

Booming from the Mists of Nowhere: The Story of the Greater Prairie-Chicken

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Book Reviews and Notices

Booming from the Mists of Nowhere: The Story of the Greater Prairie-Chicken, by Greg Hoch. A Bur Oak Book. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. xiii, 126 pp. Maps, graphs, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer James A. Pritchard is adjunct associate professor of environmental history and natural resource policy at Iowa State University. He is a coauthor of *A Green and Permanent Land* (2001).

This wonderful book is at once enlightening and hopeful, a welcome outlook amidst the challenges of wildlife conservation today. Readers interested in the history of Iowa or wildlife in the Midwest will find *Booming from the Mists of Nowhere* provocative in its consideration of historical landscape change, and intriguing as it brings diverse historical voices into the conversation.

Hoch traces pinnated grouse (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus* and related species) populations through time in North America, describing interactions among people, land, and wildlife on scales from a few acres to the entire Great Plains. Euro-American farmers settling the prairies reported astounding numbers of prairie-chickens. In fact, these particular birds followed the plow, increasing in numbers and shifting their range, reaching a high point when the mix of crop fields and prairie was about half and half.

The author gracefully points toward fundamental truths, including “grassland wildlife needs grass” (think habitat), and insightfully describes the underlying complexity of grassland ecosystems. Indeed, prairie-chickens are “complex creatures living in very dynamic landscapes” (106). Readers will readily grasp Hoch’s concise and imaginative explanations, for example, how a human flu season is similar to the workings of disease and parasites in bird populations. Along the path to understanding the relationship between structural diversity of vegetation and chick survival rates, readers are invited to consider life from an animal’s viewpoint, in this case imagining a predator looking for bird nests amidst the various prairie forbs and grasses.

Hoch’s account embraces the latest practice and science, including “patch-burn grazing” techniques currently employed in southern Iowa, busily investigated by graduate students counting the variety of insects and birds. Interestingly, it’s not the choice of cows or bison but rather the management of grazing animals that matters in restoring field and

prairie to vibrant condition. The author's discussions of habitat fragmentation—how birds use various prairie types, and how habitat availability can shape the genetic diversity of prairie-chicken subpopulations—is compelling because it links the prairie's past to its future. Small populations of birds use remaining prairie patches scattered over the landscape, exchanging (one hopes) heritable traits as part of a larger metapopulation.

Undeniably, prairie-chickens are “birds of working lands” (100). Midwestern farmers used to foster six or more crops, but simplifying the landscape negatively affected bird populations. Although the prairie ecosystem has been driven to functional extinction, the author argues that “there is room on the prairie landscape for many species of grassland birds,” given better habitat management and enough grass (10). Conservation can work successfully with grazing and haying at the township level, while patches of 320 acres scattered over the larger landscape (along with some larger core areas) would encourage various grassland birds. Government agencies, non-profit organizations, and citizens all have roles to play, but ultimately the “true fate of all these species lies in the hands of farmers, ranchers, and rural landowners” (107).

Hoch is not only a competent biologist but also a thorough researcher and a worthy author as well, drawing readers into a fascinating world of birds, biology, and history. Successfully integrating passages from historical accounts and natural history, the narrative provides reflective moments and additional insight into human interactions with wildlife. This account is a thoughtful and well-executed blend of wildlife science, history, and poetic thought.

Readers should accept Hoch's invitation to see for themselves the prairie-chickens during their courting season on the lek, when the males call with haunting voices and show off their colorful feathers while the females choose mates, shaping evolution. It is an experience promising inspiration, uplift, and a sense of renewal in witnessing prairie-chickens “booming from the mists of nowhere” (108).

The Settlers' Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest, by Bethel Saler. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. iv, 382 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Catherine J. Denial is the Bright Professor of American History at Knox College in Illinois. She is the author of *Making Marriage: Husbands, Wives, and the American State in Dakota and Ojibwe Country* (2013).

In *The Settlers' Empire*, Bethel Saler sets out to counter the widely held belief of many historians that there was no nation-state in place in the