

PHOTOGRAPHING

Mating Grouse in the *Wild, Wild West*

By Christine Pence, QPSA and Sandy Zelasko



Greater Sage Grouse Copulating



Prairie Chickens Engage

Two nature photographers set out in late March to explore the habitat and mating activity of several types of grouse from the Phasianidae family of Galliformes. We traveled across seven western USA states over three weeks, photographically chronicling the habitat and mating activities of the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), the Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*), the Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*), and the Lesser Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*).

Though not on our list for this trip as we were concentrating on the mating activity on open field leks, we did see along the way male Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), and domesticated Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), all of which are part of Phasianidae family.

Prairie Chickens, Sharp-Tailed Grouse, and Greater Sage Grouse gather in early spring (March and April) for a unique mating ritual in which the males compete for females through intricate displays of flight and fight skills. This mating ritual, known as lekking, takes place on unique areas known as mating leks which can be found in open, sparsely vegetated areas. Males and females perform their mating activities, usually starting in the pre-dawn hours until a couple of hours after sunrise. Females choose one or two males to perform copulation duties for the entire covey and once impregnated, the female leaves the mating area to find a somewhat protected spot to lay her eggs. Visiting mating leks earlier in the season improves the chances for seeing the copulation act.

During the intervening year from our first encounter with the Greater Sage Grouse, we studied what others had written and shared, met the experts who could help us locate these leks, planned our route, acquired the relevant photography gear and clothes for three weeks of discovery across seven states within our designated region, and assured we had enough funds to cover the rising fuel costs of 2022. With this little bit of book knowledge and two mornings of Greater Sage Grouse viewing from a previous year, we thought we were ready enough to study live these mating activities in several places across the Great Plains and the eastern edge of the Great Basin Shrub Steppe. Reality quickly caught up with us.

It's 3 a.m. Time to trade the warmth of an almost quietly heated room for the howling cold winds of the Great Plains, ever hopeful that the nighttime precipitation will have dissipated by the time we reach the mating lek, sometime about an hour before first light. No warm drink or even a cold drink will help us because we are about to spend the next



Sharp Tailed Grouse on Display

five hours in the restricted space of a photography blind with no facility or big bush anywhere in sight. Searching for the field path we had identified the day before, even our flashlights are sputtering in the cold. The headlights do help when the trail is reasonably flat and dry.

Each of the grouse we chose to study on this trip has a slightly different favorite lek environment. The lesser and hybrid prairie chickens seem to prefer open fields, somewhat trampled down and surrounded by taller grasses and forbs. The Columbian and plains sharp-tailed grouse we observed in Nebraska chose clearing areas surrounded by taller trees and thick forbs. In South Dakota, we found them on an elevated mound, surrounded by taller grasses, forbs, and very distant wind breaking woodlands. By sharp contrast, the Greater Sage Grouse in Utah favored the shrub steppe lands surrounded by tall mountains, where grassy plains mix with woody brush such as sagebrush. In Wyoming, the Greater Sage Grouse wandered on top of a sloped, wind-swept mountain covered only in low sagebrush.

March and April in this part of the USA are known to be cold, windy, and unpredictable in terms of precipitation. We encountered rain and had to cancel entirely our lek viewing in Montana, due to a blizzard that covered the countryside and leks with



In the Blind Box



Tent Blind on the Prairie



Greater Sage Grouse Displaying

a deep snow fall that was significant enough to keep the highways and autoroutes closed for several days and to make off-road passage impossible.

We experienced the lekking activity for these grouse in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Utah and can now share some important considerations for those who are interested in photographing this annual, early springtime ritual. Keep in mind that it is difficult to find active leks within easy reach of a passable road. More than 93% of the potential lek locations are on private lands for which permission is needed in order to approach and photograph the lekking. Accurate locations for active leks usually are not publicized and therefore good sleuthing research skills are required. Leks, while used year after year, appear to be abandoned more frequently due to encroaching human development, tall towers and buildings, red cedar and pinon expansion, agricultural pesticide usage, and changes to native grass and sage dispersion. Natural disasters such as wildfires also contribute significantly to loss of habitat for wildlife and that includes grouse.



Sharp Tailed Grouse Parade

Hybridization of Greater and Lesser Prairie Chickens can lead to a decline in population as well since females do not appear to be interested in mating with the male hybrid birds.

As of the most recent 2022 State of the Birds report copyrighted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, The

Endangered Species Act of 1973 does not list the Greater Prairie Chicken as Threatened overall but it is considered Threatened in certain states. It is considered Vulnerable on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) Red List. The Lesser Prairie Chicken recently received the Threatened/Endangered status, depending on exact location. The Greater Sage Grouse also is considered Threatened/Endangered. By contrast, the Sharp-Tailed Grouse remains on the IUCN list as Least Concern with the exception of Washington State which classifies the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse as Endangered.

Federal, state, and private land managers work together to monitor and protect these and other wildlife populations. The Bureau of Land Management is a good place to start researching. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is organized by regions and has staffed offices in these regions which work with the regional private landowners, state agencies, NGOs, Tribes/Nations, and universities. Regional Audubon offices as well as those of The



Lesser Prairie Chicken



Prairie Chicken Faceoff

Nature Conservancy often have experts who work with government agencies and local landowners. In Kansas, for instance, the Audubon of Kansas puts on an annual Prairie-Chicken Festival (this year 13-16 April in Hays, Kansas) which provides mating lek viewing opportunities and many educational experiences. Our personal experience in 2022 was that this was an invaluable means to shorten the learning curve and to meet others interested in these grouse. A few other states do have some events, but we found this one to be strategically placed in time and location for our needs.

Once contacts are made to locate appropriate mating lek possibilities, a relevant equipment list can be established. Since most of these sites will be off-road, an off-road vehicle is essential. Often the vehicle will be used as a blind, so it is desirable to have enough space and visibility inside to move around easily with camera gear. It will be cold when the motor is turned off (28F/-2C with wind gusts up to 38mph/51kmh) so having leg protection will be appreciated. Consider assuring that warm, thick boots, layered clothing, ear-covering hat/scarf, and gloves that work with camera equipment are part of the essentials for the day.



Christine Pence, QPSA

Christine currently is the Past Chairperson of the PSA Pictorial Image Division. While she photographs across several genres, she really enjoys photographing wildlife and has traveled widely across the world in pursuit of images. Her recent work focuses more on birds, due to travel limitations from Covid, yet she has found this to be a rewarding and challenging genre. Using social media to document travels in general, on this trip we set up a blog (<http://chicksonagrousetrip.blogspot.com>) to keep track of our observations and to share with those interested specifically in our findings. Find more of her work on <https://500px.com/p/ccpence>



Sandy Zelasko

Sandy Zelasko, an award winning published photographer, is an accomplished speaker, instructor and hands-on nature photography workshop leader who listens to participant needs so she can best deliver solutions for student understanding and achievement. A freelance nature photographer specializing in North American wildlife, she promotes ethical practices in the field of conservation photography and donates her talents towards land acquisition for better connectivity and wildlife sustainability. Learn more about Sandy at InvestInNature.org.



Sharp Tailed Grouse Fighting

Sometimes available photography blinds are set up near the leks in the correct position. If not, a portable tent blind works as well. Identifying the lek in the daytime the night before makes it easier to position the blind correctly in the dark when cold winds blow incessantly across most of this western region of the US. Bring a stool/chair for the blind and if there is no flooring, bring a tarp to help keep camera gear off the ground directly and feet on something a little less cold/muddy.

For camera equipment, be prepared to see mating activity within a few feet of the blind/vehicle as well as further out to about 200 feet. A good tripod is essential and if there is room in the blind, a couple of tripods with cameras mounted to include video shots is desirable. Each of the types of grouse we photographed had a slightly different mating ritual. The Prairie Chickens are the most demonstrative with high flights, rigorous fighting, and flying plucked feathers. Studying the mating behaviors of the selected grouse helps greatly with getting good images. They move fast, in and out of vegetation and changing light. Having cameras set on Auto ISO and shooting in manual works well. Considering the distances that this activity can encompass, trying to shoot tight to the subject can be difficult and perhaps not even desirable. Often there will be multiple birds

in the frame, requiring a change in f-stop for sharp focus. The birds are already moving around on the lek in the dark hours and can be heard before they are visible to the eye or the camera. The activity continues as the light improves for photography so there is no need to precipitate by taking many images in poor light. It is good practice, however, for getting accustomed to the conditions and behaviors. Individual birds seem to follow a similar ritual pattern, making it easier to track the action. Keep an eye on the horizon for wandering coyote, hawks, pronghorn, and other birds, as these make for interesting shots and also can cause the grouse to flush, though they usually return, so wait it out a bit before deciding to end for the morning.

The last, but perhaps the most important consideration when planning this kind of photographic experience is that of the significant peril these birds are facing. The ever-increasing struggle to protect these habitats is real. As photographers, we have an opportunity to encourage ethical behavior at the same time that we show the magnificence of these mating rituals. The lekking experience is unique and to be protected. The environments in which this takes place also need to be preserved. Our documenting of these rituals can tell the story of the dangers of extinction these birds are suffering as we encroach upon their traditional sites.



Peonies

By Cathy Gabel

Creating Flower Portraits in my Kitchen Sink Studio

“Everything I photograph, I photograph with love.”

I have several confessions and secrets to share - I've had PhotoShop for years but never learned how to create backgrounds or manage the program well. I take photos with a point and click compact digital camera set to automatic. The subject of a majority of my photography is backyard wildflowers, patio container plants, and flowers blooming in my wild and unruly garden that I nicknamed Small Paradise Garden.