

# Prairie chickens dance to rhythm of spring



A turtledove takes a break recently at Prairie Dog State Park near Norton. Doves are one of many bird species populating the park.

-Telegram photo by Dana Paxton

Male chickens dance and “boom” to attract mates in elaborate ritual on the prairie

Each spring, one of the most extraordinary rituals in all of nature occurs right here in Kansas: the courtship of the prairie chicken. The large expanses of natural prairie in Kansas may be awe-inspiring to humans, but to the prairie chicken, some patches are special. These are the mating grounds called “leks” where male chickens gather at dusk and dawn in elaborate rituals designed to attract females.

These areas, also called booming grounds, are actually formed in fall when the order of dominance is established among males. At this time, mature males gather in these relatively high, flat areas and attempt to establish small territories as close to the center of the lek as possible, where activity will be highest in spring. Although young males visit the lek, they are kept to the edges and are seldom given the opportunity to establish their own territories.

While the fall activity is important and interesting, it is the spring booming activity that attracts anyone fascinated by nature. Beginning in March and lasting through the end of May, male chickens display an incredible array of vocalizations and maneuvers to attract a female’s attention.

In the mating ritual, the male chicken’s tail is elevated; horn-like feathers (called pinnae) on the neck are raised over the head; and the

wings are lowered with the primary feathers spread. The bird stamps its feet while moving forward or in circles, and this is followed by a series of rapid tail snaps and fans. At the same time as the tail is clicked open and shut, a whoom-AH-oom sound is given as bright orange air sacs on the neck inflate for maximum exposure.

A second major display is flutter-jumping with associated cackling calls. The male jumps several feet into the air, flies forward, and lands. In so doing, the bird advertises its presence as well as the location of the lek. Flutter-jumping is a common tactic of peripheral males when females are near the center of the display ground.

A female will typically fly to the edge of a lek and walk slowly toward the center. When the hen enters a male’s territory, the male’s behavior changes greatly. The ritual is performed with high frequency and extreme posturing. The male will display in circles around the female, showing all aspects of its plumage. At the peak of this performance, the dancer often spreads his wings and lays its head flat to the ground, as if bowing to the hen. If suitably impressed, the hen will flatten to the ground, signaling a willingness to mate.

Occasionally, fights break out among competing males. This is mostly ritual, as well, involving short jumps; striking with feet, beak, and wings; and face-offs in which

the competitors whine and attempt to stare each other down. Injuries do occur but are seldom serious.

With its large, colorful air sacs, horn-like pinnae, and feathers growing all the way to its feet, the prairie chicken is one of the most beautiful and unusual birds in Kansas. And its mating ritual makes it one of the most fascinating birds to watch. Kansans are lucky to have the largest population of prairie chickens in the world, so viewing opportunities are good.

Two species of prairie chicken can be found in Kansas. The greater prairie chicken, by far the most populous, can be found throughout portions of northcentral and eastern Kansas, especially in the Flint Hills region. The lesser prairie chicken, which is slightly smaller and has red air-sacs instead of orange, can be found in pockets of native sandsage prairie in the southwest. The lesser prairie chicken male produces a higher-pitched, bubbly sound, or “gobble,” leading to the term “gobbling grounds” for their leks. On a quiet spring morning, the sounds of both species can carry as far as two miles across the open prairie.

For a list of prairie chicken viewing opportunities, visit the Natural Kansas website [www.naturalkansas.org/birding.htm#PCV](http://www.naturalkansas.org/birding.htm#PCV) or phone the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks Emporia Office at 620-342-0658 or the Pratt Operations Office at 620-672-5911.



• LUNCH SPECIALS  
• DRINK SPECIALS

*Margaritas: Small and Jumbo*

Summer Hours: Every Day, 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

## Las Canteras

*Mexican Restaurant*

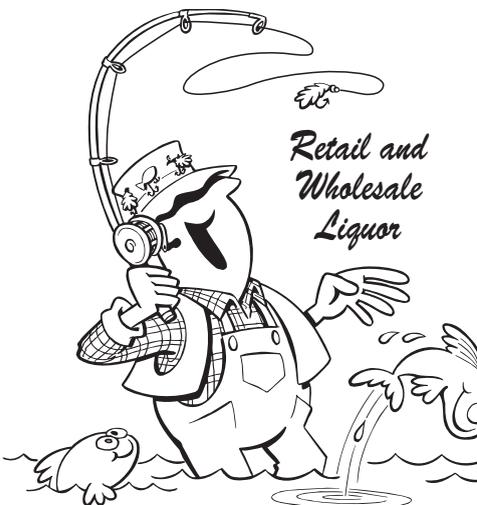
203 W. WASHINGTON STREET, NORTON



We  
Now  
Carry  
Granite  
Counter-  
tops

## NORTON MONUMENTS

215 W. MAIN – NORTON, KANSAS 7654 – PHONE: 785-877-5135



# EBKE'S LIQUOR

Retail and  
Wholesale  
Liquor

409 W. Holme Street  
West Highway 36, Norton, KS  
Phone: 785-877-2152

Al and Ursula Ebke, Owners  
Open till 11:00 p.m. Daily  
— Lottery Available Here —

Norton Travel & Tourism DiscoverNorton.Com  
205 S. State Street, Norton, KS 67654 - Phone 785-877-2501

www.us36.net/nortonkansas Where the Best Come to Stay!

## WELCOME TO NORTON

STATE PARK AND SEBELIUS RESERVOIR—  
CAMPING, FISHING AND WILDLIFE  
GALLERY OF ALSO RANS—  
Unsuccessful Candidates for Presidency of the United States  
STATION 15—  
Leavenworth to Pikes Peak Stagecoach Stop  
ADOBE HOUSE — HILLMAN SCHOOL HOUSE  
“WHERE THE BEST COME TO STAY”

