

ADOPT-A-

Summer 2011

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

Prairie Chicken

NEWSLETTER

News from the Prairie Chicken Front

Although you have not heard from us for a while, Adopt-a-Prairie Chicken is still here, and still working to assist the zoos in raising Attwater's Prairie-Chickens (APC) for release on the Texas Coastal Prairie. We have some great news from the prairie this year, as well as some needs that you may be able to help with.

The annual census, which was conducted during the spring, showed 90 birds on the prairie—the same number as last year, with some relocation. The population at Goliad decreased slightly while that at Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge (APCNWR) was up slightly. Considering that the state just emerged from a hard drought this past winter, these numbers are encouraging—especially since only five years ago, the population was 40.

There is more good news! Census results indicated nesting success, as well. Birds at two sites, Goliad County and the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, raised young to at least 6 weeks of age this year. Observations showed at least one chick at 6.5 weeks of age at Goliad County, and at least 58 chicks at 6 weeks of age at APCNWR. The 58 chicks at the refuge represent the best reproduction record for this site in at least 16 years.

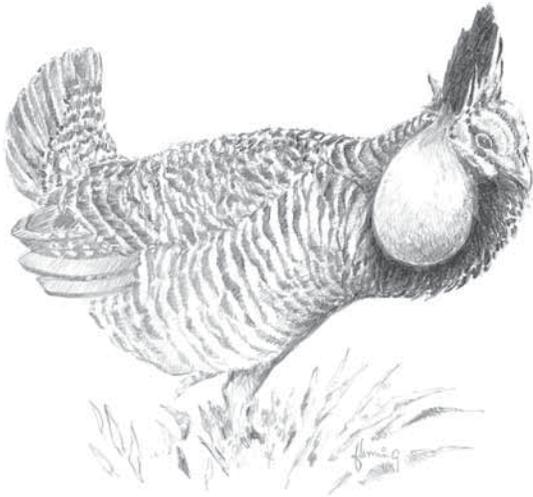
Since 2004, refuge staff, Student Conservation Association interns and refuge volunteers have provided a “head start” for chicks found on the refuge by capturing and feeding insects to the hens and chicks during the first two weeks of life. With 23 nests hatching on the refuge this year, it was impossible for this group to “head start” every nest. Of the 16 nests they were unable to tend, 10 of the hens (62.5 percent) raised chicks to 2 weeks of age. This compares favorably with the nest success of wild Greater Prairie-Chickens (69 percent) in Minnesota.

Captive breeding continues to produce birds for release. This year, 137 birds were released into the wild. These releases supplement the three current wild populations—those mentioned above and the one at the Texas City Prairie Preserve in Galveston County. You can help this activity by supporting the Adopt-a-Prairie Chicken program.

Attwater's Prairie-Chicken Display Expected to Open

Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, near Glen Rose, is developing a new Children's Center, which will include an enclosed flight area for up to six Attwater's Prairie-Chickens. Although these birds will not be in the wild, visitors will have opportunities to see and photograph them. The APC display is expected to have birds by January.





Why the Continued Success?

Several people have asked what might have contributed to the positive trend in the population numbers the past few years. This trend cannot be attributed to any one factor, but rather to a number of factors that are allowing recovery for this bird.

One of the biggest changes, and one to which you contribute directly, has been the ability of the zoos and wildlife centers to raise a significant number of birds for release into the wild each year. This has resulted from improvements at the facilities and a greater understanding of prairie chickens' husbandry. Animal-care staff at these facilities have worked together to create a standard of care that allows the young birds to thrive. Diet specialists and other specialists from outside the group have also contributed to this effort. Standard techniques are being compiled into a manual so that new staff can quickly develop the knowledge and skills needed for bird care.

The restoration of prairie-chicken habitat has also contributed to population growth. As early as 1941, Lehmann said that 93 percent of the Coastal Prairie was no longer present in an unaltered format. These losses continued, and by 1991, less than 1 percent of the prairie remained, according to Smeins and his associates. If there is no habitat, wildlife—especially an animal that is dependent on a specialized plant structure or community—cannot survive. In order to survive, the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken

requires the bunch-grass structure of the native prairie with limited brush encroachment. This is the prairie that Smeins found to be essentially gone.

The creation of a coalition known as the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative (CPCI) is helping to slow down habitat loss and to restore some of that lost prairie. Through CPCI, federal and state government, nongovernmental organizations and other conservation-minded groups work together to help landowners restore and protect quality prairie habitat for the APC. As a result, private landowners are considering Attwater's Prairie-Chicken releases on their property, thanks to a safe harbor agreement with the United States government protecting them from further liability should released birds not thrive.

You can find more information about these and other issues facing the Texas Coastal Prairie in the October 2010 edition of *Eye on Nature* (see www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/newsletter/eye_on_nature/).

Fire-ant Control

The Attwater's Prairie-Chicken recovery team is concerned about the apparent lack of brood survival for birds released to the prairie. When wild hatched chicks die, the wild population is totally dependent on released birds for recruitment to maintain and increase population numbers. A major reason for brood mortality among wild hatched chicks seems to be their inability to find insects. Research has indicated that prairie-chicken young, like the young of most other gallinaceous birds, are primarily insectivorous during the first weeks of life; and that insect abundance in

the brood habitat of Attwater's Prairie-Chickens was significantly lower than in the brood range of Greater Prairie-Chickens in Minnesota. This deficiency was particularly notable in leafhoppers, which were noticeably reduced in APC brood habitat when compared to Greater Prairie-Chicken habitat.

The decline in insect populations is caused, in part, by the presence of the red imported fire ant (RIFA). Previous biological efforts to control this invasive species on the

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Wildlife Division Funding in Texas

Texas wildlife conservation funding is highly dependent on sports enthusiasts (hunters and anglers). Analysis of recent division budgets demonstrate that 97 percent of our operating funds come from sports-related activities – either Pittman-Robertson funding (54 percent) or various user fees—hunting licenses, hunting stamps, WMA user fees, etc. (43 percent). The remaining 3 percent of operating funds come from State Wildlife Grants – funds tied to royalties associated with offshore drilling rights and subject to reauthorization each year by Congress.

The danger lies in a trend that is occurring nationwide: although our state population has increased by about 5 million persons in the past 15 years, the number of hunting and fishing licenses sold has remained constant. As a result, the percentage of our population funding 97 percent of Wildlife Division activities in Texas has declined.



In recent years, additional sources of funding have been used for conservation and

outreach projects within the state. These include: Nongame Stamp (\$40K in 2010), Horned Lizard License Plate funds (\$277K in 2010), White-tailed Deer

License Plate (\$72K in 2010), and federal (Section 6) grants that pass through the Wildlife Division (\$2.5M in 2010). The Non-game Fund that receives tax-deductible donations to wildlife conservation generated about \$2K in 2009. These funds are dedicated to conservation activities associated only with nongame species.

You can help. Purchasing a hunting or fishing license ensures that 100 percent of the \$60 goes to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. In addition to traditional hunting and fishing, this license is required in order to take any wildlife from the wild. Purchasing any one of our four Texas Conservation License Plates ensures that \$22 of the \$30 cost goes to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, with the "Horned Lizard License Plate" money going directly to nongame wildlife. Any donation to the Nongame Fund is tax deductible, and 100 percent of these funds go to nongame conservation efforts.

These are just a few of the ways you can actively support wildlife conservation in Texas. Of course, continuing your support for the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken recovery efforts through the Adopt-a-Prairie Chicken program is a vital part of this effort.

Joining and supporting any of the groups that are involved in the Teaming With Wildlife Coalition also supports our efforts. This group actively works with local and national elected officials to support the continuation of State Wildlife Grants, which make up 3 percent of our annual budget.

Fire-ant Control, continued

Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, including the release of phorid flies in recent years, have had no documented success to date.

In April 2009, Extinguish Plus was applied as bait to 760 acres at APCNWR. This bait insecticide is similar to Amdro. To track the effects, several 0.5-acre study plots were established in both the treatment area and control (untreated) areas. Fire-ant mounds were counted and insects were collected from all study plots. Since treatment, fire-ant activity assessments and insect sweeps have been conducted repeatedly on each plot.

Preliminary results are promising. Mound counts previous to treatment were similar in both treatment and control

areas, indicating that fire-ant activity before treatment was similar in both the treated and untreated plots. One week after treatment, fire-ant activity analysis indicated the average number of fire ants in treated sites was less than half that in the control areas. In the following 18 weeks, this number remained consistently lower in the treatment plots. At week 19, a significantly higher number of insects were collected from the treatment plots than from the control plots. Insects collected included several species of grasshopper, spiders, leafhoppers, beetles, caterpillars, native and imported ants, and other true bugs.

Refuge staff will continue to explore these promising results, and plans are in place to expand this treatment to Texas City Prairie Preserve and Goliad County.



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