

THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING

From time to time Snowy Egret invites established nature writers to share their thoughts and nature-related experiences with our readers. In this issue we are honored to have Tom Leskiw as our guest editor.

THE RITES OF SPRING

Long before daylight came to the eastern Colorado prairie, noises – booming and cackling – betrayed their presence. Frigid air streamed in through my rolled-down driver's side window. The cold metal of my spotting scope's focus knob prompted me to reach for my gloves. The sun ignited clouds on the eastern horizon, and slowly it grew light enough to see. Two male lesser prairie chickens, vying for the attention of females, glowered at each other. Tails erect and heads down, their bodies were bent parallel to the earth. Feet pounding the ground like a drum, the two bodies rotated in unison, enacting a ritual thousands of years old.

Shafts of sunlight spilled over the dance grounds. Feathers parted, revealing air sacs on the sides of the birds' necks. After the birds inflated these pink, scarlet-tinged sacs, an expulsion of gobbling noises accompanied their deflation. Erect tail feathers waved to and fro, and vigorous wing shaking produced a series of clicking sounds. At forty power from a distance of only one hundred fifty feet, the yellow combs above the males' eyes glowed as if lit from within. Dominant males occupied the center of the lek, periodically fending off advances from their rivals. With them vying for the right to claim the females, sexual tension hung heavy in the air. On occasion the aggression between males intensified; these encounters were presaged by a lowering of pinnae – ear tufts – a deflation of air sacs, and swift leaps into the air, the bird striking its opponent with feet, wings, and beak.

Meanwhile the females did their best to remain above the fray, skulking about the edges of the strutting grounds. The males' antics, combining an exuberant focus with testosterone-addled abandon, brought a smile to my lips. For them nothing else mattered this morning but the urge to procreate. *This* is what captivates me about birds, I whispered to myself – an elemental distillation, just me with creatures wedded to their habitat, sweeping away pressures, deadlines, snubs real or imagined, in its wake.

The lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) inhabits the shortgrass prairie and is thought to occupy only ten percent of its historical range, with its numbers plummeting ninety-seven percent since 1900. The Greek-Latin word *Tympanuchus* means "having a drum," referring to the booming sound emitted from the bird's air sacs. The percussive elements of its display can be heard from more than a mile away, alerting predators and hen chickens alike that the dance has begun.

Humans have long noted the bird's elaborate, stylized courtship ceremonies. Since long before written history, the Kiowa people have lived in the area that includes southeastern Colorado. One evening I watched television footage of Kiowa dancers juxtaposed with images of displaying lesser prairie chickens. I was dumbstruck, speechless. Although I'd seen images of the dancers before, I'd never stopped to think about the origins of the ceremony. The dancers had attached feathers to their arms, ankle bracelets, and lower back; each wore a feathered headdress. Their rendition was perfect, right down to the bowed head, quivering wings, and pounding feet, the dancers churning up dust clouds as they whirled around.

N. Scott Momaday, a poet and writer of Kiowa-Cherokee descent, provides some insight into the genesis of the chicken dance. "The Kiowas are a summer people; they abide the cold and keep to themselves, but when the season turns and the land becomes warm and vital they cannot hold still; an old love of going returns upon them." In a land where summers are blazing hot and winters bone-chilling cold, the spring rebirth — anchored by this totemic creature — is perhaps the sweetest season. The abundance of arrow points near some leks makes clear that the Kiowas' interaction with these birds went beyond mere observation. Because adult birds are most vulnerable during their time of courtship and procreation on the lek, these hunting activities underscore the inseparable nature of life and death. The Kiowa's dance, then, becomes homage — giving thanks for the spiritual and nutritional sustenance the bird furnishes and for the return of spring.

It is winter now. Where I live in the Pacific Northwest, deciduous hardwood trees are leafless, and near-daily rains replenish the rivers, moss, ferns, and mushrooms. Some mornings frost covers the ground. The earth sleeps. In my mind's eye, a blizzard rages on the plains of eastern Colorado. It comforts me to know that, even as snow clings to north-facing hollows, increasing day length will trigger a change in the lesser prairie chicken. Solitary males will grow restless and begin to congregate at the strutting grounds. Their favored knolls support only sparse and scattered woody vegetation, a situation maintained by the tamping of many avian feet. Undeterred by frost, late spring snowstorms, or predators, they'll once again take to the dance floor — the latest participants in an activity thousands of years old. --Tom Leskiw