

# A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



*Male Prairie Chicken*

DAPHNE KINZLER



*Male Sharp-tailed Grouse*

CRAIG BIRRE

## Spring Fling

You can bet that North Dakota's male prairie grouse are assembled today on some flat spot or hilltop, vying for the attention of female onlookers. But it's hard to say what the walruses are doing.

Unlikely as it may seem, prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse have something in common with the massive arctic sea mammal. All three, scientists tell us, are lekking species. Meaning: they gather together in a certain spot in hopes of impressing female bystanders for breeding purposes. It's just that their leks – prairie versus saltwater – are vastly different.

Male sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens are similar in some ways when it comes to their springtime ritual. Both arrive on leks daily from early March through May, with peak activity in mid-April. The lek may be a knoll, ridge or other flat area with sparse vegetation, enabling females to better view the show and for all birds to better detect predators.

While both species of performing males hold their tails erect, lower their wings and swiftly stamp their feet, you could argue that prairie chickens are the showier of the two. Combined with their bright orange to yellow eyebrows, prairie chickens stand out from some distance as they inflate their large yellow-orange neck sacs. These sacs also produce a booming sound – sort of like a dove on steroids – that can be heard from a mile distant on calm mornings. Prairie chickens also straighten the long black feathers on the sides of their necks into “horns” during courtship.

Some would argue that prairie chickens are more confrontational than sharptails during courtship displays, while others would claim the opposite. Maybe it depends on the day, the mood and the birds themselves. What is certain is that the displays for both species can at times get heated and feathers sometimes fly.

Sharp-tailed grouse are native to North Dakota and prairie chickens aren't. The former vastly outnumber the latter, in part because sharptails are more adaptable to the different kinds of habitat they'll use throughout the year, such as woody vegetation. Prairie chickens, on the other hand, are strongly tied to undisturbed tallgrass prairie with little woody cover and do poorly without it. Unfortunately, there's not much of that kind of habitat left.

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