



Greater Prairie-Chicken males and females on lek. Drawing by Leslie A. DeCoursey.

in Illinois

By Judy K. De Neal

tions due to changing land practice and competition among species. Robert Ridgway scarcely mentioned the prairie-chicken in his 1889 *Ornithology of Illinois*, suggesting it would be like carrying coals to Newcastle, so common was the species. But it hadn't always been so.

The prairie-chicken found the eastern tall-grass prairie no more hospitable than did the early settlers. The grasslands were hot in summer, cold in winter, and subject to dangerous fires. Early settlers, suspicious of land "too poor to grow trees," preferred to homestead forested areas along rivers and streams where good

water, timber, and game were plentiful. The clearings yielded to the plow more readily than did the deep-rooted prairie sod. Historical accounts show prairie-chickens moved from the prairies into cut-over woodland fields to become pests to crops (Westemeier and Edwards 1987).

It is not clear what the population was before the 1850s, although records indicate chickens were widely distributed throughout the tall-grass prairie region of Illinois. Early settlers said prairie-chickens were numerous, while P. L. Hatch stated that a hunter in 1836 would be lucky to shoot a dozen in a day (Westemeier

1985). During the winter of 1830-31, in Sangamon County, Rev. J. G. Bergen reported "thousands and thousands of prairie-chickens died as a result of being trapped in deep snow under a crust of ice." During the 1840s, a hunter named McCormack bagged 160 birds in one day and two men killed 48 chickens in just two hours near Danville (Galbreath 1982).

Population Boom

The real population boom came after the invention of the self-scouring plow. Settlers lost little time convert-