

# Wild Life of New Mexico

## Its Conservation and Management

Being a Report on the  
Game Survey of the State  
1926 and 1927

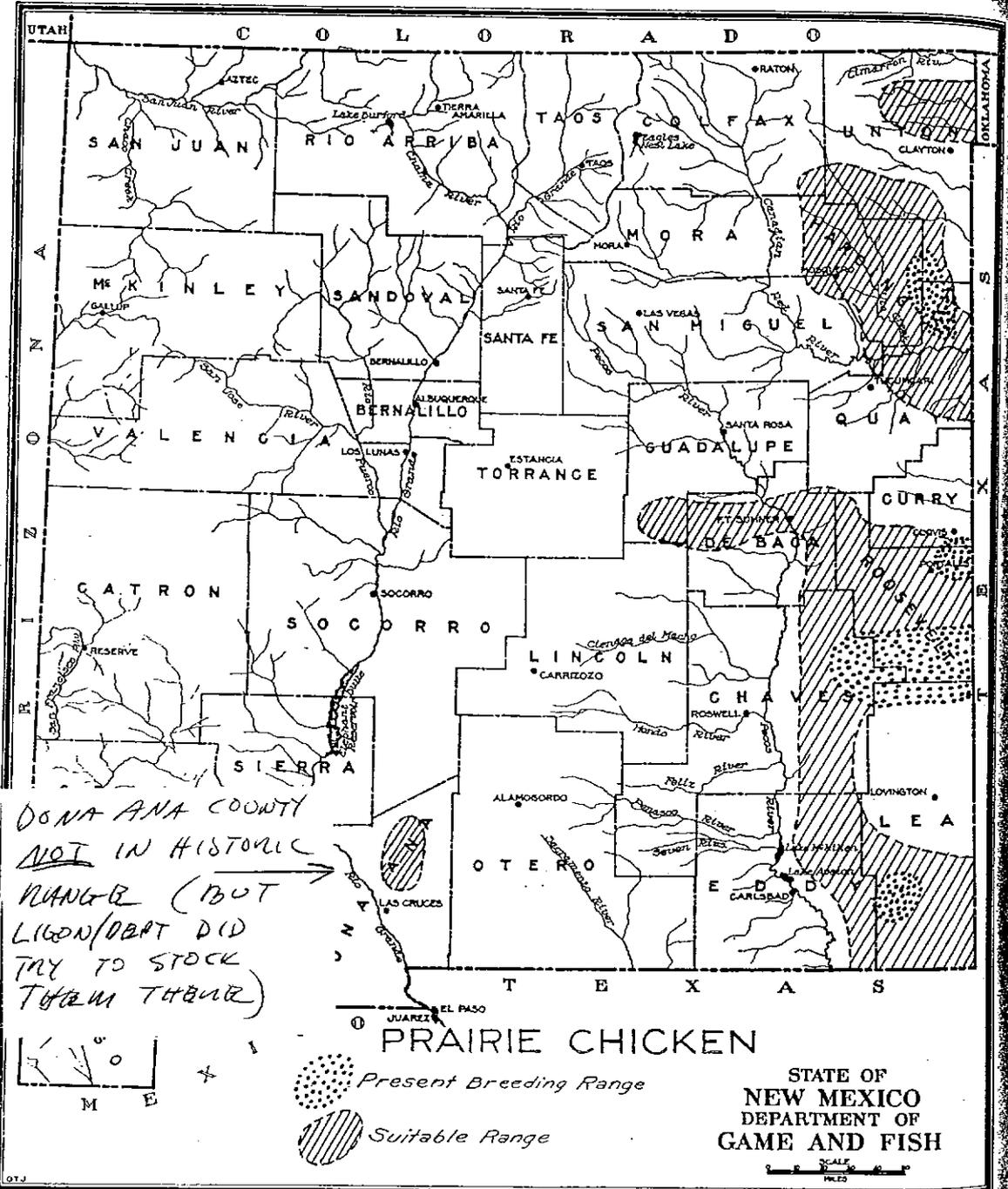
By J. STOKLEY LIGON

*Photographs, Unless Otherwise Stated, by Author.*

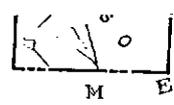
PROBABLY THE BEST  
MAP ALTHO HE  
DIDN'T TELL  
US JUST WHY HE  
DREW THE LINES  
WHICH HE DID



State Game Commission  
Department of Game and Fish  
Santa Fe, New Mexico



DONA ANA COUNTY  
 NOT IN HISTORIC  
 RANGE (BUT  
 LIGON/OBPT DID  
 TRY TO STOCK  
 THEM THERE)



1926/1927

LESSER PRAIRIE HEN (*TYMPANUCHUS PALLIDICINCTUS*)

The lesser prairie hen or prairie chicken is a local form of one of America's finest game birds. To distinguish it from its larger relative, which inhabits the north and east, the form to which the New Mexico bird belongs has been named the lesser prairie hen. Both the male and female have prominent neck-tufts and the males have conspicuous neck air sacs which they use in their spring mating calls.

Due to its size and the open country it occupies, the prairie hen has been badly persecuted. But so very hardy and prolific is it that it has managed to survive in limited numbers, even in New Mexico where suitable range is not very extensive. "Chicken hunting" has long been one of the most fascinating attractions to sportsmen of the prairie states. And now, with better enforcement of game laws and refuges, there is promise of this fine bird being perpetuated.

Agriculture, particularly where small grains are extensively grown, favors prairie chickens where the cultivated land adjoins prairies with rank grass in which the birds can live, nest and raise their young. In New Mexico favorable conditions are usually found along the eastern border where extensive areas of sandhill lands are available to the birds. But in the State the range of the prairie chicken is now so limited that should a short season be provided, discretion in hunting them must be used. In many sections of the country where conditions are suitable and where given benefit of protective laws, prairie chickens reestablish their numbers rapidly.

The nuptial performances of prairie chickens on their meeting or parading grounds during the mating period are among the most interesting and dramatic scenes in bird conduct. These meetings are of almost continuous occurrence at the height of the breeding season.

## DISTRIBUTION :

Prairie chickens formerly inhabited all of the sandhill type of country in eastern New Mexico, from the Texas line on the south to the Colorado line on the north and west as far as where Buchanan is now located. At the present time the birds are confined to a comparatively small section, south and southwest of Portales. A few remain southwest of Clayton, and occasionally stragglers are observed in other sections of their former range. During the last few years there has been some increase and evidence of reoccupation of range.

It is not probable that prairie chickens would thrive outside of their former habitat in the State; but where given proper protection and range lands are not badly abused by overgrazing, they should reestablish themselves over their former range. Fortunately, enough of the birds remain to accomplish this rehabilitation without resorting to artificial means, if they are given proper protection.

## ENEMIES :

Due to the fact that there are fewer predatory animals and bird destroying hawks in their usual habitat, prairie chickens have not as many natural enemies to

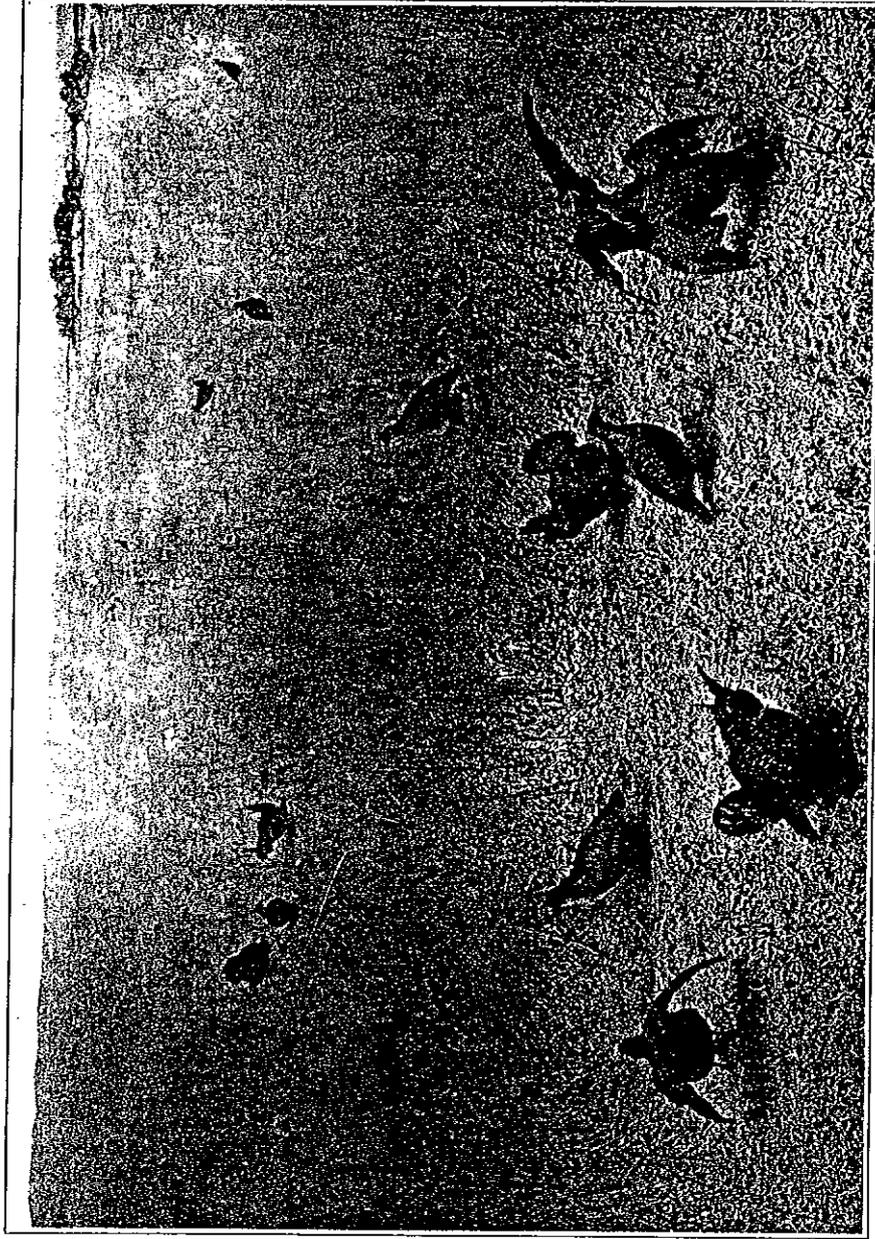


Photo by Courtesy, American Museum of Natural History. From *Habitat Group*.

#### MATING CEREMONY OF PRAIRIE CHICKENS

*Performances of the kind by prairie chickens are among the most interesting and dramatic scenes in bird conduct*

contend with as have most other grouse. Man is the most serious enemy of this fine game bird.

Prairie chickens are locally migratory in quest of food. In the fall and winter they drift about, often leaving their more remote and therefore safest range, and by so doing subject themselves to illegal hunting. In order that they may have an opportunity to reestablish their numbers on all suitable range, they should be protected, no matter where observed out of the open hunting season. Settlements and farming districts now surround practically all prairie chicken range as well as the areas formerly occupied by them. Because of this, their increase and spread are wholly dependent on protection against law violators.

Coyotes are no doubt the most serious predatory enemy of the prairie chicken; but in recent years the numbers of this enemy have been successfully reduced in the open sections occupied by man, such as the prairie chicken generally frequents.

#### COLUMBIAN SHARP-TAILED OR PIN-TAILED GROUSE (*PEDIOECETES PHASIANELLUS COLUMBIANUS*)

Although the pin-tailed grouse in size and general appearance resembles the prairie hen, it is a very distinct species. The prairie hen has a square or blunt tail while the pin-tailed grouse has a wedge-shaped tail ending in a narrow point, from which the bird derives its name. The bird lacks the neck tufts so conspicuous on the prairie hen, is slightly larger, paler in color and its legs are fully feathered. In markings the pin-tail is a beautiful species. It frequents similar open areas and possesses the excellent game bird qualities of the prairie hen.

#### DISTRIBUTION:

The range of the pin-tailed grouse in New Mexico is very limited, being confined to the high, grassy, broken-rimmed mesas, lying east and northeast of Raton. This bird is generally a dweller in more northern climes, but favorable conditions as result of altitude—8,000 to 9,000 feet elevation—on Johnson and Barillo Mesas appear to create a little world suitable to it in New Mexico.

It is not probable that pin-tailed grouse have ever occupied an extensive range in the State and there appears to be little hope of greatly expanding their distribution.

Oldest settlers advise that the birds have long inhabited their present range though in former times they were more numerous than they are today. These grouse, however, have survived remarkably, considering the fact that the mesas on which they dwell, as well as the adjacent valley lands, have long been settled. The fact that small grains, particularly wheat, are extensively grown on Johnson Mesa, the most important area occupied by the pin-tail, has greatly aided them, especially in the winter when the snow becomes deep and lies on the mesas for extended periods.