

ADOPT-A-

Summer 2012

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE



Prairie Chicken

NEWSLETTER

NEWS FROM THE PRAIRIE CHICKEN FRONT

So, What Really Happens on Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge?

I am sure many of us have wondered this same question at some time. Perhaps it was as a youngster, wondering what we were going to do when we “grew up.” Television certainly makes it look glamorous with their outdoor shows. But what is a year really like on Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge?

The year at the refuge usually really starts to become busy in April when the results from the annual survey of prairie chickens on the known sites are announced. For those of us working with the birds, this is always an eagerly anticipated time, hoping for that huge increase, but conscious of all the threats that could impact this animal. April is also time for the annual Attwater's Prairie-Chicken festival, one of the few times each year when people visit the refuge with a realistic opportunity of seeing wild Attwater's Prairie-Chickens, and staff time is heavily committed to preparing for the festival and interacting with visitors.

Shortly after the visitors are gone, staff begins looking for nests on the prairie and erecting predator deterrent fences around known nests. These fences have been critical in allowing hens to hatch young on the prairie.

May is brood season on the refuge. This means a very busy time, using “brood boxes” to protect the young birds and sweeping the prairie for insects to feed the chicks. At the same time, captive breeding facilities are very busy with nesting birds. By the end of the month,

we are beginning to get some idea of how many birds we might have available for release in the summer.

In June, we meet to identify which birds are to be retained for the next breeding season, and which birds are targeted for release. Production, both in the wild and at the zoos, is finishing up, and Youth Conservation Corps enrollees are beginning to erect acclimation pens in preparation for the first releases of the summer. We will learn the results of the wild nests usually in July; fledglings that survive to that point are generally considered successful.

Releases will actually occur between early July and mid-September. Birds are brought to the refuge from the various breeding sites, held in acclimation pens for two weeks and then released to enhance the wild population on the refuge. Historically, Attwater's Prairie-Chickens depended heavily on recruitment – both young of the year and recruits from nearby populations – to maintain the stock. Since no nearby populations exist for any of our known populations, the captive-bred birds must fill this role.

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PHOTO:
GARY HALVORSEN, USFWS

Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, continued

Summer and fall (July to December) is also the period when invasive plant control is most active on the refuge, with McCartney rose, Chinese tallow and deep-rooted sedge being the most serious offenders. August and September are the months when summer prescribed burning occurs if weather permits. Typically, late summer burning is more effective at controlling woody species, but this tool has to be used carefully since these fires can become very intense.

Invasive species treatments continue in October, with large scale red imported fire ant treatments. As noted in an earlier newsletter, controlling these ants has had a significant impact on insect abundance, and thus on APC survival.

October is also the month when we meet to determine pairings for the next season of captive breeding. We “play cupid,” using genetic data to determine what male should pair with what female to provide offspring that would be most beneficial to the flock. Usually, but not always, males are moved to females when one bird must change facilities.

In November, we begin getting preliminary information on the success of the summer releases. We find out how many of the radio-collared birds are still alive and moving on the prairie.

If available, and if weather conditions allow, native plant seed is harvested by mid-November. It is important to leave some seed where it is found to ensure the health of that pasture, but nearby pastures provide a place to

gather seed needed to restore areas on the refuge. Once harvested, if weather is right, and seed production allows, native grasses are planted in October and November to restore the prairie landscape these birds need.

While controlled fires in the summer are intense and destroy invasive woody plants, winter fires are often timed to allow early winter forbs to produce and still allow a quick recovery. These fires are generally planned for December and January as weather and range conditions allow.

In February, just as the males are beginning their booming for the new breeding season, we get an update on the number of birds surviving from the releases of the previous year. Late in the month, food plots, if they are going to be used, are planted.

In March, the census is completed that gives us our population numbers for the year. While males are easy to spot when they are out on the booming ground dancing and showing off, females are less notable. Assuming a 1:1 male to female ratio, the number of males is doubled to produce the number of birds estimated on the refuge. This is why the population numbers are always shown as an estimate.

Between March and May, more seeding is done with native grass to encourage restoration of prairie habitat if weather permits. So you see, life on a refuge is active all year-round.

How Many Prairie Chickens Are There?

This question usually starts coming in shortly after we send a newsletter. An "official" count is conducted in March of each year. This count identifies as many individual male birds as possible, and the number of females is extrapolated based on that. This results in a population estimate usually released around the first week of April.

This year the official estimate was 46 birds at three populations, down considerably from the 2011 numbers. This was definitely a result of severe drought. Despite receiving almost as much rain in the first four months of this year as they did in the entire 2011 calendar year, the refuge is reporting that it is once again becoming very dry.

The 46 birds this year were found as 30 birds at Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, 2 birds at Texas City Prairie Preserve, and 14 birds at the Goliad County site. The good news is that, as of May 10, 17 nests had been located: 12 on the refuge and 5 in Goliad County. Of those, 5 (3 at APCNWR and 2 at Goliad) had hatched.



How Can I Help?

As always, funds are needed to help with raising young birds we can release on the prairie. These funds help the zoos to maintain and even enhance their bird husbandry facilities.

The greatest need is to get the word out that we have a beautiful bird on the Texas coast that is dependent on native, coastal prairie to survive. The more people become aware of this bird, the more they will want to see coastal prairie restored and conserved.



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