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Photo Available.

GAME SPECIES DYING OUT, BUT MAY YET BE SAVED, TEXAN SAYS

The Attwater's prairie chicken, formerly one of the most popular game birds along the Gulf coast, is rapidly disappearing and will soon join the ranks of the heath hen and other extinct birds unless adequate measures are taken soon to preserve this race, accordingly to a Fish and Wildlife Service report received today by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

Formerly, the population of the Attwater's prairie chicken exceeded a million, and the bird ranged on the coastal prairies of Texas and western Louisiana. Valgene W. Lehmann, who for the past few years has been studying the status of this game bird for the Texas Wildlife Cooperative Research Unit, believes the bird is probably extirpated from Louisiana and is now found in only four counties in Texas.

Studies of the Attwater's prairie chicken were begun by the Texas Wildlife Cooperative Unit in 1936. The unit is financially sponsored by the Texas A. and M. College, the Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Range Reduced 93 Percent

In 1937, Lehmann estimated that there were only some 8,700 Attwater's prairie chickens left.

"The chicken tends to be further reduced as time goes on," declared Lehmann, pointing out that the population decreased at an alarming rate during the past 75 years. Once the birds ranged over more than 6 million acres of the Gulf Coast prairies, extending from South Texas near Port Isabel to Louisiana in the vicinity of Opelousas, Abbeville, and Bayou Teche. In 1937, there were only some 540,000 acres of occupied range left in the four Texas counties.

"Causes for the decrease of the Attwater's prairie chicken are many," Lehmann said. "More than 2 million acres of what was once the best Attwater habitat is now under cultivation. Pasture burning in spring destroys eggs and young. The May rains are especially serious."

Local hunting also has been detrimental in the past because open seasons came in September, or earlier, when the young of the year were physically immature and inexperienced. To control the hunting factor, the Texas legislature in 1937 provided a 5-year closed season on all prairie chickens in the State.

The significant point in the history of this bird, it was pointed out, is that during the past 75 years the range of the Attwater's prairie chicken has declined more than 93 percent and the number of birds has decreased more than 99 percent.

Good Range in Only Four Counties

Suitable areas with enough prairie chicken range to make recovery of the bird likely are now found in only four Texas counties: Refugio and Brazoria, on the coast, and Colorado and Austin, about 75 miles from the Gulf.

The outlook in Colorado County, where most of the investigations have been made, is growing progressively worse. During the past 4 years, 80 percent of the breeding range has been diverted to rice farming, and 90 percent of the remaining area was closely burned in February and March 1940.

Rice culture is expanding in Colorado County and it is only a question of time, investigators believe, when most of the birds will disappear from that area. Other factors affecting the prairie chicken include heavy grazing that reduces food and cover, oil developments that deplete the habitat, drainage canals, and roads.

Still Some Hope for Recovery

"There is still some hope for recovery," Lehmann asserted, "But if we are to preserve the prairie chicken from going the way of its cousin, the heath hen, we must act quickly."

Better land management will help, he believes. Hunting should be based on the annual increase in birds and should not begin before November 1.

"But the existence of the prairie chicken will remain precarious as long as all of their range is privately owned and privately operated."

Large favorably located government-owned refuges would save these birds, Lehmann declared. These refuges would almost certainly insure survival. Action to acquire refuges must be prompt, he warned, because less than a dozen choice areas remain in the entire State of Texas.

NOTE TO EDITORS: The Following information is added for those who wish to run a longer feature story on the Attwater's prairie chicken. PHOTOS may be obtained by writing to the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C.

The Attwater's prairie chicken was named in honor of Prof. Henry P. Attwater of Houston, Texas, in 1894 by Major Charles Emil Bendire, a retired army officer who was an ornithologist of the Smithsonian Institution. It was the study of specimens sent to Major Bendire by the Texas naturalist which revealed that the prairie chicken of the coast differed from other prairie chickens in the United States.

This chicken is closely related to the heath hen, which became extinct in 1932 when the last survivor is supposed to have died on Marthas Vineyard. The heath hen is technically known as Tympanuchus cupido cupido, the Attwater's prairie chicken as Tympanuchus cupido atwatteri.

Smaller than the greater prairie chicken, the Attwater is also somewhat darker in color and rather more tawny above. The bird lives mainly in the low prairies of the coastal counties in Louisiana and Texas. Its haunts have been described as open rolling, grassy, fertile upland prairies, where the grass is from 1 to 3 feet tall, old and thick and mixed with weeds. Wheat and corn fields are also favored areas. The bird takes to timber only during snow and sleet storms.

Stately in bearing, the Attwater's prairie chicken is otherwise very much like a domestic fowl in its actions. In spring the males select drumming grounds, smooth, open courtship grounds where pairings take place. At this time the birds can be observed singly or in pairs but in fall and winter they roam about in flocks of 10 to 12 and up to 100 or more.

Comparatively little of the details of the life history of the bird was known until the Texas Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit assigned Lehmann to make such a study a few years ago. Recently he completed work on the subject and a manuscript on the life history of the Attwater prairie chicken is now being prepared.

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