

**High Plains Lesser Prairie Chicken Festival
Milnesand, NM
April 16, 17 and 18, 2010
By
Carol Ann Bauer**



Friday was cold and rainy. The weather didn't look great for our excursion to Milnesand, New Mexico, to the 9th Annual High Plains Lesser Prairie Chicken Festival. Nevertheless, Randy Hapgood and I were packed and ready and enthusiastic about our very first sight of these incredible birds, the numbers of which have declined dramatically in the last 20 years, with loss of habitat and the encroachment of humans onto their grassland prairie.

The Lesser Prairie Chicken is a member of the grouse family. It has light brown barring over most of its body that allows the bird to blend in well with the sandy-soiled grasslands in which it lives. The males have more dramatic coloration, with bright yellow eye combs and an orange patch and sac on their throats that fill up with air during "booming".

During the spring, just before daybreak, the male birds gather at a lek (we asked Mark, our guide Saturday morning, what "lek" meant, and when his answer did not quite

satisfy us, Jim Steiert of the Lubbock Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists said it means “Let ‘Em Know!”), spreading tail feathers, extending neck feathers, inflating the bright orange sacs on the sides of their necks while making a “booming” noise, and stamping their little feet on the ground to make a drumming sound. Some folks think the “booming” sounds like a warbling gobbler reminiscent of a turkey. The noise can be heard up to a mile away and is the first sign in the still-dark morning that you have happened upon a lek for the mating display. For several hours pre- and post-dawn, the males display and spar at the lek. This activity seems appealing to females and they come to the lek to select a mate. As a female of the human species, I can attest to the amazing appeal of these small creatures, and commented to Randy that I had been smitten by a number of men in my life, but not quite so much as I am with the male lesser prairie chicken!



Here is one eager male hoping to attract a mate.

Recently the Nature Conservancy purchased the 18,500-acre Creamer Ranch near Milnesand, NM, long recognized as the epicenter of New Mexico’s lesser prairie chicken population, with as many as 40 leks. There are only two remaining patches of grasslands where you can find the lesser prairie chicken. One is located in the Kansas-Oklahoma panhandle and the other is in the eastern New Mexico, West Texas area. With the assistance of local ranchers, the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and The Nature Conservancy, it is hoped their numbers will increase. Milnesand’s annual Prairie Chicken Festival is a glorious celebration of the unique place in our prairie ecology of these incredible little birds.

Even so, the numbers are small. Saturday morning we saw 12-14 males and 3-4 females on a ranch owned by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, under the excellent guidance of wildlife biologist Mark Gruber of New Mexico Department of Game & Fish. Sunday morning, led by Willard Heck, ranch manager of Grasslans Charitable Trust – Weaver Ranch, we saw 6-7 males but only one female, who found none of the males to her liking and soon departed. It was enough to pique our imaginations of days gone by, when many leks were populated by dozens of prairie chickens, all dancing and drumming for the soon-to-be-impressed nesting females.

But the early morning prairie chicken display is only part of the festival each year. Tish McDaniel of The Nature Conservancy coordinated the entire well-run event, and Willard Heck announced each portion, keeping the 100 enthusiastic participants under some modicum of control.

Randy and I sent our registrations in early (the festival filled up by early January!) and were able to rent a room in the two-bedroom bunk house on the Creamer Ranch, owned by The Nature Conservancy. We shared the house and bathroom with a couple from the state of Washington. But these people were not the furthest-travelling participants! There were people from Florida, Virginia and of course many from New Mexico. We are on the early-bird notification list now, and we are planning to attend next year. I'm not sure I can ever get my fill of these birds and the other field trips provided.

Local women prepared a veritable feast of good ranch cooking, along with selections for vegetarians and the gluten-intolerant who indicated their preferences ahead of time. A local singer-songwriter serenaded us Saturday evening after dinner. After lunch on Saturday, Jim Rogers, a licensed falconer from western New Mexico brought a golden eagle for us to see and photograph. And finally, Kyle Dillard, a local Milnesand ranch manager, gave us a talk and demonstration about training and using working dogs for livestock herding. His own dog Bo kept a small herd of sheep totally under control while he talked.



Jim Rogers and his golden eagle (rescued).



Bo brings the sheep "Away to me" to Kyle Dillard.

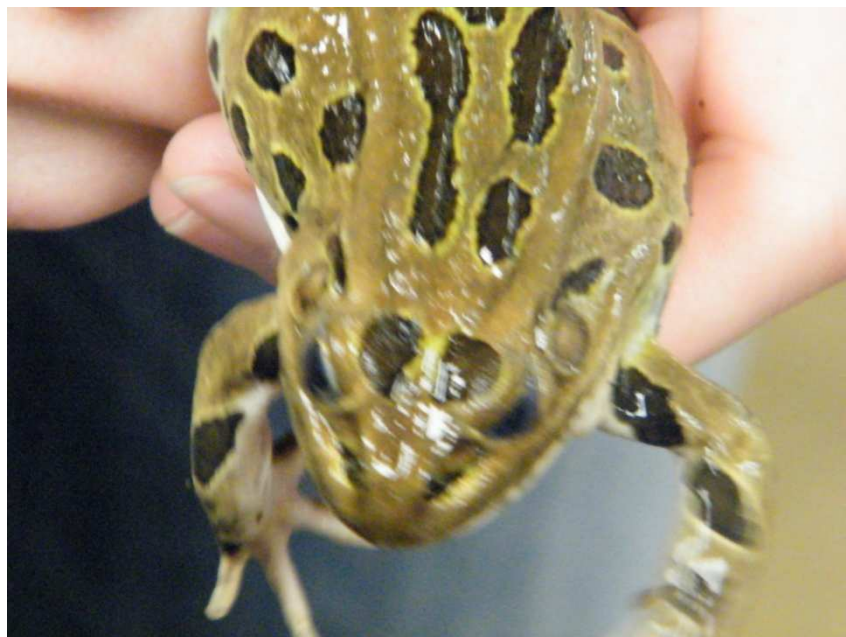
Various field trips, for which we registered when we arrived Friday afternoon, were well-thought-out and guided by experienced, knowledgeable biologists, wildlife management specialists, birders, herpetologists, photographers ... the only complaint I could possibly have is that there was not enough time for me to go on every single one.

I accompanied Sean Lewis to a local prairie dog town for a study of the Ecology of Black-Tailed Prairie Dogs on Saturday morning after breakfast. After lunch I studied

Reptiles and Amphibians with Robert Martin, who began his field trip with a presentation in the community center with live frogs, turtles and snakes for us to view and handle, after which we went to a nearby water tank to check live traps and hunt for the leopard frogs resident at that little pond. Sunday morning I took a class on Pointing and Shooting Photo tips from photographer Tom Hill, and I surely hope my future photographs will be much better!



Robert Martin's Snapping Turtle. "I have had her for five years," he said, "and she still hates me."



Leopard Frog

Meanwhile, Randy took a class on How to Keep a Naturalist's Notebook with Dr. Susan Tomlinson, and went on two birding tours.

Not much was blooming on this cold, wet early-Spring week-end, but here are a few things I found on the field trip to the sandy soil region around Milnesand:









With great anticipation, we are planning next year's trip. Hope the weather warms up to suit this fair-weather naturalist. That would make the whole experience absolutely perfect.

Carol Ann Bauer
Texas Master Naturalist
Class of 2009