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NEBRASKA SANDHILLS PROGRESS REPORT No. 1 - March 24, 2012

Our research is off to a good start. On March 3, 2012 I received a Scientific and Educational Permit from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to cover our research for at least the next two years.

We have also received the go ahead to rent and move into a house on the US Fish and Wildlife Service - John W. and Louise Seier, NWR near Rose, Nebraska.

After transporting six research vehicles and equipment from Minnesota to Nebraska, we started surveying for booming grounds here on March 21 and seeking permission from landowners to trap and radio-mark prairie grouse on these grounds.

So far we have located at least 26 booming grounds ranging in size from 3-23 cocks. Booming grounds in Nebraska are smaller on average than those historically seen in Minnesota and Wisconsin. See Toepfer (2001) Large booming grounds versus small booming grounds. BOOM 39:1-2.

The local ranchers seem intrigued with the idea of collecting information on the year-round ecology of prairie grouse and documenting a baseline of normality for prairie-chickens in Nebraska. Several landowners have indicated that in winter they have large flocks of up to 100 prairie-chickens coming to feed in the areas where they feed their cattle. This may present us with an opportunity to catch birds especially hens more efficiently in contrast to capturing them a few at a time on 15-20 booming grounds over a 10-14 day period.

We have complete access to one 40,000 acre ranch in the area and permission from 9 other landowners to trap on booming grounds on their lands. Over 90% of the area is native grassland with little bluestem, switch grass, needle and thread or Stipa and lead plant making up the bulk of the residual cover.

On the downside however, the high price of corn has resulted in a portion of the CRP grasslands and a few pastures being plowed up where corn is now being grown corn via center pivot irrigation.

I anticipate that we will probably start trapping next week (March 26). There are currently four in the STCP trapping crew; myself, Gary Huschle, Perrie Kerch and Matt Rethaber.

John Toepfer, Ph.D.

