

Isaac E. Hess presented the following paper :

#### THE PASSING OF OUR GAME BIRDS.

What has the future in store for the game birds of the Mississippi valley? My paper will refer in particular to the resident game birds: the prairie chicken, ruffed grouse, bobwhite and woodcock.

Of the migrators, including such species as Wilson's snipe, golden plover, yellow-legs, and the several ducks and geese, there is no immediate danger of extermination.. Just so long as these birds extend their summer range beyond the bounds of man, the long black lines and curves and angles of migrating birds will continue to be seen traveling northward in the spring and returning each autumn.

When civilization has followed them until farther northward is denied, then will their numbers fade away like those of the beautiful wood duck; and like the passenger pigeon they will gradually disappear.

Time was, and not in the distant past, when prairie chickens and quail were more common in the fields of the prairie states than domestic fowl about the barnyards. Several times within recent years, bobwhites have so rapidly increased as to excite comment from even non-observers, only to be swept away in such an avalanche of destruction, that the following season they are rarely met with. And nature is his great destroyer, not man.

The winter of 1902-1903 was a fair illustration of how nature performs her work of equalization. In the fall of 1902 bobwhites were more numerous, with one possible exception, than any other bird of central Illinois. A walk through any stubble or meadow would send at least one flock scurrying to shelter, and a ride along country roads would reveal covey after covey runing along the hedge rows; while dozens would be

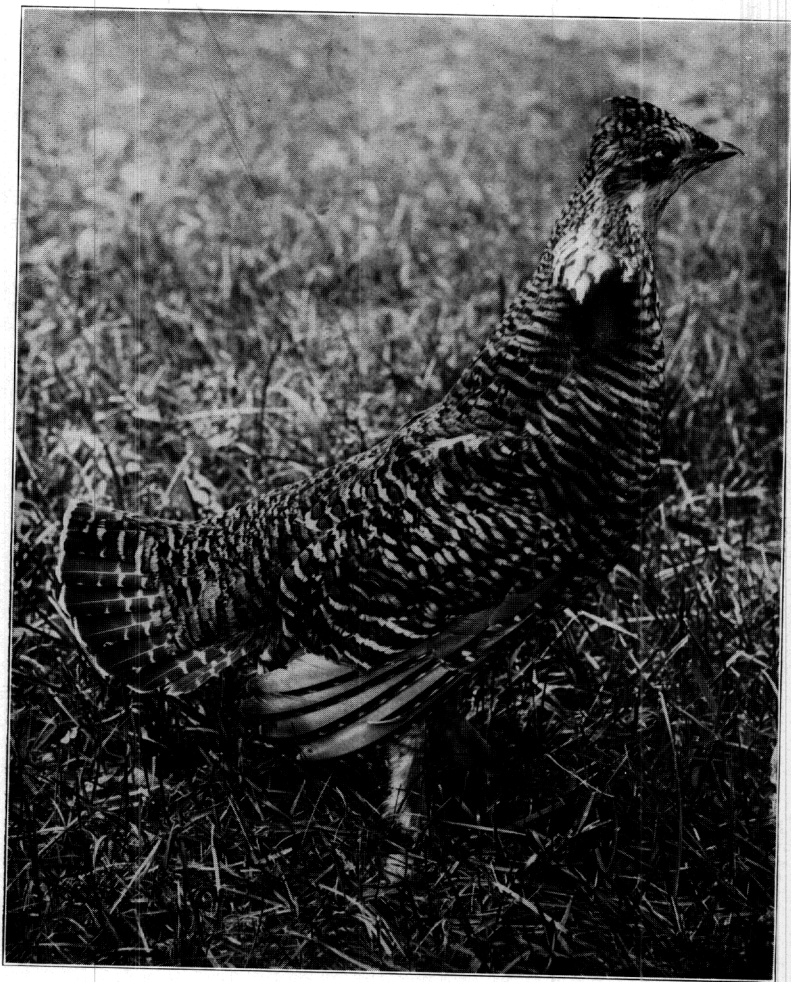


Fig. 5. Prairie Chicken (*Tympanachus americanus*.)

seen hurrying across the road ahead of approaching teams. The winter was moderately mild until February, when one evening came a heavy fall of snow and the thousands of bobwhites, out battling with the elements, burrowed to the bottom of the snow-banks for warmth and shelter.

During the night the wind shifted and a rain and sleet set in. In a short time the tunnels were covered with the drifting snow, and by morning a thick hard crust of ice imprisoned the little bands of living pulsing creatures. A new experience now confronts them and they huddle close together. Their world has narrowed to small proportions, but they are warm and comfortable, and the first day passes with little inconvenience. But prison without succor means death, and slowly but surely the little flocks succumb to the pangs of hunger. With horns of plenty all about them, they gradually starve, and not until the warm spring winds unlock the prison doors, do we behold the awful results of nature's tragedy.

The bobwhite army quickly recovers, however, from these terrible reverses, and two or three good seasons are sufficient to restore them to their former numbers, as they rapidly multiply. If the summer season be dry and favorably, two sets of eggs will be deposited, and each female will bring forth two broods averaging fifteen chicks each. The first brood will hatch in late May, and the second in early July. Twenty chicks of the thirty should arrive at maturity, and if the winter season be not of the quail killing sort, a dozen should survive its rigors, leaving seven pairs to begin the following season. Computing by compound interest, these seven pairs should increase to 606 birds by the third season. With one pair of quails on each section of land, one township should furnish the enormous number of 21,816 birds in three productive seasons.

Is it not plain that without the intervention of nature, quails would soon become more numerous than the grasshoppers in the fields, and in the course of events would prove a serious menace to the harvests?

But nature does not need the help of man in her work of reducing the over supply to normal conditions, and when man

interferes, the result is sometimes extinction.. Nature has seldom caused the extinction of species since the modern era, but through human agencies alone has disappeared the great auk, the passenger pigeon and the Carolina parroquet.

From man the bobwhite, however, has little to fear, and for this reason he seems to have brighter prospects than the other game birds about us. The day is past when he furnishes the zest for the hunting trip. Through wise legislation, the time for shooting him has been diminished, until now he is protected nearly eleven months of the year.

Another point in his favor is the growing sentiment that he should not be considered a game bird. His economic value has been established, and this with his inocent harmless life has appealed to those who used to seek his life, and many hunters now will allow a fine covey to flush at their feet with never the temptation to lift a gun. As one old hunter said, "Did you ever dress a pretty little quail and find its crop bursting with weed seeds of which it had kindly cleared your land? And did you stop to think that for the fun of killing and for two or three ounces of meat—delicious, it is true—you had destroyed a friend that was working hard every day in your interest? Well, that is my experiance, and I must say it took some of the zest of quail shooting away, when I thought of what I had done."

The prairie hen has had a harder row to hoe. That noble bird has been forced to adapt itself to a violent change of conditions since the days when it felt so much at home in the broad expanse of rolling prairies.. The fates have been unkind to it and its enemies relentless. Big and strong and swift of wing, it has furnished rare sport for the hunter, and the flavor of its flesh has found great favor with the epicure.

With its enemies so much in evidence, the natives seeking it for food, the hunter shooting it for sport, and the pot-hunters slaughtering it for gain, it has been running a continual gauntlet.

Add to this the constant danger confronting the young prairie chickens from their natural enemies, the foxes, minks,

skunks, weasels, and hawks, and the difficulties the hen must meet in saving her eggs from the ravages of cows, snakes, and squirrels (to say nothing of the farmer's plow), and you need not think it strange that the prairie hen has been unable to hold its own. No more do we see those great flocks, numbering in the hundreds, sailing rapidly over the fields to their feeding grounds. Only little bands scattered here and there are left of that vast army of birds so conspicuous in the early settlement days. They have been rapidly disappearing of late years, and it seemed for a time that their days were surely numbered.

Fortunately, however, the legislature of Illinois became sufficiently alarmed to pass a law protecting this bird for a period of years, giving it in this state at least a new lease of life. The next few years will determine whether or not the prairie chicken is doomed to destruction. If the clause be not renewed, this pioneer bird will pass into history. A renewal of the law at its expiration July 1, 1911, for an additional five years will give him another chance in the great battle of the survival of the fittest.

If the prairie chicken is a native of your locality, you will know it about the last week in February. It is then you may hear the loud drumming noise made by the male at the first signs of opening spring, and be enabled to number and locate each flock in the vicinity. If you have never seen the male at his drumming, you have missed a novelty indeed. On either side of his neck is a large yellow spot devoid of feathers. The skin is quite loose and very elastic and capable of being blown up like a small rubber balloon. As the cock struts to and fro, displaying his many charms before a bevy of admiring females, these wind-bags are distended to the size of oranges.

With his head swaying back and forth near the ground, the drumming noise is made by expelling the collected air through the mouth. Beginning about four o'clock in the morning, the cocks drum with marked regularity until six or after. On still mornings they may be heard at a distance of three or four miles.

His "boo-ro-roo" is a long-drawn out roll, and resembles nothing so much as the expression "you-ole fool." Indeed, when the drumming is followed with these syllables in mind, the resemblance is ludicrous. Not the most gallant way perhaps, for father Tympanachus to announce to the sleeping world the birth of a new day, but really quite excusable when we think of his many trials and crosses at the hand of man. It is, in fact, his only way of resenting the plowing up of his foraging grounds and the turning of his nests in the furrows.

To see him in his most interesting moods, you must find him during courting hours. Then the determined swains meet in battle royal to decide the great question as to which shall be "king of the flock," the victor of course claiming the choice of the females for his mate.

When you have gazed upon the proud fellow dragging his stiff wings on the ground in scornful challenge; when you have seen the excited cackling females encouraging their lords to battle and have heard their wild nerve shattering laughter (so like the babble of a gathering of maniacs), you will have felt repaid for the inconvenience of an early morning trip to the rendezvous.

The bobwhite and prairie chicken may both be saved to us by simply protecting them. That they are gradually adapting themselves to the changed conditions is amply proved. Recently I found a nest of the prairie hen containing thirteen eggs placed in a small clover field within a hundred yards of our town park, and last summer I photographed a nest with eggs only four blocks from my place of business. Bobwhite is already a semi-domesticated bird and will nest and feed in company with the barnyard fowl when undisturbed.

The ruffed grouse and woodcock, however, will soon be gone. The only possible way to keep them would be to save the forests, and this of course will not be done. These interesting game birds cannot change their mode of life, and man's advent was the beginning of the end for them.

I have in mind but one spot where I may now find the woodcock, that queer almost silent bird of the night. Untouched

by the woodman's axe, a bit of forest in its primeval state still shelters a thick swampy undergrowth. The soil remains wet and soft throughout the summer season, and here where the woodcock may penetrate its oozy depths with his long soft mandible he feels at home. When the last of these wild spots of nature is gone, then will the woodcock be no more.

The passenger pigeon is gone, and now it does not lie within our power to bring back the magnificent flocks that used to darken the sun for our ancestors. Perhaps my hearers have noticed the desperate efforts that are recently being made in behalf of the passenger pigeon. Offers of hundreds of dollars are made to the public, not for the dead body of this now rare bird, but merely for the evidence that a single one is in the land of the living. Excellent motive, but too late! too late! Wise legislation a score of years ago would have prevented this fine bird from extinction.

We of Illinois have an opportunity to improve upon the lax methods of twenty years ago. This is the age of conservation of resources. We have tasted of the fruits of carelessness. Are we to learn from experience?

The past months of December and January, with their abnormal periods of ice and snow, have wrought sad havoc among the quail of the north Mississippi valley. It is doubtful if any season of recent years has proved so disastrous as the one just past. Reports from all over the state tell the same pitiful story of covey upon covey of bobwhites found huddled together, all dead.

I think it is obvious to us all that without protection for the bobwhite at this stage for a period of three years at least, we shall be in danger of losing for all time this valuable citizen.

Through the protection of the prairie chicken during recent years, this part of Illinois (at least Champaign county) may claim a very appreciable increase in numbers. Just as they are getting a good start, we are confronted with the knowledge that the protective clause expires on July 1st of next year. Listen while I tell you of a secret. Within six miles of the University of Illinois, at this moment there is a grand flock of

sixty of these splendid birds that have successfully coped with the severe winter months.

Gentlemen of the Illinois Academy of Science, how many of you would wish to see that band of pioneer birds exterminated within a month from July 1, 1911?

I have a letter in my pocket from W. F. Henninger of Ohio, who is Secretary of the Wilson Ornithological Club of that state, stating that he seriously doubts if a single live prairie chicken is now to be found within the boundaries of Ohio. Is this to be said of Illinois in the near future??

I would be much pleased should the Illinois Academy of Science go on record as favoring the repeal of the quail law for a protecting period of three years, and an extension of the prairie chicken protecting clause for an additional period of five years from July 1, 1911.

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