

Only 56 Attwater's prairie-chickens remain in three Texas counties

The endangered Attwater's prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido attwateri*) is a medium-sized chicken-like bird — about 17 inches long — with a barred, brown and buff pattern. Males have an area of yellow-orange skin on each side of the neck that inflate during courtship display.

Although very similar in appearance, the Attwater's, or APC for short, should not be confused with the lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) found in the Texas Panhandle area or Greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) found in Kansas and parts of Oklahoma and Nebraska. The Attwater's is a subspecies of the Heath hen (*Tympanuchus cupido cupido*), a grouse that became extinct on the East Coast of the United States in 1932.

Historically, up to about one million APCs occupied an estimated six million acres of coastal prairie grassland along the coastal bend of the Gulf of Mexico from Bayou Teche in Southwest Louisiana to the Nueces River in Texas.

Today, unfortunately, only 56 APCs remain in the wilds of three Texas counties — Colorado, Galveston and Refugio. The Attwater's prairie-chicken became extinct in Louisiana in 1919.

Loss of habitat has been the principle reason for the long-term decline in APC population levels. Agriculture, urban and industrial expansion, invasion of prairie habitat by woody species, and overgrazing have, in combination, resulted in a dramatic decline of the coastal prairie habitat required for APC survival.

During the past several years, inclement weather coupled with the loss of habitat can be blamed for the bird's decline.

These colorful prairie birds utilize different areas of coastal prairie grassland (comprised of perennial bunchgrass species like little bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, and big bluestem) for various activities.

Shortgrass cover (less than 10 inches in height) is generally used for courtship and feeding; midgrass areas (10-16 inches in height) are used for roosting and feeding; and, tallgrass areas (16-24 inches in height) are needed for nesting, loafing, and escape cover. Grasses taller than 24 inches are generally avoided, but are occasionally used for shade during the summer months and protection against inclement weather and predators.

In January, males begin to gather on booming grounds or leks to start courtship activities. These areas, used year after year,

can range in size from 0.1 to 10 acres.

During the early morning and late evening hours the males perform their elaborate courtship dance by stretching their necks forward and erecting neck feathers, or pinnae, forward; at the same time, the tail is held verti-

cally and the wings are extended downward. Rapid foot stamping is synchronized with the inflation of the yellow-orange air sacs on either side of the bird's neck. A low ventroloquial sound is produced from the air sacs re-

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