

Greater Prairie-Chicken

6 Sep 1996

Five Ridges Prairie, Plymouth Co., IA

*Ann Johnson/Jim Bangma

IBL 67:21, 82

Record Number: 96-47

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211

Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Ave, Apt 8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:21

Records Committee: IBL 67:82

VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, The issue here is origin. Unless someone has more current information on possible released birds, this area's close proximity to native populations in South Dakota leads me to the conclusion that this species may well have inhabited the prairie all summer. Certainly worth looking for this coming spring.

NA, Prairie-Chickens apparently molt before September to adult-like plumage. I cannot identify the birds from the description provided. The only field mark that suggests prairie-chicken is "the tail was not long and pointy", but "short rounded". Prairie-chickens are completely barred on the underparts, not just on the flanks. The gray tail does not match the expected brown, barred tail of females or blackish tail of males. The distribution map did not reproduce well and may be misleading. Occurrence of this species at this date and location needs to be confirmed by further and better looks.

A-D, Not a tough ID if seen well. Tail as described diagnostic for Lesser/Greater. Assume Greater by range.

RE-VOTE (by mail): 5 A-D, 2 NA

NA, The heavy barring on the flanks and gray in tail do not eliminate Gray Partridge. Also, Partridge would be more likely to flush as a covey like these birds.

A-D, Although the birds were seen briefly, the description eliminates similar gallinaceous birds except Lesser Prairie-Chicken, which can be eliminated by range.

A-D, ID seems correct. South Dakota populations not far. These birds may have spent summer there, or even longer. Location is in an area where there are several thousand continuous acres of prairie.

A-D, NA voter says "only field mark that suggests prairie-chicken" is the tail. However, the heavy barring on the flanks is diagnostic for Prairie Chicken. The document does not say that only the flanks were barred, and in fact does not even mention the pattern of the belly since the birds were in flight. All tails appeared short and rounded -- which rules out Pheasant and Sharp-tailed Grouse. Overall coloration rules out Spruce Grouse. Color and short dark tail rules out Ruffed Grouse.

NA, I await response to my previous doubts.

96-47

A-D, Distribution map might be misleading but there are nesting records for this species close enough for those birds to naturally occur in the right habitat in Iowa considering the migratory nature of this species. Also, no other gallinaceous species has barring on the flanks or elsewhere. A record of this species was accepted even further east of this location. The tail was not described as gray but as dark gray and contrasted with the brown bird, this dark gray could be approaching a black color as the tail color should be. I think this is a good record for this species in Iowa.

A-D, no change.

96-47

**DOCUMENTATION FORM
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

Species: Greater Prairie Chicken - six individuals

Location: Five Ridges Prairie, Plymouth County, IA

Habitat: Rolling western Iowa prairie with some agriculture

Date: 6 September 1996 **Time:** 7:20 am **Length of observation:** about two minutes total

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211
Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Ave., Apt. 8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

Background: We were walking down the road which was edged with shrubs and small trees looking for migrating passerines when a couple of gallinaceous birds flushed from the edge of the road about 100 feet in front of us. Our immediate thought was Ring-necked Pheasant but the tail wasn't pointed. We stopped in our tracks, looked at each other, and two more flushed. A short time later two more birds flushed and all six flew across the road and disappeared into the taller prairie grasses. We searched from the road bed for several minutes but did not see the birds again.

Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics): Birds were seen through 7X42 Zeiss binoculars at approximately 100 feet. Sun was in the east and we were facing due west.

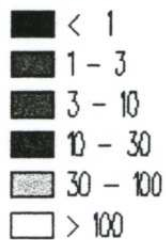
Description of bird: The body of these birds was similar in size to a pheasant, but the tail was not long and pointy so they looked smaller. Size and shape was similar to a Ruffed Grouse. The birds were primarily brown with heavy barring on the flanks. The tail was short, rounded and dark gray, contrasting with the brown of the bird.

Similar species/discussion: The lack of a pointed tail eliminates even a young Ring-necked Pheasant (confirmed later in the week with observations). Sharp-tailed Grouse have been released in the Loess Hills, but they show a more pointed tail with white at the edges and their flanks are more spotted than barred. Ruffed Grouse has a fan-shaped tail which matches the body color and has a dark subterminal band.

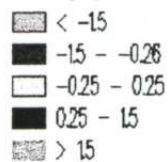
We had no doubt that these birds were Prairie Chickens. Lesser Prairie Chicken cannot be eliminated by our sighting but is dismissed based on location and habitat (tall grass vs. short grass prairie). The question of origin then arises. The closest releases of grouse have been Sharp-tailed in the Loess Hills south of Sioux City, but our observations eliminated Sharp-tailed. Greater Prairie Chickens have most recently been released in Ringgold County, some 150 - 200 miles to the southeast. I discussed possible releases with some birders in the area and no one had any knowledge of released birds.

On the other hand, Greater Prairie Chicken nests in South Dakota fairly close to the Iowa border. This map shows the relative abundance of the bird in the plains states based on Breeding Bird Surveys. We therefore feel that it is most likely that these birds come from a native population nearby and might possibly have been a family group.

Average Count



% Change per Year



Previous experience: 30+ years birding experience for both observers. Although actual experience with Prairie Chickens is somewhat limited, both observers are very familiar with gallinaceous birds in general.

References consulted: Standard field guides ; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Web Pages; Personal comm. from western Iowa birders