

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

Game Division

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RESULTS OF THE 1951 DANCING GROUND SURVEY

The map on the next page shows the locations of active prairie chicken and sharptail dancing grounds checked this past spring by District Game Supervisors, Cusino and Houghton Lake Wildlife Experiment Stations, Seney Federal Wildlife Refuge men, and field workers on Pittman-Robertson Project 37 - R.

As in 1950 road conditions were again poor in the Upper Peninsula in the early part of the courtship season, and since dancing activity was not late this year some grounds could not be visited until after the peak of courtship activity had passed. In the Upper Peninsula the peak occurred about May 2, in the Lower Peninsula on April 24, as indicated by frequency of hens appearing on dancing grounds.

The outstanding changes in distribution of these species as compared to last year (see Game Division Information Circular # 68) are:

1. A further reduction in the number of prairie chicken colonies in the Upper Peninsula. One new colony (3 cocks) was located in Menominee County but it is not known whether or not these birds were there previously.
2. The disappearance of prairie chicken colonies in Midland, Montmorency, Presque Isle, and Cheboygan counties in the Lower Peninsula.
3. Newly discovered sharptail colonies in southeastern Antrim and north-eastern Crawford counties.
4. The successful establishment of sharptails (from Alberta) in Otsego County and the appearance of a sharptail dancing ground in Benzie County where a planting of Alberta birds was made (The Benzie County introduction may not be successful due to an apparent lack of hens).

Following is a summary of this spring's findings compared to last spring:

Total Birds Recorded on All Dancing Grounds Checked
(Number of dancing grounds in parenthesis)

	<u>Prairie Chickens</u>		<u>Per Cent Decrease in 1951</u>
	<u>1950</u>	<u>1951</u>	
Upper Peninsula	71 (10)	26 (6)	63 %
Lower Peninsula	489 (61)	332 (49)	32 %
Totals	560 (71)	358 (55)	36 %

Sharptails

	<u>1950</u>	<u>1951</u>	<u>Per Cent Decrease in 1951</u>
Upper Peninsula	884 (83)	870 (95)	2 %
Lower Peninsula	185 (18)	113 (16)	39 %
Totals	1,069 (101)	983 (111)	8 %

Although some of the grounds that were active in 1950 were not checked this spring, this was offset by the fact that some new grounds (probably active in previous years) were located in 1951. Using only those dancing grounds or special areas checked in both years the resulting decreases are very close to those shown above.

General Summary

1. Prairie chickens are disappearing in the Upper Peninsula, both on the Seney Refuge where they were protected and on the Bullock Ranch, which was heavily hunted. In the Soo area there is no indication that prairie chickens survived any better on the small area closed to hunting. There sharp-tail cocks and prairie chicken-sharptail hybrids were noted dancing with prairie chickens. Only six small dancing grounds are known in the Upper Peninsula.
2. In the Lower Peninsula there was about a 30 per cent reduction in prairie chickens. Since there was an open season only in Missaukee County this can hardly be named as the cause. There was a slight decrease in Missaukee County, but there was also a considerable decrease in Alpena and Iosco counties, while the several colonies in Midland, Montmorency, and Presque Isle counties have disappeared. The prairie chicken populations in Arenac, Gladwin, Mecosta, Ogemaw, Oscoda and Otsego counties remained about the same.
3. Sharptail populations remained about the same in the Upper Peninsula as a whole. There was a noticeable decrease in what was formerly known as the Escanaba River Tract (now the Sturgeon River State Forest) and a considerable increase on Drummond Island. In the Seney Area there was a slight decrease in the Bullock Ranch vicinity while on the adjacent Seney Refuge (closed to bird hunting) there was a moderate increase, by contrast. Most other areas in the Upper Peninsula showed little change.
4. In the Lower Peninsula a decrease is indicated in the Fletcher Area newly opened to hunting last fall but some new dancing grounds were located and there are reports of birds seen in a number of new areas, indicating that there has been a considerable spread in the range in recent years.
5. On two other areas newly-opened to hunting last fall, Beaver Island showed no change while on Neebish Island there was a decrease.

It should be mentioned that in areas that are subjected to comparatively heavy hunting pressure, especially where the vicinities of dancing grounds are hunted repeatedly, it is likely that abnormal number of cocks are taken. This might disrupt the sex ratio the following spring sufficiently so that an estimate of the population based on cocks seen on dancing grounds would be low.

The normal sex ratio of sharptails is believed to be about 120 cocks per 100 hens, but checks of birds shot in fall have shown a ratio as high as 150 cocks to 100 hens. Excessive shooting of males might have accounted for some of the decrease noted on such areas as the Bullock Ranch, Neebish Island, and the Fletcher Area. At Fletcher, however, it is probable that many of the sharptails moved out to other areas, as indicated by observations in new localities.

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