

## Nature Notes, March 2023

### Sharp-tailed Grouse: The Prairie Dancer

By Stan Shadick

What is Saskatchewan's official bird? If you guessed sharp-tailed grouse, you would be correct. The government proclaimed it to be Saskatchewan's provincial bird in 1945 at the joint request of Nature Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Fish and Game League.

The sharp-tailed grouse is a permanent resident throughout Saskatchewan except for the subarctic region in the extreme northeast. Within the boreal forest, it occurs in isolated bogs and burned areas. It is more common in the southern half of the province where most birds are found in lightly grazed pastures. Fewer birds are found in intensively cultivated regions devoid of prairie grasslands.

The first written record of sharp-tailed grouse in Saskatchewan was in 1774 when Samuel Hearne recorded hunters had shot some near Cumberland House. Two specimens collected by the Franklin Expedition were shot near there in 1819.

In winter, sharp-tails flock together to feed on waste grain and buds of aspen and berry bushes. Often one bird perches high in a tree watching for predators while the rest of the flock feed near the ground. Bristles on their toes act like snowshoes to help them walk across snowy fields. Their heavily feathered legs and insulating downy feathers help them stay warm. On the coldest days, they may burrow under the snow to take advantage of its insulation.

The spring courtship dance of the sharp-tailed grouse is the most spectacular mating display of any bird in North America and draws visitors each spring from across Canada and the USA. Near sunset, male sharp-tailed grouse fly to a dancing ground (lek) usually located on a high knoll. They may dance briefly at sunset and during the night but most activity occurs after sunrise.

When dancing, the males raise their tails, outstretch their wings and rapidly stomp their feet like pistons. Listen for booms, clucks and tail rattling plus the sound of their stomping feet. Look for their bright yellow combs above each eye and purple air sacs on their breast. During each dance,



Sharp-tailed grouse gather on leks in springtime, when the males perform their spectacular courtship dances.

Photo by May Haga

which lasts about 10 seconds, males resemble a group of noisy spinning tops, each buzzing around in circles on their own territory. Indigenous people have patterned some of their dances after those of the sharp-tailed grouse.

Only males dance. A few female grouse will unobtrusively watch the proceedings. Most females will mate with the dominant male nearest the centre of the lek. Following each dance, two nearby males will often face each other at their territorial boundary. Sometimes a fight will break out.

The greater prairie chicken is the closest relative of the sharp-tailed grouse. They are more heavily barred and have a black fan-shape tail unlike the Sharp-tail's narrow white-edged tail. They require long grass prairie that is no longer found in Saskatchewan.

Early Saskatchewan settlers managed to stop the regular prairies fires, permitting our grasslands to grow taller. This habitat change allowed greater prairie chicken to expand their range into southern Saskatchewan from 1895 until the 1930s. Once farming became more intensive, their numbers declined severely because prairie chicken were not as adaptable as sharp-tailed grouse in finding nesting locations in small pockets of grass. The last known prairie chicken in Saskatchewan was shot near Leader in 1972. Today, a few people erroneously use the name prairie chicken to refer to sharp-tailed grouse.

Unfortunately, data from Breeding Bird Surveys show the sharp-tailed grouse population has declined at about 5% per year since 1968. Hopefully, we can protect their habitat so they will not become extinct like the prairie chicken.

*Stan Shadick is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society (SNS) and leads spring tours to view dancing grouse from vehicles on behalf of SNS, and from a blind in support of Living Sky Wildlife Rehabilitation.*