

# Recent Records of the Greater Prairie Chicken in Saskatchewan

by Margaret Belcher, Regina



Photo by K. Hodges

Greater Prairie Chicken

The Greater Prairie Chicken or Pinnated Grouse (*Tympanuchus cupido*) was not an original inhabitant of the Canadian "prairies," as was its near relative the Sharp-tailed Grouse. It appears to have come to Canada rather recently, arriving about the turn of the century. Settlers in Manitoba first reported its appearance in the late 1880's and referred to it as the "Minnesota Chicken." The Greater Prairie Chicken followed the advance of the farming westward and at one time was fairly common in open grassy areas in Saskatchewan. Then, because of more intensive cultivation and other undetermined factors, the numbers of Greater Prairie Chicken decreased markedly, so that today it is difficult to establish its occurrence in Saskatchewan.

The vital role of grassland in Prairie Chicken ecology is shown in a table included in **A Guide to Prairie Chicken management** by F. N. Hamerstrom, Jr., Oswald E. Mattson and Frances Hamerstrom (1957). In this table the total grassland area is related to the abundance of Prairie Chicken, with a historical review, and letters from Houston and Bard are quoted (p. 111) presenting the Saskatchewan picture as outlined above. A map in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

circular **Distribution of American gallinaceous game birds** by John W. Aldrich and Allen J. Duvall (1955), which shows the present distribution of the Greater Prairie Chicken in relation to its past distribution, indicates records for areas in North Dakota and Manitoba that touch the extreme south-east corner of Saskatchewan. This would suggest the possibility of Prairie Chicken still being present in the southeast corner of the province.

A summary of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History's records of the Greater Prairie Chicken in Saskatchewan was given by F. G. Bard to the Fifth Prairie Wildlife Habitat meeting in Regina, March 16-17, 1961. Apart from a few SMNH specimens for which no data is available, the records can be summarized as follows: one bird collected at Holdfast (H. Eutenner) and one at Nokomis (R. A. McEwen) no dates; one collected September 23, 1913, at Edam (W.E. Lake); sight records of numerous birds seen by H. H. Mitchell on September 30, 1913, three miles west of Regina, on February 15, 1916, at Craven, and on October 24, 1922, at Imperial Beach; Mitchell also took two specimens at Imperial Beach, October 27, 1922, and October 21, 1924; recorded at Dafoe as quite common and evidently breeding in 1928 and again April 24 and 28, 1929, by F. G. Bard, one specimen being collected April 25, 1929; five chicks were collected June 18, 1929, by F. Bradshaw at Quill Lake; several birds were seen at Dafoe on October 10, 1930 (F. Bradshaw) and October 11, 1930 (F. G. Bard); specimen taken April 30, 1931, by F. G. Bard at Imperial Beach; female taken at Viewfield by Dr. J. R. Hoag in October, 1931 (?); hybrid bird taken October 22, 1933, by J. C. Lusted at Truax; four seen at the north end of Last Mountain Lake June 5, 1936, by F. G. Bard; one specimen taken by F. G. Bard, October 24, 1940, east of Simpson; one seen in 1942 in February or March by F. W. Lahrman at Mortlach; specimen taken October, 1943, by F. N. Dunk at Marienthal; speci-

men taken October 31, 1945, by R. J. Fyfe at Carlyle (see **Blue Jay** 15:57).

In the **Birds of the Saskatchewan River** (1959) Mr. G. Street records scattered reports for the Nipawin area, including a female that he himself flushed with seven young on July 18, 1947, near Maywood, and a final record of a lone bird seen near Snowden, June 10, 1950, by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Matthews, Billy and Anne Matthews and James McCunn. In conclusion, Street comments that "these grouse are now believed to have disappeared from this area, if not from all Saskatchewan."

Street's comment, based on the dearth of records in the early 1950's, reflected a rather general feeling that the Greater Prairie Chicken had perhaps become extinct in the province. Sight records of recent date, however, have revived our hope that a few birds still exist. One was reported seen near Old Wives' Lake by Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher on August 25, 1959 (**Blue Jay**, 18:13), and in a letter from John M. Pringle (**Blue Jay**, 19:55) two

birds believed to be Greater Prairie Chicken were reported at Stoughton. The mention of the pair at Stoughton brings a comment from one of the **Blue Jay** readers, Geoffrey Hewson of Langbank, who has not seen the Prairie Chicken in his area since around 1924 when he recalls them booming on the knolls. On the other hand, R. Folker, biologist with the Sask. Department of Natural Resources, reports an observation from David MacDonald of Manor who saw a single Prairie Chicken in the spring of 1954, three birds in 1958 (one or two of which may have been shot by hunters), and a single bird again in the spring of 1959 observed on a Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing ground. Finally, a report comes from Fred Sharp working with Ducks Unlimited in Alberta of three birds that were seen on the fourth day of the upland game season of 1959 approximately four miles north of Sidewood, Saskatchewan. The three Greater Prairie Chicken were with some eight or ten Sharp-tailed Grouse and flew north into the sand hills when Mr. Sharp's companion got out of the car.

## First Cardinal Specimen for Saskatchewan

by Elmer Fox, Regina

On December 29, 1960, a male Cardinal (*Richmondia cardinalis*) was collected at Craven, Saskatchewan, 20 miles northwest of Regina, thus adding another species to the official list of birds known to have occurred in Saskatchewan. The bird was collected by R. W. Nero and myself during a Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History expedition to Craven where the Cardinal had first been reported on November 23 by Mrs. Frank Luckey in whose yard it was regularly feeding. During the past 35 years, the Cardinal has on occasion been reported by competent observers; but until this date no specimen or acceptable photograph had been taken, and the Cardinal thus remained on the hypothetical list.

The earliest known record for western Canada is the observation of a Cardinal in Regina in the summer of 1926 by F. G. Bard. A few other records have been recorded since that time in the **Blue Jay**. A male Cardinal was seen feeding on table

scraps at a feeding station in Esterhazy in January, 1951, by Mrs. Bert Ford of Hazelcliffe (**Blue Jay**, 5:3:2); a single bird was observed on the May Day count, May 26, 1957, by five members of the Saskatoon Natural History Society, led by Frank Roy (**Blue Jay**, 15:102); and Mrs. Ted Scrivens saw a Cardinal at her farm home on July 9, 1957. In addition to these Saskatchewan records the **Blue Jay** has a Manitoba observation—W. F. Rosenbarker of Kelwood first saw a Cardinal in the summer of 1958. This bird was seen occasionally throughout the summer and on the date of writing, December 30, 1958, the bird was being seen every day at the feeding station (**Blue Jay**, 17:17).

The Cardinal is a non-migratory bird, and is resident wherever found. It is generally distributed in the United States, east of the Great Plains and north to southern Ontario along the Canadian border. In later years it seems to have gradually extended its range westward. Taverner