

# Dancing grouse has primal connection to the land

By: [Kathryn McNutt](#) The Journal Record August 12, 2022 [Q](#)



Skylar Nucosee dances the prairie-chicken dance during the 2021 Unite the People Powwow at Scissortail Park. (Courtesy photo/Larissa Rose Photography)

The lesser prairie-chicken not only matters as an indicator of our environment's health. It forms a primal connection to the land and its inhabitants for centuries.

It needs [space and protection](#): Ideally, a lesser prairie-chicken needs 25,000 contiguous acres of appropriate habitat to meet its breeding, nesting and brood-rearing needs to thrive.

Stephanie Manes, a research biologist with LPC Conservation, works with landowners like Gardiner Angus Ranch in Ashland, Kansas, to bank grassland for a permanent conservation easement that can restore the bird's dwindling population.

Survival of the species is important both environmentally and culturally, Manes said. The bird is the top indicator of the ecosystem's health and, as the largest upland game bird, fed humans for hundreds of years, she said.

Last, but certainly not least, the lesser prairie-chicken "is one of the most charismatic birds," Manes said. The spectacle of the males' elaborate mating dance has captured the imagination of people for centuries.

"It's the greatest natural experience I've ever had in my life," said Michael Smith, public relations counsel for LPC Conservation. "There truly is nothing like this. You're watching the forces of nature."

A ceremonial dance originating with the Blackfeet people of Canada and northern Montana celebrates the interconnection between Native people and this grassland grouse. The dance mimics the bird's showy displays performed to attract a mate – lowered head, wings spreads and fervent stomping.

Skylar Nucosee, 29, of Ada, is among the contemporary prairie-chicken dancers who continue to honor "the beautiful bird that we have a bond with. There's not very many of us."

Nucosee, who is Chickasaw, Seminole and Miccosukee, said many tribes have adopted the dance that has been passed down for centuries by older dancers teaching young ones.

He explains the dance's origin:

A young man with a wife and two children was hunting for food but found none all week. As he prayed, he went into the buffalo grass and heard a pitter-patter. Parting the grass, he saw two male prairie-chickens dancing and fighting to win the female who watched them. As she chose her mate, the hunter's arrow took his life.

The hunter prayed over the evening meal and thanked the bird who gave his life to nourish the family's bodies. That night the bird's spirit came to him in a dream and told the man that his people must honor the prairie-chicken going forward by performing the dance he would teach him.

Nuoosee said dancers today perform a variety of versions of that original dance – old-style, contemporary and midrange – but all tell the story of the prairie-chicken.