.

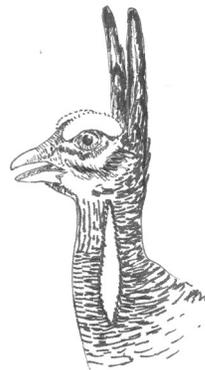
As dawn breaks, I begin to see lots of figures moving about near the fencelines. A male approaches a trap entrance. The recent adjustments to the trap set to better intersect hens approaching from the north means that males might get caught until they figure out the new trap orientation. We aren't trying to catch males, and a male in a trap can interfere with catching hens. Don't do it! Turn around! Luckily, another male approaches him and chases him off in another direction. Thank goodness! A few minutes later, the males all start booming and whooping in unison. A female must be nearby. I scan the horizon to find her, and sure enough, she is slowly making her way to the booming ground and is heading straight for the fence leading to the traps. Patience ... After what seems to be an eternity, probably 5 minutes, she hits the fence and starts to walk along it ... in the wrong direction! The fences form a "W" with each point of the "W" having a trap that is the culmination of fences funneling birds to it. However, this hen is going the wrong way ... out into the great wide open! After a few steps, she turns around, this time heading toward the trap. A few more steps. I'm holding my breath as if she might hear me breathing from 50 feet away. The she turns around again, walking away from the trap! If she could hear my heart pounding, she would surely fly away, but instead she turns around and starts walking towards the trap again. Slowly, slowly. She puts her head in the trap entrance, then pulls it out. Pecks at the ground a few times. Pauses. And then ... she walks in!

We scramble to get the blind zipper open and run out to remove her from the trap before she figures out she can just as easily walk out the way she came in. All the birds flush, and she is the sole bird remaining. We lift the mesh top of the trap and grab her over the wings with both hands, quickly placing a baby sock over her head to minimize stress. Like horses, blinders go a long way to reducing perceived danger. We bring her back to the blind to work inside so the other birds can return. First, we verify the transmitter is in "live" mode, place it on the hen, preening into her barred brown and white breast feathers. Next, we place a leg band and collect some additional data. Then, when we are satisfied that she is ready to release for tracking on our study, we open the blind door, set her feet on the ground, and pull off the baby sock. She bursts into flight and flies away into the distance. Quite pleased with things, we return to sitting in the blind, hopeful that we'll catch another hen this morning. But even if we don't, and chances are we won't, this hen was enough reward to last many unsuccessful days. All the

early, early mornings, cold temperatures, and days without captures are worth it for mornings like this one.



Prairie chicken technicians, Melissa Schilling and Samuel Andres, setting prairie chicken traps. The fencelines direct the bird into the funnel of the trap, which is oriented forward in the picture.



Pieces of the Prairie



Small White Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium candidum*)

This delicate prairie orchid is a joy to behold. Although uncommon or endangered in much of its range, on the prairies of western and northwestern Minnesota it can be locally very abundant. One has to be in awe when upon a walk in wet meadows, you are suddenly standing in view of dozens of clumps of these pretty slippers. They typically bloom from mid- to late May and into June. Are we “spoiled” in this part of North America to have substantial populations? Certainly! Why do we have good numbers of this orchid species in much of western Minnesota? As with all things Nature, it’s about habitat. The recent geology in what is now Minnesota, left us with Glacial Lake Agassiz “Beachlines” running (generally) north to south. Between and directly below these beachlines, are inter-beach wetlands or wet zones at the “toe of the beachline”. Many of these damp habitats have calcareous soils (alkaline soils); just the habitat for Small White Lady’s Slippers. These habitats come in the form of calcareous fens, alkaline wetlands or extensive sedge meadows. They tend to be habitats that are easily damaged by human activity (such as drainage projects) due to their wet Nature in which water is generally filtered through different soil strata to reach a fen or wet meadow. If this important hydrologic system is tampered with, the fens, meadows and wetlands below the strata will cease being a functional habitat. These little slippers do respond positively in Springs following a burn and the Editor has often gazed upon hundreds of these orchids in late May a year after an area has burned.



MPCS Board Members

(Updated 25 March 2022)

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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.
 I would like to contribute to Prairie Chicken Habitat Improvement.
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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

