

The Dance of the Sharp-tailed Grouse

As described by **Thomas Blakiston** in the *Ibis*, April, 1863

When the first naturalists visited the prairies, over one hundred years ago, they were greatly impressed by the dancing of the Sharp-tailed Grouse. After the second Franklin expedition, Thomas Drummond published his account of their dancing in *Botanical Miscellany* in 1830, while Dr. John Richardson of course published his observations in *Fauna Boreali Americana*, volume 2 on the birds being released in February, 1832. The best description, however, is that of Captain Thomas Blakiston, magnetic observer to the Palliser expedition, who was stationed at Carlton during the winter and spring of 1857-58. The following account was published in the April 1863 issue of *The Ibis* and is here offered for the interest of our readers.—C.S.H.

Towards spring the Sharp-tailed Grouse of a neighbourhood collect at a certain spot on the prairie (usually a small mound or other raised position) twice a day, morning and evening, about the time of sunrise and sunset, to celebrate, in their peculiar way, festivities of love, displayed to so remarkable a degree by birds of this family. By the inhabitants of the fur-countries this is called "dancing." It is commenced even before the snow is off the ground; and one frequently comes by chance on such places where the snow and grass are beaten down for the space of many yards. I had often, during the spring mornings, heard the peculiar chuckling noise made by the birds on these occasions; for it can be heard at a distance of over half a mile; but having been confined to the Fort during that part of the day by magnetic observations, I was not able to search out the originators of it, which was the more annoying as the hunters and others used to tell me most wonderful

stories of the "pheasants' dance." However, I was not doomed to be altogether disappointed; for, after our arduous work was completed, I went out on a trip to the plains, with the buffalo-hunters, at the commencement of April. On awaking one morning, when we were camped at a place called "Mosquito Springs" my ears caught the well-known chuckling sound. I need hardly say that I was not long before I tied my moccasins and made my way towards a small knoll on the plain, which was but a short distance from our night's camp; and on nearing the place I could observe some Sharp-tailed Grouse running about. They were quite unsuspecting as is always the case on these occasions, and did not seem to heed my approach; but as I wanted to get as near a view as possible, I went down on my hands and knees, and crawled towards the spot. Getting closer, I lay flat on my stomach, and pushed myself along till I gained the cover of a small stone (a rare



Sharp-tailed Grouse—"in the attitudes of fighting cocks opposed to each other."

Photo by F. W. Lahrman

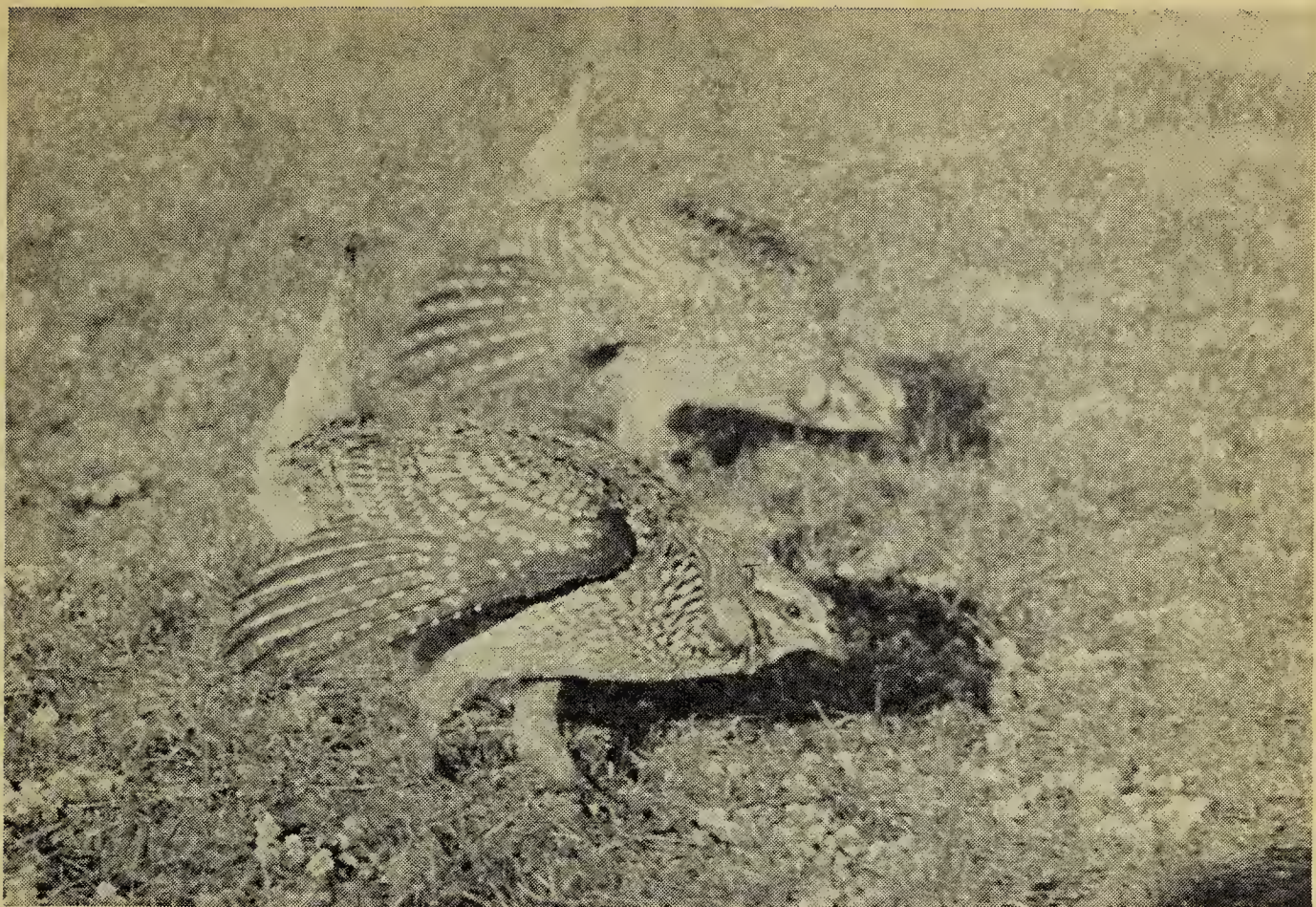


Photo by F. W. Lahrman

Sharp-tailed Grouse—"the sharp-pointed tail was erected at right angles to the back."

thing on the prairies) near the top of the knoll, within ten yards of some of the birds, where I stationed myself, and was well repaid the trouble of getting there. In this instance there were eight or ten birds (there are often many more) engaged in the performance. The two nearest to me were in the attitudes of fighting-cocks opposed to each other, and, besides the feathers of the occiput, ear-coverts and whole neck being set out to the greatest extent possible; the sharp-pointed tail was erected at right-angles to the back, thereby causing the light-coloured undertail-coverts to assume the form of a rosette; the wings were lowered and somewhat spread out, touching the ground, the quill-feathers of which, kept in constant quiver, made a sound like the rustling of a lady's silk dress. These two every now and then circled round, but kept their bodies in the same attitude, their heads nearly touching the ground, and again and again they "came up to scratch." Occasionally one of the two would make a jump in the air to the height of a couple of feet, and sometimes they chased one another; but they did not appear to fight. A little beyond

these two front actors was one amusing himself by strutting about with his head as high as he could get it, and like the others, with his tail erect; in fact, as his back was inclined, the tail being vertical was bent forward toward it: this is much more than the bird is wont to do at other times; for although when it is frightened and about to take wing it erects its tail, it is not nearly to the same extent. Besides these, others were running about and chasing one another in various directions, occasionally taking up the position of fighting-cocks, as already described. Then there were a couple which appeared to be doing nothing, but still they had their tails erected like the others. An odd one or two every now and then flew up and pitched again within a few yards. But above all this and besides the rustling sound of the wings, there was a constant loud chuckling noise kept up, which added music to the ceremony. I cannot describe the sound, but it is at times very loud, neither do I know how the birds make it. All this is the scene for a picture, and I should like to see a competent zoologist artist take it in hand.