

LPC still a mystery to long-time KSU researcher

David Haukos, a researcher with Kansas State University, has spent nearly four decades studying the lesser prairie chicken.

He agrees that, as numbers currently stand, that WAFWA won't come anywhere near its goal of reaching an annual average of 60,000 LPCs in the five-state region that is the bird's primary habitat.

Part of the problem is that the "carrying capacity" of land currently enrolled in the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative or through Common Ground Capital isn't adequate to support anywhere close to 67,000 birds.

Beyond that, Haukos says the LPC has a long history of fluctuating numbers. He attributes that to "an environment that changes dramatically, and which can see significant changes from one year to the next."

He points out that during periods of severe drought during the 1930s and again in the 1950s, the LPCs saw their habitat strongholds contract significantly.

"They colonize and emerge from those areas when conditions improve," Haukos says. "So to isolate the population based on a one year count

doesn't offer a full picture with what's happening on the landscape."

Likewise, Western Kansas and a large region that is home to the LPC also experienced severe drought from 2011-13, which again resulted in declining numbers. The population has begun to rebound in the years since due to greater precipitation and fewer intensive weather events.

"Last year, it was dry, especially out west and it's been dry in the southern part of the range (Texas and New Mexico) over the last few years, so that's led to renewed concerns about their population," says Haukos.

A Complex Problem

Haukos says getting more acreage committed to LPC habitat is only part of the solution.

"If it doesn't also include management changes in existing grassland, just setting aside more refuges for the LPC isn't going to increase their numbers all that much," he says. "The LPC needs an extremely larger area for the population to expand and survive."

Haukos, like many others, are looking for ways to build their numbers that don't call for the species to be listed as threat-

If significant ground were to be taken out of CRP, or when the next drought occurs, it will have a huge effect on the birds. We currently have a very large population of LPCs that rely on the existence of CRP.

David Haukos, K-State researcher

ened or endangered.

At the same time, he says it's a perplexing problem.

One question that hasn't been resolved is why the LPC has largely disappeared from what used to be a stronghold in the Cimarron National Grassland of Southwest Kansas as well as the Comanche National Grassland in southeast Colorado.

"Those areas still seem to have ideal conditions," he says.

Efforts to transplant lesser prairie chickens into those areas have largely been unsuccessful. Over 400 birds were moved to both locations and "97% of the birds moved before they had settled down," Haukos says.

Some did settle in the grassland, but it was on the fringes of where they had historically been found.

Large amounts of acreage devoted to the conservation reserve program (CRP) has contributed to the movement of the lesser prairie chickens north of the Arkansas River.

"From what we can piece to-

gether, there were always a few birds north of the Arkansas River in the 1990s, but those numbers have increased as they've adapted to CRP," Haukos says.

And that's where they've remained.

Today, he says about 60% of the bird's population is north of the Arkansas River.

"We put a lot of transmitters on birds at Stacy Hoeme's land and they didn't move south," he points out.

Take away the CRP land and things could change dramatically.

"If significant ground were to be taken out of CRP, or when the next drought occurs, it will have a huge effect on the birds," says the researcher. "We currently have a very large population of LPCs that rely on the existence of CRP."

Expanding the Range

Haukos applauds the efforts by Wayne Walker and Common Ground Capital to restore the LPC population.

"That's preserving birds where the landowners are managing for the birds and they're doing well," he says.

What's needed, he emphasizes, is to expand beyond the Hoeme ranch or the 46,000 acres committed to the program by Mark Gardner in Clark County.

"We need more land and more incentives for landowners," he says. "The majority of the LPC range is on private land. We have to provide incentives for landowners to manage responsibly so the bird population will grow."

He says there's considerable acreage in the LPC range that doesn't have birds, but has adequate habitat.

Haukos is uncertain what will eventually occur as hearings on the LPC status begin later this month.

"I've been working on these birds since 1986 and I still hesitate to predict what will happen with their future," he says.

"There will always be prairie chickens somewhere, but going forward it's going to be difficult to sustain the current population in some areas and restore or increase population in other areas," Haukos adds. "It's a mystery how to do that."

Controversy

(continued from page one)

Declining LPC numbers, say Walker, speak for themselves.

There are only about 35,000 known birds in its natural habitat area, based on helicopter surveys which, they note, could overstate the actual count. These surveys don't make a distinction between the endangered LPC and the greater prairie chickens which exist in larger numbers.

If the LPC total is accurate, it would represent a two-fold increase from 2013.

"At that time, there were about 17,000 birds, but we were also coming out of a terrible drought," points out Smith, who is with a public relations firm advocating for the LPC.

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) has a 10-year plan for boosting the LPC population to 67,000, but with that timeline nearing its conclusion the agency is falling well short of that goal.

WAFWA a 'Failure'

WAFWA represents 22 states, but it includes a five-state committee focused on preserving the LPCs in their natural range that includes Western Kansas, eastern Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico.

Neither Walker nor Smith pull any punches when describing WAFWA's efforts.

"The program wasn't designed by WAFWA properly and, consequently, it's been a failure," says Walker. "People have good intentions, but their

approach to the solution doesn't work."

While no one at the state or federal level wants to deal with the fallout if the LPC is declared endangered, neither are they willing to admit they need a different strategy, Walker says.

He says WAFWA has about \$65 million at its disposal for the LPC program and has spent about half that amount "with basically nothing to show for it."

On the other hand, Walker and Smith say their market-based approach has proven to be effective with individuals like Stacy Hoeme, of Scott City, who has committed about 9,000 acres in southern Gove County to enhancing LPC habitat.

Likewise, Mark Gardner in Clark County has put about 46,000 acres into the program.

"That's a lot of acres, but that's what these birds need," says Smith. "We need 25,000 to 55,000 contiguous acres and there aren't a lot of these places left, and fewer landowners with these sites who are willing to work with you."

Smith and Walker feel there is opportunity to expand on the 9,000 acres in this vicinity, but it comes down to money.

Pay What Land is Worth

It's not complicated, they say.

"You have to pay the landowners who have the habitat the birds need," emphasizes Walker. "You have to pay them a market based rate. We negotiate with them that if we sell

mitigation credits they will get a large cut."

Instead, WAFWA or other agencies put a price on the land that owners won't accept. Walker says landowners won't give up the "last of the best" LPC habitat for low government rates.

Consequently, what happens too often is lower quality sites are enrolled because those owners will take the lower offer.

"Most of these agencies are staffed with biologists and not land guys," says Smith. "They aren't willing to pay what it takes. They may be very good biologists, but they don't understand the private sector. They make this much more complex than it needs to be."

Walker says WAFWA offers about one-third the value of the ranch land for a permanent easement "which is a deal no one will take."

It's because of the efforts of Common Ground Capital that Hoeme and Gardner were willing to commit quality habitat to the program.

"We've proven that it's possible to get a landowner to put a permanent easement on his land if the price is right," Smith says.

"You have to look at all these competing land uses - mineral rights, carbon rights, cattle prices," Walker continues. "You need to talk with all your family and lawyers. You want to know that if you give up these rights you can look at your children someday and tell them you got enough money to make it worthwhile - that you got more than you would have received



A lesser prairie chicken male inflates an air sack on the side of its neck before emitting a booming sound. (Record Photo)

from any government program."

Wasted Time

Walker notes that with WAFWA's current strategy it will never reach an average of 67,000 birds over the next couple of years.

"We've unfortunately wasted seven or eight years because people prided turf and control more than partnership. We need conservation on the ground, where the bird needs it, and you do that by paying the landowner a market-based rate."

Walker says they refer to these sites as "conservation banks." Credits are purchased by energy developers - oil/gas and wind.

"The credits offset the impact from the energy developers while also creating a stronghold for the bird," Walker says. "It's a win-win for everyone."

Walker and Smith have had conversations with WAFWA and felt they were making headway on a cooperative agreement between the two sides, but WAFWA "backed away."

"It's not too late to work together on a solution that can benefit everyone and rebuild the LPC population to avoid having it listed," Walker says. "But time isn't a luxury."

Cooperation within the five-state LPC region is also tenuous.

There are only about 5,000 birds remaining in New Mexico.

"They realize what's happening now is busted. They would like to work with private ranchers," Walker says of officials in New Mexico.

Because of pressure from oil and natural gas interests, Texas is less willing to devote resources to fix the problem. Oklahoma, says Walker, "is doing nothing."

"Right now, this is a very delicate coalition," he says.

"No one wants to see the prairie chicken listed as endangered. We have a program that can help," Smith insists.

"A population of 35,000 isn't sustainable," he adds. "If we're going to do something we don't have time to waste."

FREE GUIDED HISTORIC BUS TOURS

Provided by El Quartejeo Museum & Jerry Thomas Gallery and Collection and Sponsored by Scott City Travel and Tourism.



See many historic sites* at:

- Battle at Punished Woman's Fork • Steele Home and Museum
- El Quartejeo Pueblo • Historic Lake Scott State Park
- Little Jerusalem or Monument Rocks • Duff Buffalo Ranch

*Weather permitting

Bus departs from El Quartejeo Museum parking lot.

Reservations are required!

Call Dennie at 620-872-5912 or After Hours • 620-874-1559