

In **2006**, the Central Wisconsin Prairie Chicken Festival (PC Fest) began on a whim and a shoestring budget. The idea was to bring awareness to the Central Wisconsin Grasslands and its prize inhabitant – the Greater Prairie-chicken (GPC).

The GPC of Wisconsin is one of the most researched of the grouse species in the United States. Yet, like many grassland species nationwide, its numbers are declining. It is estimated that there are only 1,200 GPC in Wisconsin now, down from 2,500 in 1950 and 55,000 in 1930. Habitat loss due to increasing residential development, conversion of pasture lands to row crops or upland cranberries, tree planting, and more are the cause. Hunting GPC in Wisconsin was banned in 1955.

Hence, the objectives for the PC Fest are to provide:

- *historical perspective of the GPC,*
- *opportunities to observe the GPC and other grassland species*
- *educational experiences for all ages*
- *forum to explain federal, state and county program that enhance grasslands*
- *benefits of rotational grazing and other conservation practices for and farmers and other dedicated private landowners*

In 2006, first-year visitors were invited to observe GPC chickens on their booming grounds at the Buena Vista Wildlife Area. This area, totaling 12,700 acres is home to the largest stable population of GPC remaining in the state of Wisconsin and east of the Mississippi River. There were seven observation blinds with each offering seating for four, to view the GPC's mating dance. Visitors also had the opportunity to go on grassland bird tours, learn about GPC management, and track GPCs using radio telemetry. There were other experts there to talk about establishing bluebird trails and to understand raptors of the grasslands, especially harriers and kestrels. Participants were treated to bagels, coffee and juice under a large tent and invited to pick up literature about the GPC, grassland conservation, and purchase PC Fest T-shirts. More than 50 people attended the morning activities.

Nearly 200 travelers stopped at the historic Hamerstrom home (1861) located just south of Buena Vista in Plainfield. Here they learned about the late researchers Fred and Francis Hamerstrom and attended the Wisconsin Literary Bash.

Since the 1950s the Hamerstroms were known internationally for their scientific and literary works which saved the GPC from extirpation in Wisconsin. They did assiduous research from 1920-1970 and Fran continued work until her death in 1996. Former students of Aldo Leopold, they received their own recognition from Wisconsin's Conservation Hall of Fame and in 1971 won the National Wildlife Federation Award for Distinguished Service to Conservation. Fran twice won the Wildlife Society Award. For her literary works, Fran was given awards through the Council for Wisconsin Writers, Wisconsin Regional Writers Association and published 150 scientific papers, in addition to twelve books including her auto-biography, "My Double Life-Memoirs of a Naturalist," some being translated into foreign languages.

The Wisconsin Literary Bash began in 2005 when Mary "Casey" Martin founded and coordinated the Wisconsin Center for the Book's (WCB) "non-urban book festival". A book and art fair with state publishing representatives and author readings was accompanied by special tours of the 19<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse directed by artist-in-residence Deann DeLaRonde. All activities were open to the public. WCB's mission *to promote the culture of the book by celebrating books and book arts, encouraging the joy of reading and writing and honoring our Wisconsin literary heritage.* WCB has been affiliated since 1986 with the Library of Congress Center for the Book and until recently with the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters in Madison, Wisconsin.

The Mead Wildlife Area, 22,000 acres near Milladore also opened its doors. Activities there included: grassland birding tours, wetland tours, bird banding, and a managed intensive grazing tour. Scheduled speakers gave presentations about GPC management, backyard wildlife, renewable/recyclable building construction, bird banding and rotational grazing. The highlight was the dedication of the Buena Vista, Mead, Leola and Paul Olson Wildlife Areas as Important Bird Areas (IBA), a global recognition of their importance for grassland species.

Children's activities were plentiful in 2006. Conservation and non-profit organizations set up table-top displays to provide information for visitors about grassland birds, trails, hunting and birding organizations, and federal/state/local conservation programs at encourage grassland enhancement and protection. Food was provided by the Student Chapter of the Isaak Walton League.

The event was free to the public and no exhibitor fees were charged. And 20% of books and art sales benefited the Hamerstrom Fund for Writing and the Wisconsin Center for the Book.

In **2007** partners, businesses and organizations from different communities asked to be included. Financial support from the Wisconsin Department of Tourism and the Dane County Conservation League allowed for regional advertising of the PC Fest.

The PC Fest was expanded to two days with Sunday added. Displays were outside in a large tent as the Wisconsin Literary Bash moved their event to the Stanton W. Mead Wildlife Education and Visitor Center. It also expanded to include Paul J Olson and Sandhill Wildlife Areas, and Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Observation blind opportunities at Buena Vista were increased to nine blinds and four at the Paul J Olson Wildlife Area. Home tours continued at the Hamerstrom home with a featured artist exhibition. A formal collaboration with Central Wisconsin Tourism Association and invited travel writers and other media personalities were invited to attend and report on the weekend. Library exhibitions were held in February and March at McMillan Library in Wisconsin Rapids, the Marshfield Public Library and the Portage County Library. More than 600 persons attended the two-day event and a three dollar wristband fee was charged.

Now in its third year, the PC Fest has begun to affect change in Central Wisconsin. Farmers and other local landowners are interested in providing needed habitat for the GPC and some are providing observation blinds to interested birders. Nature tourism is seen as a viable local economic outcome of these beginning efforts. On behalf of Golden Sands RC&D we hope that you will join us for a look at the Central Wisconsin grasslands. On behalf of the GPC and its fellow grassland inhabitants – thank you!