

Prairie chicken tours offer Colorado wonder

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Birders, families and wildlife fans alike will delight in this opportunity to watch the annual courtship dance of the greater prairie chicken, one of Colorado's amazing avian inhabitants. On weekends throughout March and April, the town of Wray in partnership with the Colorado Parks and Wildlife will offer guided tours to view the birds—locally called the “sandhill dancers”—in their natural habitat.

“Many birders visit Wray to see the prairie chickens and mark them off their ‘Life Lists’ for bird watching,” said Josh Melby, district wildlife manager for Wray. “What they find here is one of the most fascinating and memorable mating rituals they’ll ever see in the wild.”

Each year, wildlife enthusiasts and birdwatchers come from around the world to enjoy this rare opportunity to view greater prairie chickens and their exotic courtship display. To ensure that wildlife watchers avoid any harmful disturbance to the birds during the courtship period, tour participants will use a special viewing blind, seating only 20 people per trip. Reservations are required.

For more information, visit www.wraychamber.net or call the Wray Chamber of Commerce at 970-332-3484.

Greater prairie chickens were declared endangered in 1972 but have recovered due to cooperative efforts of local landowners and the Colorado Parks and Wildlife. There are approximately 10,000-12,000 greater prairie chickens in the state at this time, most of which live on private property in the sandhill region of northeast Colorado.

The greater prairie chicken tours are made possible through a cooperative effort of Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the East Yuma County Historical Society, the Wray Chamber of Commerce, local landowners and volunteers. The town of Wray is located on US Hwy 34, about three hours driving time from Denver or Fort Collins.

Did you know?

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—Colorado is home to nine species of grouse: the greater prairie chicken, lesser prairie chicken, dusky grouse (formerly blue grouse), sharp-tailed grouse, greater sage grouse, Gunnison sage grouse, the mountain sharp-tailed grouse, the plains sharp-tailed grouse and white-tailed ptarmigan. All grouse have feathered legs.

—People can participate in tours to see the sharp-tailed grouse courtship dances in the Yampa Valley and the greater sage grouse in Walden. For information, visit <http://wildlife.state.co.us/Viewing/EventsFestivals>.

—Some traditional dances of the North American Plains Indians are believed to have been inspired by the courtship dances of the prairie chicken.

—The Conservation Reserve Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture may be one helpful tool for prairie chicken conservation. Farmers enrolled in the program agree to plant appropriate vegetation on eligible fields, field edges and stream banks to create wildlife habitat and retain topsoil. Agricultural lands restored to grasslands under the CRP program could be valuable habitat for greater prairie chickens in some areas. To learn more about the CRP, visit <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/crp>.

For more information about viewing wildlife in Colorado, visit <http://wildlife.state.co.us/Viewing/Pages/Viewing.aspx>.

Holyoke Enterprise March 8, 2012