

Encores

Prairie Chicken



**These big native grouse are
once again fair game in
northwestern Minnesota.**



Text and photography by BILL MARCHEL

DURING A GLORIOUS PRAIRIE sunset, we searched the horizon for chickens.

Friday, Oct. 17, 2003, my friend Dave Sapletal and I were in Clay County in western Minnesota, scouting a harvested sunflower field for prairie chickens. We hoped to spot a flock or two flying into nearby grassland to roost for the night.

As the sun perched on the horizon, Dave suddenly announced: "There's a flock."

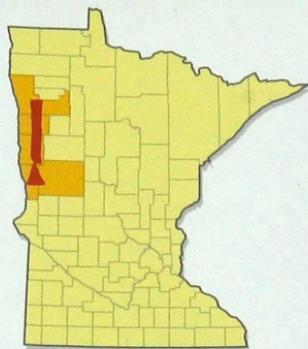
We were two of only 100 hunters randomly chosen to participate

in the first prairie chicken hunt in Minnesota since 1942. The hunt would begin the following morning, a half-hour before sunrise. We planned to be ready.

As Dave and I watched, about 20 prairie chickens lifted from the field. With binoculars glued to our faces, we watched the birds fly south for three-quarters of a mile before landing in tall grass in a wildlife management area. We agreed that place would be where we'd start hunting in the morning.

FLOURISHED ON THE PLAINS. Prairie chickens are one of four species of grouse native to Minnesota. Best known for the male's booming calls and springtime courtship antics, the greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) once flourished on the plains of Minnesota. In 1923, hunters shot an estimated 300,000. But as prairie hab-

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■ Prairie chicken permit area

MAP BY MATT KANIA. SOURCE: DNR

itat disappeared, so did the prairie chicken. In 1942, the hunting season was closed.

Recently—due to efforts by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society, and other private and public partners—enough grassland habitat has been preserved and restored to help stabilize the prairie chicken population. Today the grasslands between Crookston and Fergus Falls hold about 3,000 birds. To spark interest in the prairie chicken and its plight, the DNR sought and gained approval from the Legislature to open a hunting season that would allow harvest of a small percentage of the total population.

MARK BIRDS. The eastern sky was a misty pink when Dave and I began our hunt. Accompanying us were Thor, Dave's yellow Lab, and Axel, my Deutsch drahthaar (German wirehaired pointer). In the pre-dawn darkness, we hiked about a quarter

TWICE LUCKY. One of only 100 hunters picked for the state's first prairie chicken season in decades, Dave Sapletal and his yellow Labrador bagged a bird within minutes of the opening.



mile to our hunting location. We took positions along a fence line, about 150 yards apart. Our plan was to watch—as we had the previous evening—for birds flying to and from the nearby sunflower field. We hoped to mark birds down in the grassy cover of the WMA and then find and flush them with the dogs.

Legal shooting time had just arrived when a lone prairie chicken appeared, gliding toward us on ridged wings, silhouetted against the orange sky. Shortly, another chicken appeared. Both birds landed in the grain stubble, safely out of shotgun range, between Dave and me.

I decided to advance about 50 yards in Dave's direction. It was a good move. In the distance we could see a flock of 20 or so chickens headed in our direction. They passed in shotgun range; and when the shooting ended, three were on the ground. Axel and Thor retrieved the birds. Only minutes into our hunt, I had my season limit of two prairie chickens, and Dave had one.

Our early success was exciting but at the same time disappointing. I had been looking forward to walking the prairie behind Axel while he searched the grass for birds.

As Dave and I were discussing this, a lone chicken flew into range; Dave dropped it, filling his limit. Chickens continued to fly past us. Within an hour or so, we saw roughly 100.

"Our hunt went too good," said Dave as we walked toward the road.

NICE POINTS. Later, we returned to the WMA with camera, instead of shotgun, in hand. Axel and I hiked the prairie in one direction; Dave and Thor in another. Axel made two nice points on lone chickens, and I saw two others. But shooting a chicken with a shotgun is much easier than shooting a good picture.

Ninety-three hunters participated in the 2003 prairie chicken hunt, and harvested 115 birds during the five-day season. Those we talked to reported seeing lots of chickens,

but said the birds were spooky and usually flushed out of shotgun range.

"It was really neat to be a part of history," Dave said later. "Even if we hadn't got any birds, it was nice to see what's been done to restore at



REGISTRATION TAG ATTACHED TO BIRD

least a little bit of the prairie.

"And I learned a lot about prairie chickens. Our scouting efforts were the key to our success. I didn't realize prairie chickens would fly such long distances."

The hunting season has given us a new awareness of prairie chickens and prairie habitat. We hope this awareness will motivate more hunters and others to pitch in to help protect and restore grasslands so Minnesota's prairie chickens will have more room to roam. ●

For information on the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society, write to 14583 County Highway 19, Detroit Lakes, MN 56501. Or visit www.prairiechicken.org.