



## habitat types of the lesser prairie-chicken

Lesser prairie-chickens (LEPCs) presently occur only in the Southern Great Plains, which includes portions of the Texas panhandle, along with parts of western Oklahoma, eastern New Mexico, a portion of southeast Colorado, and parts of western Kansas.

Lesser prairie-chickens need large blocks of unfragmented native grasslands which include interspersed forbs (broad-leaved plants) and areas of low growing brush with few vertical structure such as trees or manmade structures. Different stages and varying degrees of grasses, weeds and low-growing shrub cover (20-30%) are ideal to meet the diverse seasonal habitat needs of the lesser prairie-chicken. Below is a brief description of the different habitat types or land uses that occur in the Southern Great Plains and their relative importance to the LEPCs.

**Rangelands** make up the bread and butter of LEPC habitat and livestock production in the Southern Great Plains. These uplands areas are primarily grassland with little vertical vegetative structure when they are in good condition. Specific vegetative community types include mixed grass prairie, shortgrass prairie, shinnery oak (low-growing oaks) and sandsage. Sometimes you will also see wooded draws imbedded in these areas. Typical vegetation includes perennial native grasses, forbs (broad-leaved plants) and shrub species which can include yucca, shinnery oak, sage and plum among others. These grass-dominated upland areas provide for the vast majority of the habitat needs for LEPC's in all seasons. These areas make up a majority of privately owned lands and almost all publicly owned lands of importance to the LEPC. Native uplands are not all created equal, however, in terms of use. Areas that are dominated by mesquite and juniper, or that are over-utilized by livestock, are not likely to be used by LEPC's. See our fact sheet on *Habitat Management* to learn more about managing rangelands.



**Riparian** habitats are those that occur immediately adjacent to creeks and streams and are often important to a wide variety of wildlife species; however they have not been identified as having a specific attraction to prairie-chickens. They are often subjected to heavy livestock grazing due to the proximity to water, but can benefit from enhanced management. Additionally they often include taller tree species which can result in avoidance by LEPCs. The boundaries of playa lakes can be restored to native vegetation and provide additional cover and food. Wet swales or riparian areas that are completely dominated by grass or grass-like species can provide good “bugging” areas for chicks during brood rearing. Although LEPC’s do not have a daily need for surface water, additional water sources can enhance a rancher’s ability to more intensively manage grazing benefitting the species.

**Croplands** are land planted to a food crop, such as sorghum, or a fiber crop, such as cotton. When farms first came to the Southern Great Plains, farming techniques left field borders in native vegetation that provided cover. Inefficient harvest also left waste grain as an additional winter food supply for wildlife. As farms have gotten larger and more efficient, there is little waste grain or field borders for cover. Where croplands are imbedded in rangeland, they still tend to have sufficient cover at the margins and waste grains available in winter and early spring that can be utilized by LEPC’s, but croplands alone cannot provide good habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

**Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)** is a US Department of Agriculture program established in 1985. Its original goals were to incentivize the establishment of permanent grass cover on privately-owned, highly-erodible croplands to reduce soil loss. The program did a good job of addressing erosion risks and provided additional cover and sometimes habitat bridges for wildlife. Originally wildlife habitat was not a major emphasis and grasses chosen for planting provided little for LEPCs in the Southern Great Plains. As time has passed, however, the program has evolved to include grassland bird habitat improvement as a goal, and more recently enrolled lands include both native grass and forb species that provide much more benefit to native wildlife species – while still achieving the goal of permanent cover on highly erodible land.