

Research helps prairie chickens thrive in Sandhills

Written by Gothenburg Times
Friday, 30 November 2012 15:08 -

LINCOLN—Sandhills ranchers, landowners and other public grassland managers wanting to better manage for prairie chickens soon will be able to thanks to University of Nebraska-Lincoln research.

Nebraska has one of the largest populations of greater prairie chickens in the United States. However, previous prairie chicken research has only been conducted on the tallgrass prairies of Illinois, Kansas, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

“We have this population in the Sandhills and decided to do something to keep it that way,” said Larkin Powell, professor in the School of Natural Resources.

Tallgrass prairies are taller and denser with grass height recommendations for optimum prairie chicken habitat much taller than the Sandhills average grass height.

Powell, rangeland ecology professor Walt Schacht, graduate student Lars Anderson and other students, are studying just how much grass prairie chickens need for good habitat for both nesting and brood rearing.

“Sandhills grasslands are not only shorter and less dense, but they are opened up by cattle grazing,” Schacht said. “So, people who want to manage for prairie chicken are dealing with grazing all the time.”

Sandhills grasslands provide dense cover up to a height of about 5 inches. Recommended height in the tallgrass prairie is 10 inches.

Powell, Schacht, Anderson and others began by tracking the birds.

Male prairie chickens get together in spring and dance for females at a lek site, where male

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prairie chickens “boom” and dance in hopes of attracting females. The males inflate air sacs located on the side of their neck and snap their tails.

“So, the concentration of bides gave us an opportune time to catch hens because we wanted to follow around hens,” Powell said. “We wanted to see where they nest and where they take their broods after the eggs hatch.”

Radios were put on females caught at the lek sites. Researchers were able to determine on average the female prairie chicken went about 1.5 miles from the lek site to nest.

One of the questions Sandhills ranchers often ask are, “if I have 5 leks, do I just need to manage the lek or the whole ranch?”

“So we now know we can go to ranchers and tell them that there is a nesting around leks,” Schacht said. “On average nesting habitat areas are within a couple miles from those leks.”

Many ranchers often worry that prairie chicken habitat requires deferred grazing or reduced stocking rates.

“This research tells us that if a prairie chicken can find a dense pocket, somewhere in that pasture, they can build a nest,” Schacht said.

Researchers also found they often chose the more densely vegetated swales between the rolling Sandhills.

Housed and centered at the Barta Brothers Ranch, the project was conducted on the private land of 10 to 15 ranchers in the area.

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Another study involving how prairie chickens respond to wind turbine facilities also is in the works near Ainsworth.

A UNL Extension Circular soon will be available on managing prairie chickens.

This Agricultural Research Division project is done in collaboration with and receives support from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.