



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (8:56)

ATTWATER'S PRAIRIE CHICKEN (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH MIKE MORROW)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I'm on the phone today with Mike Morrow, Wildlife Biologist. Hi, Mike, how are you today?

MR. MORROW: I'm doing well, thank you.

MS. LEON: Do you have some time to talk to us about the Attwater's prairie chicken?

MR. MORROW: Sure.

MS. LEON: Great. And, Mike, what can you tell us about this species?

MR. MORROW: The Attwater's prairie chicken is the grouse that's endemic or native to coastal prairies of Texas and Louisiana. It was once so numerous that during the late 19th to early 20th centuries hunting parties had contests to determine who could accumulate the largest pile of harvested prairie chickens. However, by 1919, the Attwater's was already expatriated from Louisiana and currently only exist in the State of Texas today.

The Attwater's shares its subspecies status with the now extinct heath hen which occupied grasslands of the Northeast United States and the greater prairie chicken which currently occupies grasslands of the North American Great Plains.

The greater prairie chicken and the Attwater's are probably best known for their courtship

display known as booming which is named after the resonance vocalizations made by displaying males and, indeed, the place that males gather to conduct these courtship displays are known as booming grounds.

And typically on these areas an average of six to fifteen males will gather on an area that may be as little as -- less than an acre in size to several acres in size to defend individual territories and also to attract females. And this booming display is quite a unique behavior in which the males inflate large orange sacs on the sides of their neck all the while emitting a low cooing sound that sounds much akin to blowing over the mouth of an open pop bottle and also at the same time stomping their feet. So, it is a rather unique and rather interesting to watch.

MS. LEON: And I understand today less than one percent of coastal prairies remain. So, what aside from habitat loss has maybe led to the species decline?

MR. MORROW: Prairie Chicken is an ebullient grassland species so the importance of grassland loss to the decline of the Attwater's prairie Chicken can't be overstated. Not only has the loss of grasslands in terms of absolute acres been important but the fragmentation resulting from such loss has led to isolation of individual populations which in turn has led to increased risks of extirpation of these isolated populations. And because gene flow is usually drastically reduced or eliminated with isolation, genetic integrity of the remaining populations also tends to become compromised.

Other factors that we think have contributed to the Attwater's decline by habitat loss include things like stochastic or random weather events such as drought or heavy rainfall during the next brooding periods or catastrophic weather events like hurricanes which occur along the coast of Texas.

Prairies are a highly variable environment so Prairie Chickens would have evolved to deal with such events that may have wiped out local populations. But these local populations would then have been recolonized by adjacent populations that were spared from these weather events. The difference now though is that with the extreme loss of grasslands within the Attwater's coastal prairie ecosystems populations are so isolated that it's impossible for recolonization to occur.

Some other factors that we think may have also been involved in the Attwater's decline are parasite and disease factors. Another one that we're particularly concerned with right now are red imported fire ants which are an exotic species.

Fire ants have been around in the U.S., particularly the Southeast U.S. for quite a while. But they're relatively new to Attwater's range, first showing up in the mid-1970s. And we're particularly interested in the role that fire ants may be playing in poor chick survival.

Chick survival has been identified as a major obstacle to Attwater's recovery at the current time and we're concerned not only with regard to the role that fire ants may be playing on direct predation of hatching eggs and chicks, but we're also concerned about the impact

that they may be having on the insect community upon which young Prairie Chicken chicks depend on for food. Those are some of the things that we think have contributed to the decline of the Attwater's over time in addition to habitat loss.

MS. LEON: Okay. So, considering all of these what actions are being taken to help recover this species?

MR. MORROW: Recovery is focused on three primary areas. Of course, habitat management has to play a key role in certainly long-term recovery of the Attwater's Prairie Chickens because of the habitat loss that we mentioned previously.

Habitat management is occurring not only on public land by the Attwater's prairie chicken National Wildlife Refuge, but also on land managed by non-governmental organization partners like the Nature Conservancy of Texas. And the Nature Conservancy has been actively involved in not only managing habitat on their own property at the Texas City Prairie Reserve but also they've been instrumental in working with private landowners to maintain and/or restore Prairie on their property. Landowners have participated through such programs as the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative, the Grazing Land Conservation Initiative and the Safe Harbor Program. And through those programs currently there are some 80,000 acres enrolled in agreements for prairie management on private land and through cooperation by willing private landowners.

Because we currently have more vacant habitat than we do have birds right now, the second major focus of recovery is on tap even wild population management with fewer than 100 individuals currently found in wild populations as of the spring 2009. Attwater's recovery by nesting must involve release of birds reared in captivity. And currently we have partnered with five zoological institutions in Texas which rear Attwater's for release to supplement existing wild populations or to establish new populations in vacant habitat.

Since 1995, over 1,700 Attwater's have been released from captive breeding facilities into wild habitat and most of these released birds have been fitted with radio transmitters to facilitate the evaluation of post-release survival and reproduction. So, the modification in rearing and release protocols could be implemented as needed.

Post release survival has actually been pretty good. It averages likely less than half we would expect from wild birds and that's really pretty good compared to release of many other pen-reared birds. So, while there's always room for improvement in post release survival, we're actually fairly pleased with the survival we've seen. And that survival has certainly been good enough that we should be making more progress with recoveries than we have.

The real brick wall in wild populations right now is brood survival which we talked about a little bit ago with respect to fire ants and certainly that's one contributor to poor brood survival. And, again, we're seeing very little survival in wild broods and that's a major brick wall that we've got to get past. So, once we solve that problem, we're hopeful that Attwater's recovery will move forward relatively quickly.

Then the third major focus for recovery is public outreach and that's just what its name implies. It's meant to educate the public and hopefully to generate support for Attwater's recovery effort.

MS. LEON: And just lastly, Mike, in a nutshell can you explain what the future might look like for this imperiled grouse?

MR. MORROW: You know, make no doubt about it. The Attwater's prairie chicken faces a deep uphill climb to recovery. Wild populations are about as close to extinction as they can get without dropping over the precipice of extinction.

However, with that said, with the average clutch size of 12, the Attwater's have the relatively high rate of potential increase. And there's currently a lot of vacant habitat available so we're a long, long ways from throwing in the towel. The Attwater's didn't get the precipice of extinction overnight and it's going to take some time to work through the problems that it currently faces. Once we get past the brood survival issue that we talked about before, we'll start making significant progress towards recovery fairly quickly.

MS. LEON: It sounds like there's a lot of good people involved in helping the Attwater's Prairie Chicken. So, we're all hoping for good things. And thank you, Mike, for your time today.

MR. MORROW: Sure. I'm happy to talk with you.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.