

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



NAPPADAL PRAIRIECHICKEN/FWS

Attwater's Prairie-chicken

Tympanuchus cupido attwateri

Region:

South

Area affected:

Texas Coastal Plain

Climatic change:

Severe weather

Impact:

Mortality

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Where there is prairie, there are prairie-chickens. Unfortunately, prairies—tallgrass, mixed grass and shortgrass—are among our most imperiled habitats, and, not surprisingly, prairie-chicken populations have also suffered drastic declines. The crisis is particularly acute on the coastal prairies of Texas, home to the last remaining populations of an endangered subspecies of the greater prairie-chicken, the Attwater's prairie-chicken. The Attwater's is slightly smaller and darker than other greater prairie-chickens, which are found primarily in Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota. At one time, there may have been as many as a million Attwater's prairie-chickens on six million acres of prairie habitat stretching the length of the Texas Gulf Coast. More than 99 percent of the species' original range has been lost to agriculture, oil and gas drilling, urban development, grazing and encroachment by woody vegetation. Unfortunately, the bird's decline has been even more precipitous. The population crashed to fewer than 9,000 by the 1930s, and by 2015 only 104 wild birds remained, restricted to two tiny pockets of habitat on a national wildlife refuge and a private preserve.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

The Texas coast is no stranger to severe weather, and droughts, hurricanes and hailstorms have all taken a toll on the Attwater's prairie-chicken. In fact, the species is something of a poster child for the impact of these unexpected catastrophes, known as "stochastic events," because all the factors that make it difficult for a species to recover from such disasters apply: low numbers, isolated populations and a slow reproductive rate. Unfortunately, one of the worst catastrophes in memory befell the Attwater's prairie-chicken in 2017. Hurricane Harvey slammed into the Gulf Coast in late August as a Category 4 storm, bringing storm surge, wind and record levels of rain. **The storm killed 80 percent of the birds on the private preserve and 24 of the 29 hens that were being tracked at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge.** Captive-bred birds have been released to augment the populations, but the Attwater's prairie-chicken may be closer to extinction than ever.

References

Gaskill, M. 2017 Attwater's prairie chicken population hit hard by Harvey. *Texas Climate News*. November 9. <http://texasclimatenews.org/?p=14183>

Goode, E. 2015. The fight to save a prairie chicken. *The New York Times*. September 14. <https://nyti.ms/2BzfGof>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Attwater's Prairie-Chicken Recovery Plan, Second Revision. https://ecos.fws.gov/docs/recovery_plan/100426.pdf



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