

## A Short Note on Small Prairie Chickens

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### Commentary

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### DESCRIPTION

Small prairie chickens (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) occupy plateaus in southeast Colorado, western Kansas and Oklahoma, eastern New Mexico, and the Texas Panhandle. Historically, the area covered by smaller prairie chickens was significantly larger. There is some confusion in identifying their exact ranges as early settlers likely confused the larger and smaller prairie chickens. However, remains that have been clearly identified as smaller prairie chickens have been reported as far as Oregon.

### COMMENTARY

#### Habitat

Small prairie chickens inhabit the plateau ecosystem. Their preferred habitats include shrubs, either glossy oaks or sagebrushes, mixed with tall grasses, usually blue grasses, and sandy soil. This accumulation of foliage is necessary to hide from aerial and terrestrial predators and in the shade in summer. In addition, the foliage provides food for smaller prairie chickens and the insects they feed on. During the breeding season, males leks in areas less obscured by shrubs and taller grass to maximize visibility for mating indicators.

### Physical description

Small prairie chickens are round, bottom-dwelling, neutrally colored birds weighing around 700 to 800 grams, they are usually between 38 and 41 centimeters long with a short tail. Small prairie chickens show a range of camouflage tones from gray to brown, paler in the chest, with heavy strokes in the plumage. Males are distinguished by yellow eye ridges, accompanied by distinctive pinnae (long decorative feathers) that straighten up during presentation, and red esophageal air sacs on the neck.

**Reproduction**

Small prairie chickens show classic lekking behaviour. The males gather in spring and fall in areas of increased visibility, vying for their position within the leks. Aggressive depictions include a semi-recumbent position, wings slightly spread from the sides, erect ears and tail, and inflated air sacs. Occasionally, these ads can lead to actual fights. Dominant males tend to occupy the center of the lek and achieve a disproportionately high percentage of successful copulations. Once the territories are set, the sunrise and sunset display will begin. The roosters call out for the females, dance, and continue to make aggressive gestures towards other males. Women choose men based on activity and vocal skills.

**Behaviour**

Small prairie chickens are non-migratory chicken birds that inhabit the arid plateaus of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. These ground-dwelling birds use the native grasses and shrubs of this ecosystem as both food and cover all year round. Small prairie chickens need shrubs for protection in the breeding season and as shade in summer. During the winter months, when temperatures get extreme, these birds burrow in the snow for shelter. Their most notable habit occurs in the spring and fall when males gather in leks to present themselves to the females, using shouts and dancing to attract them. In addition to these shows, the males will be aggressive with one another and establish territories within the lek. Aggressive behaviour includes ritualistic postures, short flights, chasing other men, and fighting. It is known that dominant men and women establish themselves among their own gender through the use of force.

**Predation**

Birds of prey such as red-tailed buzzards and mammals such as coyotes, bobcats, foxes and skunks are the main predators of smaller prairie chickens. Built-up areas can increase predation as terrestrial predators follow fences and roads, and fences and power lines provide additional sleeping areas for aerial predators. Small prairie chickens rely on camouflage for protection and hide between bushes and tall grass for cover. You will eagerly avoid high structures as these can be sleeping places for birds of prey.