

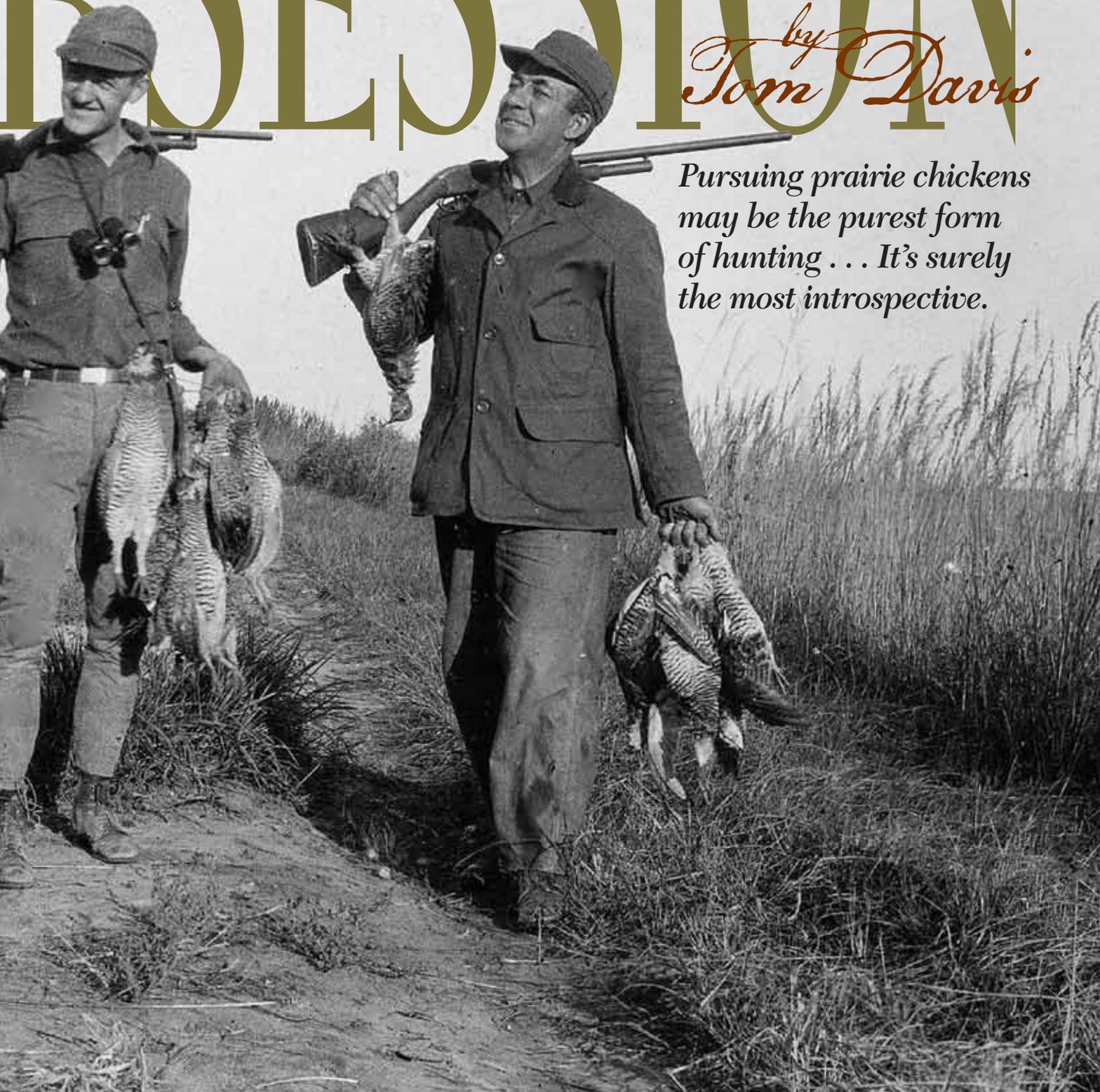


# OBSESSION

*Magnificent*

*by Tom Davis*

*Pursuing prairie chickens may be the purest form of hunting . . . It's surely the most introspective.*



# Scalded by the wind,

punished by the sun, reduced to insignificance by the enormity of the landscape and its infinite canopy of sky, you scan the horizon through narrowed eyes. Your quarry lies hidden in this sea of grass, that much you know, but it's slippery, mercurial, a perpetually moving target whose familiarity with the creases and contours of the terrain – as if it were a map encoded in its DNA – dwarfs your own. To know where, or when, you'll find it is impossible to predict with anything resembling precision. It could be a matter of yards and minutes; it's more likely, though, to be a matter of miles and hours, even days.

So you simply keep searching, wading the prairies' tawny, rippling tide, a momentary disturbance cleaving its matrix of brilliant light and shifting, cloud-cast shadows. Your dog roams ahead, its speed and range compensating for your grievous lack thereof, its nose the only arrow in your quiver that remotely evens the odds. What progress you make is less toward a fixed point than toward a fortuitous intersection, a collision of vectors in space and time. Your stamina will be tested, yes, but more than that the strength of your resolve, the depth of your commitment. And, perhaps, the steadfastness of your faith.

To hunt prairie chickens in the 21st century requires the ascetic zeal of a religious pilgrim and the obsessive determination of the master of a whaling vessel. It's an adventure in anachronism, a pursuit whose appeal is so difficult to convey to anyone not similarly afflicted that you might as well be speaking the click language of Bushmen – and whose rewards, to the typical

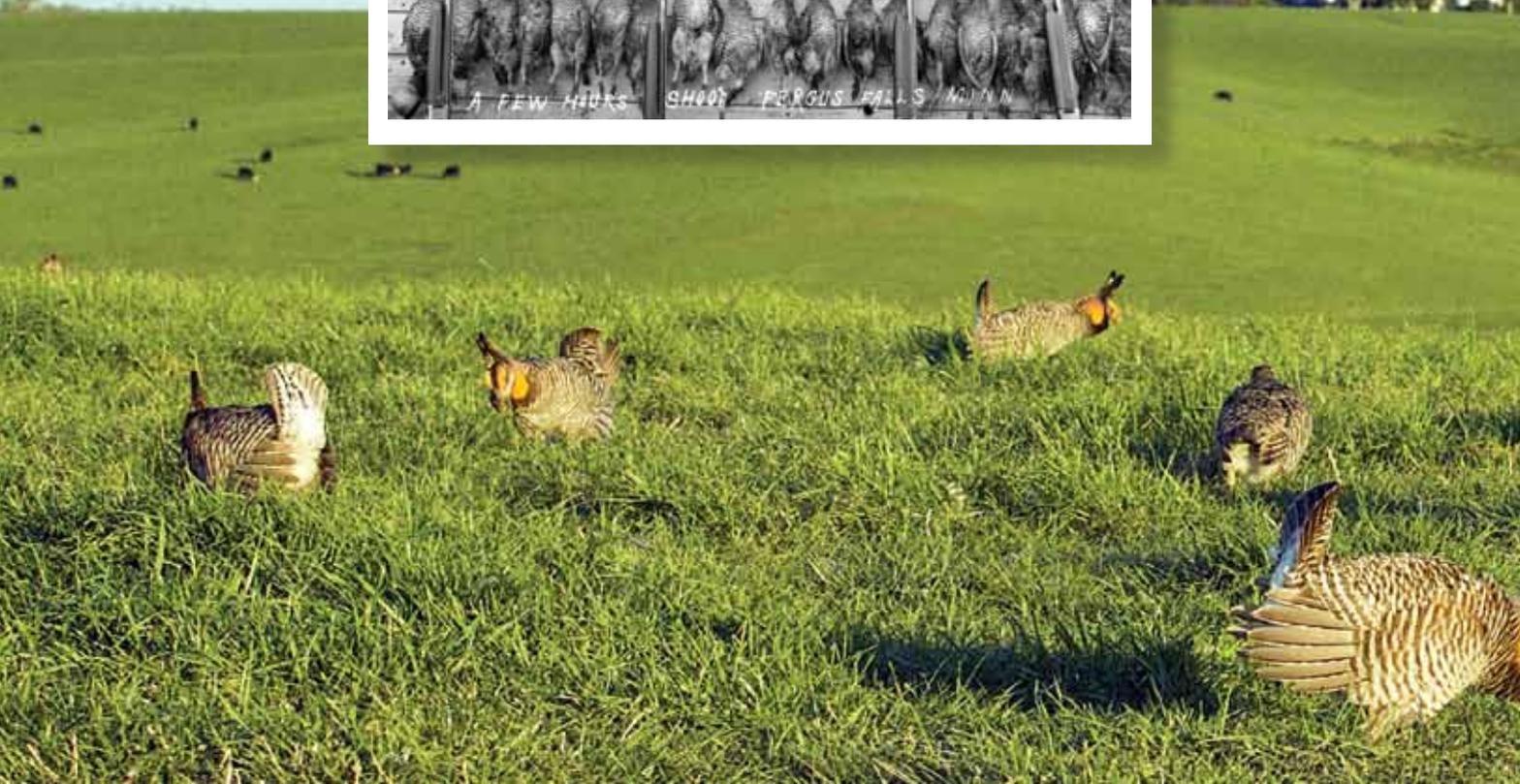
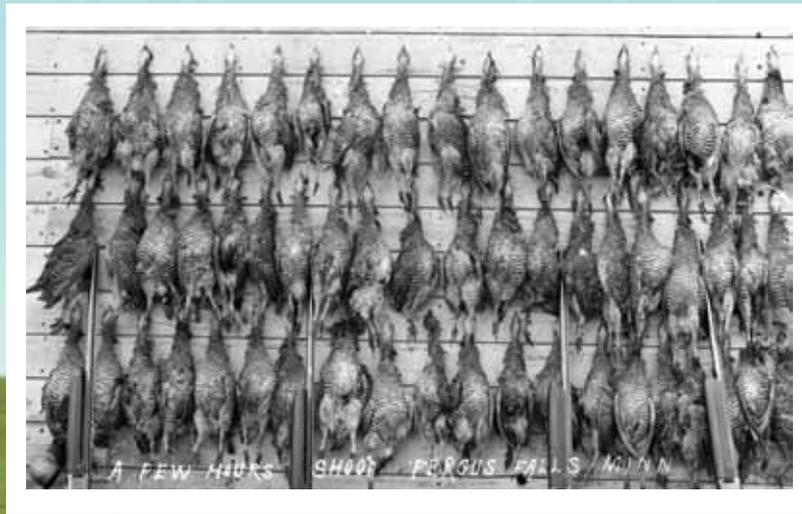
observer, appear irreconcilably meager compared to the massive level of effort required to obtain them.

In other words, prairie chicken hunting doesn't resonate much in a society that worships at the altar of *American Idol*. Its delights are largely intangible, its satisfactions intensely private. It may be the purest form of hunting I know. It is surely the most introspective.

You don't have to be an Old Soul to be a prairie chicken hunter, but it helps.

**K**illing prairie chickens is easy. The hard parts are (1) finding them and (2) flushing them within range of a scattergun. This latter consideration is somewhat relative, of course. Many birds at dicey range by my standards were right in my friend Bill Shattuck's wheelhouse – and it's no coincidence whatsoever that Bill was not only the most successful prairie chicken hunter I've ever known (or heard of), but the finest long-range wingshot. As another friend put it upon hunting chickens for the first time and finding himself in a mild state of shock at the ranges involved, "It's a full-choke, 12-gauge deal."

Strictly speaking that isn't true – but it's pretty darn close. The classic chicken-hunting scenario is to walk to the edge of forever without seeing a bird, and then, when you finally stumble into a bunch, have to make a 40-, 50- or even 60-yard shot. That's a tall order when you're feeling frisky, much



less when you're foot-sore, eye-sore and bone-weary.

Another common scenario, sort of a sub-category to the first but even more damaging to the psyche, is to walk your ass off, empty your gun fecklessly at birds you wouldn't shoot at under normal (i.e., unstressed) circumstances, and then watch in helpless, hapless disbelief as the balance of the flock straggles up within what seems like spitting distance. This brings up the salient point that there's almost always a "sleeper" or two that carries unaccountably after its pals have gotten out of Dodge.

There aren't a lot of really useful tips for hunting prairie chickens, but the two that have worked for me are "Keep walking" and "Reload, pronto!"

The thing about chickens is that, in contrast to pheasants, Huns, ruffed grouse and most of the quails, they don't have a bag of tricks they can reach into to elude hunters. When danger approaches on the ground, they either hold tight and hope that it passes them by, or they take to the air before it poses a serious threat. Single birds will walk away from a point and just sort of drift off, but they don't run in the way we normally understand the term.

If you can catch them in the holding mode, a cool hand can kill a three-bird limit without moving his feet. I've never done it myself but I've seen it done, notably by the artist Peter Corbin, who made a nice left-and-right with his 20-gauge Superposed, reloaded in time to drop the inevitable sleeper, and wondered why everyone made such a big deal out of killing a prairie chicken.

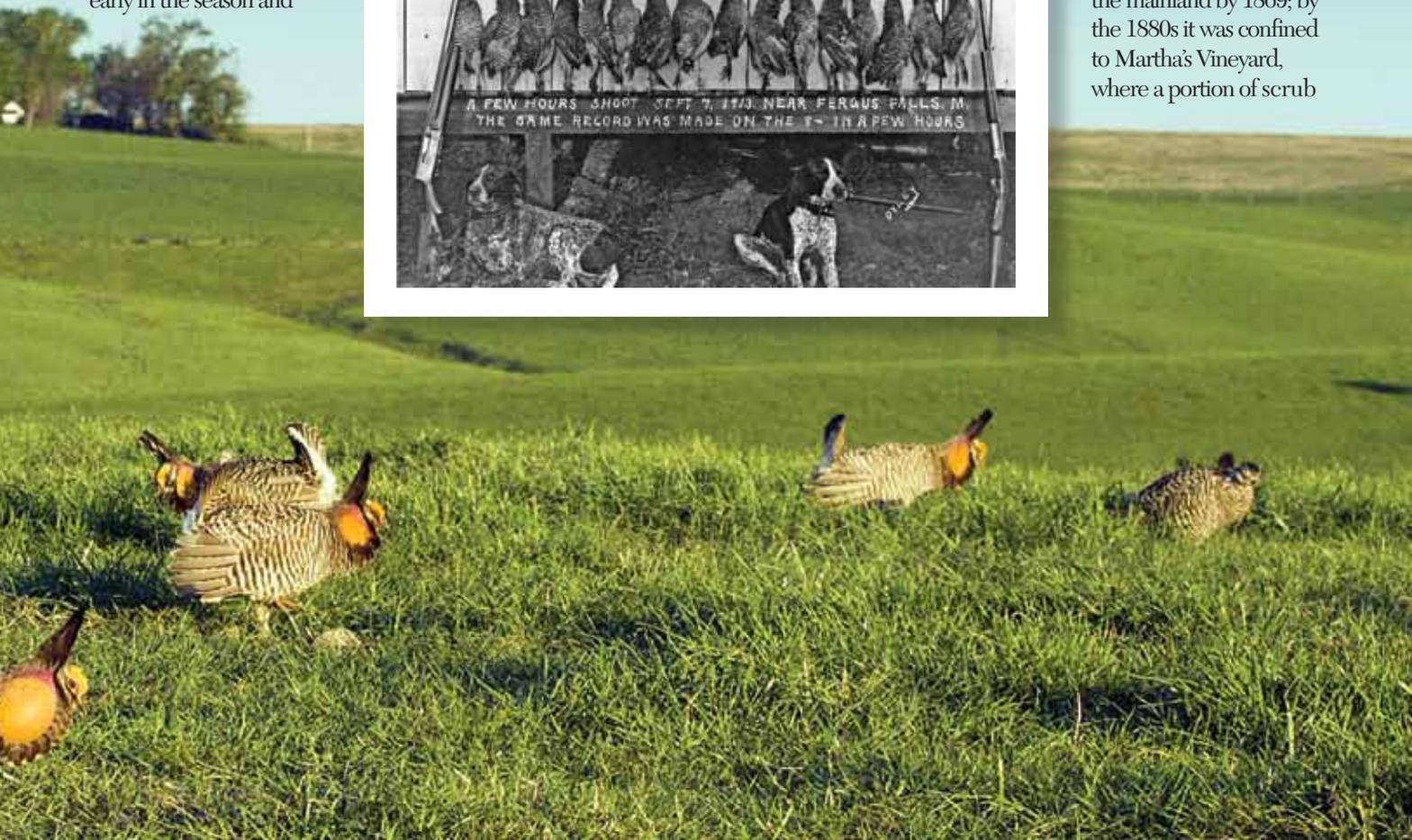
All else equal, chickens are more likely to let you get close to them early in the season and

increasingly less likely to cooperate as autumn wears on, which helps explain why September is the most popular month to hunt them – and why some pretty experienced sportsmen are of the opinion that hunting them any time after that is an exercise in futility. This isn't true either, strictly speaking. I've shot chickens over points in November and Bill Shattuck, although clearly a special case, did so regularly in December. But again, it's not altogether misleading.

In short, the prairie chicken refuses to resort to chicanery or subterfuge. It puts all its cards on the table, every time, and lives or dies with the consequences. If there is a single word that distills the bird's wild essence, that word is *uncompromising*. It is the prairie chicken's beauty, and it is the prairie chicken's curse.

**I**ndigenous to our continent, four races of prairie chicken – the family name biologists use is "pinnated grouse" – inhabited North America at the time of European settlement. Three of these were subspecies of *Tympanuchus cupido*, which translates, evocatively, to "drummer of love." The heath hen, *T. cupido cupido*, was the eastern subspecies, occupying bogs, barrens and moorlands from southern Maine to the Virginia Tidewater. Like the Atlantic salmon, it was so abundant in the Colonial era that servants stipulated in their contracts that they should not have to eat it "oftener than a few times a week."

Like the salmon, too, the heath hen fell victim with frightening swiftness to the malign forces of overharvest and habitat loss. It was gone from the mainland by 1869; by the 1880s it was confined to Martha's Vineyard, where a portion of scrub



oak savannah on the island's Great Plain was set aside as a reservation for the bird. There the heath hen held its own and for a time even prospered. By 1916 the population was estimated at a robust 2,000.

But on May 12, 1916, a wildfire swept the Great Plain at the very peak of the nesting season, killing virtually all the adult females and sending the population into a free-fall from which it never recovered. After 1928, only a single heath hen remained. A cock, he'd appear every spring on the James Green farm near West Tisbury, faithfully performing his ritual courtship display for the ladies that never came. The poignancy of that is almost unbearable.

On March 11, 1932, the last heath hen on earth was seen for the final time. *The Vineyard Gazette* eulogized, "There is a void in the April dawn, there is an expectancy unanswered, there is a tryst not kept."

The southern subspecies, Attwater's prairie chicken (*T. cupido attwateri*), once occupied six to seven million acres of grasslands along the Gulf Coast, from southwestern Louisiana to the Nueces River in Texas. It, too, was hunted relentlessly – there are accounts of bags so enormous that most of the birds were left to rot – but the real culprit was the transformation of its habitat into rice fields, cattle pastures and cities.

Extirpated from Louisiana in the 1930s, the remnant population in Texas slowly and inexorably declined until, in 1976, it was designated a Federal Endangered Species. Today, only about 100 Attwater's prairie chickens exist in the wild, most of them at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge near Eagle Lake. An intensive captive breeding program involving Texas A&M, the Houston Zoo, the Nature Conservancy and several other partners has been implemented in a last-ditch effort to bring the birds back, but despite this heroic effort its survival seems far from assured.

Now considered a separate species rather than a subspecies, the lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) is slightly smaller and paler in overall coloration than the greater. The cocks are also distinguished by their dusty rose neck sacs, which are

burnt orange in the *T. cupido* tribe. The lesser's range extends from southwestern Kansas and southeastern Colorado through the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma to eastern New Mexico, where it inhabits short- and mixed-grass prairies sprinkled with sand-sage and shinnery oak. Only Kansas supports enough birds to allow hunting, but with its future as a huntable species decidedly murky, a number of sportsmen have moved "Bagging a lesser prairie chicken" to the top of their Bucket Lists.

Conversion of grassland to cropland, overgrazing (limited grazing actually benefits the bird) and oil, gas and wind energy development are among the conspirators depressing the species' population. Curiously, one of the most significant causes of mortality in lesser prairie chickens is collisions with fences. With recent research showing that bobwhite quail in the same general part of the world are infested with parasitic eyeworms that almost certainly impair their vision . . . Well, it makes you wonder.

**T**he most widespread and abundant chicken of them all was, and still is, the greater prairie chicken, *T. cupido pinnatus*. The grouse of the tallgrass prairies, its range historically extended from Ohio to Oklahoma and from Minnesota to Arkansas, although it expanded its range significantly (if temporarily) north and west, as far as the eastern Great Plains and the Prairie Provinces of Canada, in response to logging and, in particular, to pioneer agriculture.

Indeed, as abundant as the birds were on the unbroken prairies – circa 1810, a young John James Audubon reported them so numerous in Kentucky that "they were held in no higher estimation as food than the most common flesh" – by all accounts their numbers exploded when their habitat first came under cultivation in the mid- to late-19th century.

With a smorgasbord of high-quality food in the form of corn, buckwheat and other grains, and still plenty of grass for nesting, the greater prairie chicken had it good – and market hunters cashed in spectacularly. A skilled marksman with a well-trained



dog could easily kill 50 birds a day, and daily bags of 100 or more were not uncommon. Little wonder, then, that the quantities of prairie chickens shipped to market were measured not in dozens, or even thousands, but in tons.

But as the tallgrass prairie was transformed into the Corn Belt, it all came crashing down. In Iowa, the very heart of the chicken's original range, the population peaked in the 1870s-'80s, and by 1919 the hunting season was closed, never to re-open.

In 1932 the author of *Birds of Minnesota*, Thomas Roberts, would write: "The story of the treatment that the Prairie Chicken received and is still receiving at the hands of white men . . . is a sad and pitiful one only exceeded, perhaps, among American birds by that of the Passenger Pigeon."

**T**oday, a sportsman who wants to hunt greater prairie chickens has three destinations to choose from: the Flint Hills of Kansas, the Sandhills of Nebraska and the grasslands of central South Dakota. In addition, there are limited, residents-only seasons in southeastern North Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Several other states have chickens, notably Wisconsin, where the birds of the Buena Vista Grasslands in the central part of the state have been described as "the most intensively managed grouse in North America." This is where the world's foremost authorities on the bird, Frederick and Frances Hamerstrom, conducted their groundbreaking research – research that began under the direction of Aldo Leopold – and where they famously distilled the prairie chicken's needs to five words: good grass and wide horizons.

Such simple, commonplace, everyday words – and such increasingly rare and precious commodities in 21st century America.

There are encouraging signs, however. Prairie chicken consciousness – the awareness of the bird, its history and its unique ecological niche – is at an all-time high. Taking a page from the ecotourism handbook, a number of communities have begun organizing prairie chicken festivals around the opportunity to view the bird's spring courtship display – a display so impressively amazing that Native Americans patterned their own ceremonial dances after it.

"Booming," it's called, and believe me when I tell you you've never seen, or heard, anything like it. Starting long before dawn, the prairie chicken cocks assemble on their booming

grounds and for the next couple hours dance their fool heads off. They inflate their neck sacs until they resemble ripe fruit, engorge their eyebrows to suggest exotic coral formations, erect their horn-like pinnae (long feathers that normally lie flat) and generally bling themselves out in aggressive contrast to the restrained, Savile Row elegance that is their usual style.

They splay their primary flight feathers, too, and thrust their fanned tails skyward. They bow, they strut, they puff themselves up; they rush interlopers as if they were tiny bulls and engage in flapping clashes that result in little more than ruffled feathers.

And the sounds they make! An eerie three-note call, often rendered *Old mul-DOON*, is their primary vocalization, but they also utter a bewildering variety of clucks, hoots, cackles and weird squalling cries that seem more appropriate to the jungle than to the prairie. They even supply their own percussion section, stamping their feet in a rat-a-tat snare that inspired the sobriquet, "drummer of love."

It's an enthralling and unforgettable show. And if you think it can't get any wilder, just wait until the hens show up. That's when things really get crazy – as in sailors on shore leave crazy.

**I** don't hunt chickens every year, but there's no bird I hunt more often in my imagination, or return to more often in memory. If any days of my life are truly hallowed, they're the ones that Andy Cook, Bill Shattuck and I spent following our dogs – Willie, Heike, Emmylou – over those billowing South Dakota prairies. *Scalded by the wind, punished by the sun . . .*

Wrote Dion Henderson in *Algonquin*: "Grandsir was very careful that I did not find out too much about chickens, because he said that if I established any kind of personal relationship with them, I would not be satisfied with lesser birds afterward . . . I thought he was fooling then, but he wasn't."

If you're already a prairie chicken hunter, you're nodding your head in agreement. If you're not, well, don't say you weren't warned. 🐔

## SAVE THE LAST DANCE

*Save the Last Dance is a breathtaking tribute to the grassland grouse of North America: prairie chickens, sharptails and sage grouse. Author Noppadol Paothong, a staff photographer for the Missouri Department of Conservation, devoted ten years to chronicling the birds' mating rituals and habitats. The hardcover, 204-page book features 130 stunning photographs, three of which appear in this article. The book is available from Sporting Classics for \$45 plus \$7 s&h. Call (800) 849-1004 or visit [www.sportingclassics.com](http://www.sportingclassics.com).*

