

AFTER 25 YEARS IN THE BUSINESS, JANE KOGER SAYS RANCHING IS FOR THE BIRDS

No, Jane is not getting out of the cattle business, but she is trying something new. And it's literally for the birds.

Some of you who grew up in Chase County will remember seeing hundreds of greater prairie-chickens in the Flint Hills, often in the spring when males gathered to do their mating dances on the booming grounds, or in fall when large flocks fed out in the open.

Leigh Ann Crofoot remembers the cleverly camouflaged birds popping up frequently from hidden nests in spring, sometimes from right under her horse, a test of the horse's nerves and the rider's reflexes. Jay Talkington recalls hunting chickens when they gathered by the hundreds to feed on crop ground along the South Fork in late autumn. Now it is rare to see more than a few prairie chickens at a time.

Where have they gone? Why has the greater prairie-chicken population in the Flint Hills declined by at least 65% in the last 20 years?

Many of our native prairie birds nest on the ground: prairie chicken, bobwhite quail, dickcissel, eastern meadowlark, grasshopper sparrow, Henslow's sparrow, horned lark, killdeer and upland sandpiper. During the months of April, May and June, a variety of prairie birds are building nests and laying eggs.

"If you think about the time of year we usually burn and stock pastures around here and then consider when the birds start nesting," says Jane, "you might see a problem." When pastures are entirely burned off in late March and early April and cattle are put on the grass in mid-April, there is little cover available to protect eggs and newly hatched birds from their predators, which include owls, hawks, coyotes, raccoons, opossums, skunks and snakes.

"Take a bird's-eye view of the county next April after pasture burning," says Jane, "and ask yourself, if you were a ground-nesting bird, where could you safely lay your eggs and raise your offspring?"

Greater prairie-chickens are particularly picky about habitat, and in order to successfully hatch and raise their young, the hens must have access to plenty of grass tall enough to hide a football. Without that kind of concealing vegetation, greater prairie-chickens begin to disappear. And it isn't that they move to another location. Very little is left of the tallgrass prairie and most of that is here in the Flint Hills. The prairie-chickens are quickly running out of suitable places to call home. A close relative of our greater prairie-chicken, the Attwater's prairie-chicken, was once found in abundance in the coastal grasslands of Texas and Louisiana. Now the bird is on the endangered species list because of habitat loss in those states. At last count, there were only about 50 birds left in the wild.

The problem for ranchers here is that stocker cattle show better weight gains on pastures that are burned annually, which is why this practice has become a tradition in the last twenty years. Better gains mean more profit, which is essential to successful ranching. The question is: Do ranchers have to choose between making a living and losing the grassland birds that have been calling the prairie home since before Chase County was settled?

Jane thinks there might be a way to do both. She is in the third year of a seven-year experiment using a technique called "patch-burn grazing." Every spring she burns only one-third of each pasture. The cattle prefer the most recently burned patch, but will also graze and loaf in the unburned areas to some extent. This method leaves plenty of taller grass for nesting and medium-height vegetation to which young birds can run for cover from predators.

So far, the weight gains for cattle have been in line with those from past years. She hopes the prairie chickens will begin to show a noticeable increase before long.

"One of the best things about this method," says Jane, "is that each year you burn the patch that hasn't been burned in three years. That means the grass has gotten a rest and you get a better burn. It looks like patch-burning is good for the grass, good for the cattle, and good for the birds."

She also admits that patch burning is harder to do. "You really have to control your fire. It takes more time, more equipment, and lots of help from your neighbors." Jane says she couldn't have undertaken this experiment without the help of good neighbors like Buck Bailey, Alan Phipps, Bobbie Hammond, Chip Hammond, Cliff Cole, Tracy Talkington, John Talkington, Larry Pinkston and Mary Harwood.

Leigh Ann Crofoot, who learned about the dynamics of controlled burning when she worked for the Pinkston brothers, helped Jane figure out burn lines along natural barriers so that pastures were divided into roughly equal thirds. She also supervises the burning when she can take time out from her busy schedule at nursing school. "This method just makes sense," says Leigh Ann, "it's more like how our grandparents did it years ago. We're still getting good gains, but the birds have a better chance for survival. What would the prairie be without prairie-chickens?"