

# AGGIE life

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## A fowl way of life

### A&M program aims to save Attwater prairie chickens

By John LeBas  
THE BATTALION

At one time, as many as one million Attwater prairie chickens roamed the country between Louisiana and Mexico.

Native Americans integrated the chicken into their culture, imitating the bird's head and tail feather displays and mating dances in dress and ritual.

Now, mostly due to habitat reduction, 40 chickens or less exist in the wild.

However, a Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences program at Texas A&M is working to halt the extinction of this endangered species.

Dr. Nova Silvy, a professor in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, said the Attwater prairie chicken is actually one of four prairie grouse subspecies. The heath hen, a subspecies that used to live in the Eastern states, is already extinct, and the Attwater prairie chicken is predicted to die out in the wild by 1998.

"They require large expanses of prairie habitat," Silvy said, "and that's gone. The major reason is that this habitat is the easiest to go to crop land."

Since the United States expanded from the East, the heath hen was the first to go extinct, Silvy said. Urban sprawl in Texas, like in Houston, has helped contribute to the Attwater prairie chicken population crash.

Degraded prairie lands, on which the chickens are more susceptible to predation, and fewer habitat-renewing fires have also taken a toll on the population.

The captive propagation program at A&M aims to stabilize and in-

crease the number in captivity, while supplementing the existing population, with the hope that later, habitat conditions will improve," Silvy said.

Along with similar programs at the Houston and San Antonio Zoos and the Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, researchers at A&M are striving to save the birds through captive breeding.

The small number of chickens has created breeding problems, Silvy said.

"One problem we found in the wild was we had isolated populations that were highly inbred," he said. "In the facilities, we bring in males from one county to mate with females from another."

Researchers hope the more genetically diverse birds will have increased vigor and a greater chance of survival in the wild.

Clifton Griffin, a wildlife and fisheries doctoral student, said photomanipulation is used to increase offspring numbers. Photomanipulation involves altering the amount of light hens receive to induce more frequent egg laying, and thus more chicks, he said.

But Attwater chicks eat a lot of insects in early life — up to 17 grams per day. Finding an adequate number of insects to feed the chicks has been a bit of a hurdle, Griffin said.

Food shortages may also affect wild chickens, he said.

"One of the factors we feel like is

leading to the demise of the Attwater prairie chicken is a lack of insect availability," he said.

When chickens move into adulthood and begin eating vegetation, a new problem arises. The chickens are raised on commercial feed in captivity but must learn to eat vegetation upon release.

"There are not any little red feed and water bowls on the prairie," Griffin said.

"This year, we're going to try to train them to go back to native vegetation before they're released," Silvy said.

Training the birds for

But Silvy said researchers are encouraged by last year's chicken release — 15 percent have survived, without any such training.

Typical survival rates in the wild from egg to adult chicken are about three percent.

This year, researchers hope to release as many as 100 captive-bred and trained birds in the wild. These birds will be fitted with radio transmitting collars for tracking purposes.

While the fate of the chickens remains to be determined, Griffin is confident about their survival.

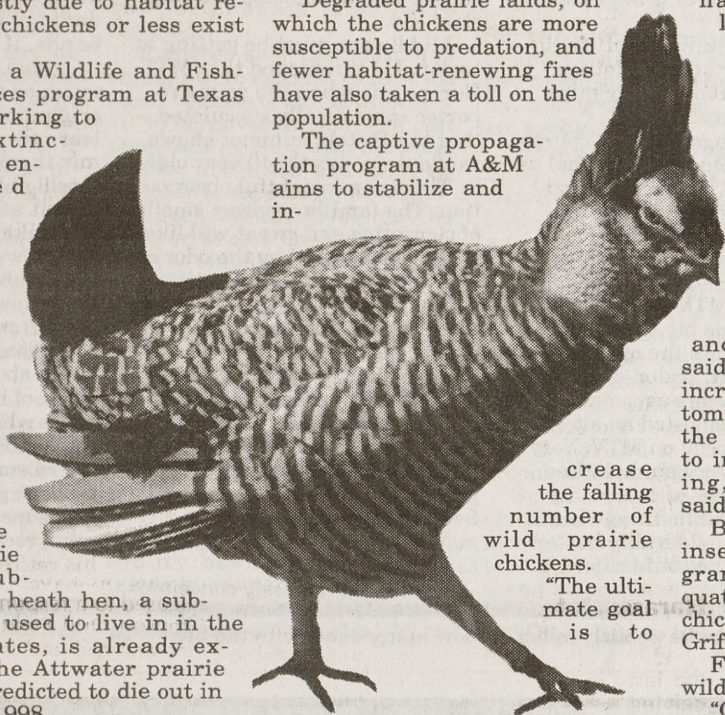
"Within a few years, we've worked out many of the details of raising the chickens," he said. "Now, we can increase the scale."

"We need to keep getting land, because there is no sense in having a huge number of birds if you have nowhere to put them."

Griffin said the state of the prairie chicken also points to the poor condition of the entire tall grass prairie ecosystem.

Without significant increases in population, the Attwater species will be lost, he said, and might indicate the destruction of this entire ecosystem.

"This is a critical year," he said. "Hopefully, it's not too little, too late."

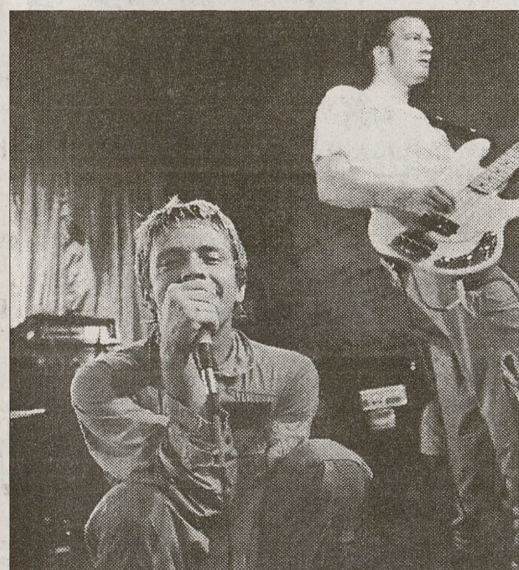


crease the falling number of wild prairie chickens. "The ultimate goal is to



survival in the wild remains a large aspect of the prairie chicken's future.

### Tripping Daisy returns to Bryan-College Station



Tripping Daisy (above) is returning to College Station to play its first show at A&M since last summer. The band is playing tonight at The Tap.

### Queens Theatre one of several buildings to be renovated as part of downtown Bryan revitalization

By Kristina Buffin  
THE BATTALION

The oldest building in downtown Bryan

dates back to the 1890s.

However, one hundred years later, most of the

historic buildings are either deserted or in hor-

rrible condition.

Over the next few years, downtown Bryan will become a place where more A&M students and Bryan-College Station residents frequent for entertainment, shopping and work.

The revitalization of downtown Bryan will include the refurbishing of the Queens Theatre, the LaSalle Hotel and the Carnegie Library.

The owners of the 3rd Floor Cantina and the Dixie Theatre, Willie Bennett and John Williams, purchased the Queens Theatre when they realized they were losing bigger bands because the venues were not large enough.

"The music scene is growing," Bennett said. "More bars around town have live music and there is an increasing overall awareness of the music scene in Bryan-College Station. We believe in downtown Bryan."



Gwendolyn Struve, THE BATTALION

See Bryan, Page 4 The Queens Theatre, which has been closed for 30 years, is being renovated.

music • poetry • food  
and it's all free...  
because we love you.

## RESEARCH PARK FRIDAY, APRIL 26

### 7.00 PM

follow the  
orange signs  
down  
University Dr.  
and into  
Research Park



NO CAR?  
...ride the happy bus  
from Rumours at 6.45

# 1997 AGGIELAND Applications Available Now!!!

Due by 5 p.m. Friday, April 26

## Positions Available:

Writer/Reporter Designers Photographers  
Pick up applications in 012 Reed McDonald