

AUTUMN RESURGENCE IN AMBER GRASSES



This is an adult male, and "going way out on a limb," I referred to him as "Charlie." I photographed him for the past two years, during the spring, at about the same place on the lek. I can identify him by his "face mask".



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That prairie-chickens gather on ancestral leks in the fall of the year is well known. Yet few persons engage in the enjoyment or study of the fall ritual as compared to those who observe or study the spring courtship activities.

My birthplace was in the heart of Missouri's Prairie-chicken range, the small town of Passaic in Bates County, which borders Kansas to the northeast of the present-day Marais des Cygnes National Wildlife Refuge. Our farm was situated in an area of high Prairie-chicken population densities. That was back in 1936, the year I was born, and today there are no Prairie-chickens in Bates County. According to

Conservation Commission records from 1943, there were an estimated 50 birds per section in that area.

Having grown up with Prairie-chickens, I have always had an interest in the behavior of the birds on fall leks. When I was a budding wildlife photographer I was privileged to have known and sat in the photography blind with the renowned Prairie-chicken

biologist, Charles W. Schwartz. We made movies and shot still pictures of the spring booming activities. Charlie and I visited often about the behavior of the birds on fall leks and wondered why few

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others seemed interested. The spring courtship ritual was what it was all about with most folks.

In his classic book, "The Prairie Chicken in Missouri," Charlie recorded a visual account of the birds on fall leks. Inspired by the black and white photographs in his book, I decided to fulfill a life-long dream and shoot color digital images of Prairie-chickens on fall leks.

Since 2008, I have photographed the birds during the spring on the Browning Ranch in the Flint Hills. I inquired of Bill about the possibilities of photographing the fall activities. With his permission, I began the project in October and November of 2009, and completed it in September 2010. My goal was to secure pictures of booming males with very short pinnae and "bob-tails" as they displayed in the beautiful fall prairie grass.

The fall assemblage of cocks on the lek is gradual. Adult males that have nearly completed the annual feather molt, and young-of-the-year begin gathering on the lek in late August and early September. Like the spring courtship ritual, the males begin to arrive on the lek about one-half hour before sunrise. There are some vocalizations early on, but no dancing. Air sacs are visible and often inflated but the eye comb is not noticeably prominent.

The early fall plumage is remarkably different from that of the birds in the spring. By early September, the progression of the molt is well underway. The pinnae are short and poorly developed and still sheathed in the blood quills. The tail feathers are short and give the birds a "bob-tailed" appearance. The sexes closely resemble each other.

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During the fall assemblage, territories are gradually established. Males that were the first to molt are the first to engage in fighting. By mid-November nearly all the males have established their territories. Vocalizations and fighting among the males parallel those of the spring.

The first frosty mornings of November stimulate the males to engage in serious territorial disputes and booming. The fall lek is primarily male-dominated. Females occasionally appear alone or in small groups. The females spend their time just hanging out, sitting quietly or preening the new incoming feathers. Females wander among the displaying males, but there are no attempts at mating.

As the morning wanes on the lek, displaying subsides and all the birds usually depart simultaneously. They fly to a secluded area where they feed on

fall insects and weed seeds, or waste grain in harvested fields. Mid-day activities consist largely of loafing on sunny slopes. In late afternoon, some of the males may re-convene on the lek. Afternoon activity on the lek is not as intense as that of the morning.

Inclement weather in November and December brings the fall gatherings to a halt. An occasional "die-hard" male may return to the lek to stake his claim during a short period of milder weather. Depending on the severity of the winter, males commonly begin the spring ritual in mid-to-late February, and may continue until mid-June.

For the serious Prairie-chicken enthusiast, a visit to the fall lek – to view from a concealed blind – is a memorable experience.



Glenn D. Chambers of Columbia, Missouri is a renowned wildlife photographer. With fifty years behind a succession of cameras, Glenn is an accomplished wildlife film-maker and still photographer. His wildlife photography library contains more than 300,000 images from all parts of North America, and his wildlife films have garnered four Television Emmy Awards.

His photography has featured a range of wildlife from underwater views of River Otters to Polar Bears on ice flows, and has been widely published. Glenn is passionate about prairies and the Greater Prairie-chicken is his all-time favorite subject. He has spent thousands of hours in photo blinds capturing images of the life history of these birds and five of the six other grassland grouse species.