

Grouse in the Balance



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THE WORLD of the grouse is all about balance. The bird itself is an interesting balance, both behaviorally and physically. Both males and females sport an ornate palette of black, russet, cream and cinnamon. No color overpowers. The mix blends perfectly into the forest understory as the bird contemplates the fateful balance between staying motionless or flushing.

Behaviorally, Ruff is a balance of timid and bold. Spending most of the year silently walking Penn's Woods and scurrying discretely away from danger, he sends forth a booming springtime serenade that echoes through the forested hills. The grouse is a bird of the big woods, but within those woods grouse need a balanced mix of habitat types. Thriving grouse populations require a forest with a generous blend of saplings, open areas and fruiting shrubs.

Grouse hunters, too, require balance. Certainly, a grouse hunter needs physical balance. Pennsylvania's steep sidehills call for a supreme level of

balance that separates our homegrown grouse hunters from those Michigan flat-landers: The ability to shoot true while clinging to a tree with one arm, swinging on a grouse with the other, while scrambling to stay afoot in the rocky scree beneath the boots.

A good grouse dog is a balanced mix of biddable yet bold; a partner who rushes headlong through thorny cover yet pivots on his heels at the 'come in' signal from the boss. The shotgun does not have to be a high-priced collectible model, but it should be nicely balanced for ease of carrying and quick mounting to shoulder.

Successful grouse hunters also exhibit a mental balance; a calm readiness that characterizes the best shooters. A grouse flush is a jaw-dropping experience as the bird rockets out of cover with a thundering of the wings. The most successful hunters recognize the messy tangles that hide grouse and approach them with a calm anticipation—not knowing if the thunder is

coming, but keyed and ready if it does.

Unfortunately, the delicately balanced world of the ruffed grouse is off-center, and the King of Thunder is suffering the consequences.

Out of Balance

Dense saplings, thick stands of shrubs, and the unbridled mess of a clear-cut provide grouse with the type of cover that separates life and death. Branches overhead disrupt the view of a passing Cooper's hawk, and dog-hair thickets of saplings, with ample slash on the ground, impair the nightly hunt of a raccoon. Throw in a few weedy clearings, bramble patches and perhaps a sprinkling of conifers and you have the perfect grouse production area. What appears to be a "jungle" in the eyes of many people is actually the makings of a classic grouse covert.

But look around, really look around. Many of our forests lack the structure and species diversity needed to serve as prime grouse habitat. Mature trees with little on the ground beyond a carpet of ferns or striped maple have limited value for grouse. In fact, these "simplified" forest stands offer restricted opportunities for most wildlife. A drive along Pennsylvania's roadways in April reveals miles and miles of forest that would make better picnic areas than wildlife habitat. You should not be able to jog through a forest!

What is missing? Grouse cover today and the forest of the future. "Young forest" is composed of a thick and diverse mix of shrubs, tree seedlings and saplings, along with openings where grass, weeds and wildflowers grow. This important habitat type is dwindling rapidly throughout the commonwealth. Our state is now at a 50-year

low for young forest. The National Grouse Management Plan recommends increasing the amount of young forest in Pennsylvania (and throughout the Appalachians) by 10 percent to bring grouse populations back up to target levels by 2025. To meet this goal, Pennsylvania's proportional share would require creating more than 90,000 acres of new habitat per year.

As a result of the loss of young forest, more than 30 species of wildlife that rely on this habitat type in Pennsylvania are declining. The amount of young forest in Pennsylvania is far short of what is needed to sustain species such as ruffed grouse, woodcock, snowshoe hares, box turtles, whip-poor-wills, regal fritillary butterflies, indigo buntings and an entire community of other songbirds. This year, the American Bird Conservancy identified "early succession forests" of the Northeast as one of the Top 10 threatened habitats in the United States. State, regional and national partners now are struggling to



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reverse these declines by creating high-quality young forest habitat, and the Game Commission is heavily involved in this effort.

Why are young forests so important to wildlife? The most species-rich habitats occur when food and cover are close together. Imagine if you had to make a 20-mile road trip every time you were hungry. This requires a lot of energy on your part, and eventually your luck may run out: an accident could easily occur while you're trying to bring back food. Though the scale is different, most species do best when their "kitchen" and "living room" are mixed together inside one safe haven. Being able to locate a diverse menu, eat it quickly, and get back to safe cover increases a grouse's survival rate, as it does for most species.

Popular game species such as deer, bears and turkeys also thrive in a diverse forest made up of different age classes and scattered openings. Even songbirds of the mature forest use young forests as feeding grounds for newly fledged young, where plentiful insects and ripe berries help fuel autumn migrations.

Grouse hunters recognized that young forests were missing long before the concept became popular. Students of the ruffed grouse have seen their flush rates dropping as favorite coverts slowly mature year after year. The Game Commission's Breeding Bird Atlas supports their observations: The Atlas documented a 30 to 50 percent decline in breeding grouse sightings in the 20 years between 1984 and 2004. That's the bad news. The good news is that grouse aficionados can take heart that so many others are now helping to pull the yoke and get the word out. [See

sidebar for how you can help.]

Although habitat changes have caused grouse numbers to falter, hunters can still find plenty of action in areas of good habitat. Although upland bird hunters enjoy pursuing turkeys and pheasants, many take unique joy in pursuing grouse. Bagging the King of Game Birds is a high honor. A good day's hunt may require miles of walking in the nastiest, thickest habitat Pennsylvania has to offer, keeping your head after the startle of a thunderous flush, smoothly swinging the gun through nearly impenetrable brush, and making a perfectly timed shot as the brown bullet rockets through a slight opening in the trees. The King's habitat makes for difficult hunting and nearly impossible shooting. Just one grouse in the bag is generally worthy of an animated story over a hot cup of coffee, because pursuing grouse is never dull. The harder the hunt, the richer the reward, and a grouse in the bag is a king's pride.

Getting Started

You don't need a collectible shotgun or a pedigreed bird dog to hunt grouse. One long time grouse hunter routinely adopts terrier mixes from his local animal shelter. He works them in twos or threes and is marvelously successful with his unusual hunting team. Others prefer to work without a dog, finding the dog to be a distraction. Likewise, many grouse hunters have a cabinet full of beautiful guns, but some prefer to use the one they used in high school or inherited from a loved one.

More than fancy equipment, a successful grouse hunt comes down to putting yourself in the right place and being ready to respond when a bird goes up. Putting yourself in the right spot

involves legwork. It is said that “you hunt grouse with your legs.” This is not a bird where you get out of the truck, walk to a blind and wait, or mosey across a grassy field while the dog runs ahead. Grouse hunting is work. On the plus side, hardcore grouse hunters seem to live forever, perhaps a result of the heart and muscle fitness built up over years of walking the state’s forested hills.

“Find the food, find the bird” is a popular saying with grouse hunters. But grouse consume just about anything, so it’s not one particular food source you’re looking for. Rather, it’s food close to cover. Look for grouse in 5- to 15-year-old timber harvests, new timber harvests with a thick understory, grape and greenbriar tangles, young aspen, cherry, oak or birch stands, patches of hawthorn, dogwood, and scrub oak, the moist thickets along streams, and in naturally shrubby areas. Other hotspots for grouse include openings with scattered intermixes of conifers, and the brushy edges of old haul roads or forest clearings.

The big woods portions of northern Pennsylvania are renowned for producing grouse. The combination of abundant aspen, black cherry and birch help create a year-round, high-quality food supply for the birds. Ask a seasoned hunter and he’ll admit that productive grouse coverts can be found in western portions of northcentral counties and eastern portions of the

northwestern counties. Beyond that, however, you will get no specific location information for grouse hunters never reveal their hotspots. Find an area that provides low, dense cover and a ready food supply, and you know you’re getting close. In general, good habitat in northern Pennsylvania will produce more birds per hour than good habitat in southern Pennsylvania, although there can be local exceptions.

Once a likely covert is found, being ready for the shot requires attention to detail. If you’re hunting with a dog, it’s easy to see when he or she is “birdy,”

brought on by a nose full of bird scent. If hunting solo, you will have to be the one to sense when a covert is hot. Learn to recognize the grouse foods that are in season on

the day of your hunt, and pay attention when food plants occur near good cover.

As you approach a likely spot, take notice of the trees and branches surrounding you and the patch of cover. Grouse have an uncanny ability to put branches between them and the gun as they rocket away from you. So as you approach a likely tangle, position yourself to take advantage of clearings and open areas between trees. Keep the gun in moving-ready position, so you can bring it to shoulder quickly when the commotion begins.

When the bird goes up, don’t rush your shot. A grouse can throw the most experienced hunter off balance when



it erupts from cover. Often the result is a rushed shot and a long look at a departing bird. Grouse move quickly, but you have more time than you think. As in any hunt, it pays to take an extra second to breathe, set up and shoot. A balanced sense of calm readiness in

a well-balanced habitat is the key to tipping the odds in your favor when chasing Thunder. 

Lisa Williams manages ruffed grouse, mourning doves and American woodcock for the Game Commission.

Restoring the Balance

By Lisa Williams

Support young forests. Landowners conducting a timber harvest may face a wall of misunderstanding and even hostility from friends and neighbors. Public land managers may receive a backlash when they harvest trees or mow over-mature shrublands. We have abundant mature forest in Pennsylvania today. More young forest is needed to stop species declines.

Harvest trees responsibly. Harvest decisions made today have consequences that last 100 years or more. Deer abundance and invasive species affect the ability of a forest to regrow. Agency biologists and foresters, and private foresters with wildlife training, can help you decide what works best for wildlife on your property. Agency personnel also can guide you toward funding that might be available for habitat improvements. Seek out professional advice.

Harvest enough trees to create young forest. Most private landowners opt for “single tree selection,” removing individual high-quality trees while leaving other trees standing. This technique preserves the “eye appeal” of the woodlot but does not create the thick young cover grouse need. Growing conditions for the future forest also may be negatively affected if tree seedlings are starved of adequate sunlight. Carried out by an unscrupulous operator, this technique may result in the loss of all high-quality trees with “junk” left in the stand. Work with a professional forester with a good reputation.

Support responsible deer management. Years of deer overabundance have resulted in many forest patches with a stripped-down understory of ferns and striped maple. This is evident particularly in northern Pennsylvania, the heart of grouse range. Managing deer populations in balance with the forest ecosystem restores the high-quality habitats that grouse require. Habitat quality for deer, bears and turkeys also is improved.

Learn to love messy habitats. Opposition to young forest creation is the NO. 1 barrier to successful implementation of ruffed grouse conservation plans. People do not generally like messy habitats, yet thriving wildlife habitat should look “lived in.” Forest fires, windstorms, floods, large-scale timber harvesting, disease and insect pests created the messy habitats needed by young forest wildlife in the past. Today it’s up to us to restore the balance.