



The Greater Prairie-Chicken

A mild breeze set the grasses swaying on a warm May day at dawn. The dozen or so volunteers at the Marion County Greater Prairie-Chicken Sanctuary heard the flight calls of a pair of Upland Sandpipers. Some of us watched a female Northern Harrier working on a nest in a field of redbud grass. All the while, the bubbling songs of Bobolinks competed with the whistles of Eastern Meadowlarks, Northern Bobwhites, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Song, Field, and Grasshopper Sparrows.

We lined up at the south end of a 20-acre plot, armed with walking

sticks to part briary tangles and dense grass clumps that might hide the nest of a Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*). Ten years ago there was a sense of merriment in this annual ritual. Each time a nest was located, the finder would shout "Bingo," which was then rewarded with a quarter. Locating three nests in a row earned the finder an additional quarter. By day's end, a sharp-eyed searcher might have earned enough to buy a hamburger, fries, and soda.

On this day, we flushed a meadowlark from her domed ground nest and watched prairie voles and other small rodents skitter for cover. Sud-

denly, our line stopped moving. There on the ground was a handful of brown and buff feathers. "Well, they're prairie-chicken feathers, that's for sure," said Ron Westemeier, a wildlife ecologist with the Illinois Natural History Survey. "It's one of our precious hens," he said.

But we found no prairie-chicken nests that day. And no one shouted "Bingo."

Early History

The history of the prairie-chicken in Illinois has recorded great fluctua-

Meadowlark