

“THE ‘PRAIRIE CHICKEN’ HAS GONE”

By E. L. PAYNTER, Game Commissioner, Saskatchewan

History records the Pinnated Grouse, or prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*), as known to the early American settlers who referred to the bird as the Minnesota Grouse. The demand for land in the United States quickly extirpated the bird from most of its former range as early as 1870. It appeared to enter Saskatchewan from the south-east in about 1900. No doubt the wealth of unsettled Canadian prairies was responsible for the extension of its range in Saskatchewan—south of highway No. 5 and east of the elbow of the South Saskatchewan River.

Unlike the Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Pediocetes phasianellus*), also called prairie chicken, which is so plentiful to-day, the Pinnated Grouse is truly a prairie bird. It loves the grasslands and shuns the brushy and heavily wooded areas so favoured by the Sharp-tailed Grouse. Another habit of the Pinnated Grouse, in which it differs from the Sharp-tailed, is that it will lie close to a dog and flushes singly or in pairs rather than in coveys. This habit, no doubt, has hastened its end although agricultural advances have been more directly responsible. From conversation with old-time hunters we learn that the Pinnated Grouse was common in 1912 and then decreased until the grouse decline in the “thirties” from which it never recovered. Grouse have appeared in emblems and mottos for many years. Of significance is the Provincial Government’s emblem, the Sharp-tailed Grouse and the Pinnated Grouse, which appeared on the vehicles of the Prairie Command during World War II.

The Game Branch, Department of Natural Resources, is making a determined effort to prevent the final disappearance of the Pinnated Grouse from Saskatchewan. Mr. Art Benson, Biologist, and Mr. Fred Bard, of the Provincial Museum, have run a survey for two seasons with the result that two hybrids and one true Pinnated Grouse have been found. In addition the dog-trainers have co-operated whole-heartedly and, altogether, the chief grouse grasslands in the province have been covered.

The Pinnated Grouse booms and frequents courtship dancing grounds as does the Sharp-tailed Grouse, and a colour-sound picture by C. W. Schwartz entitled “Sunrise Serenade” illustrates the birds’ activities on their dancing grounds. Should any dancing grounds of the Pinnated Grouse still exist and be reported to the Game Branch, they will be posted so that they shall be respected and shall serve as study areas.