

FROM THE COVERTS

- FALL 2014 -

The Grouse and Woodcock Cooperators' Newsletter



PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

2001 Elmerton Avenue, Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797



The Season Ahead

Biologist's Report

DEAR GROUSE & WOODCOCK

COOPERATORS: First the fun stuff. Remember my promise of a prize if you took part in last year's Grouse Wing or Grouse Habitat surveys? Well, 314 survey responses were received, and names went in a hat. Phil Smiley was selected to receive a Thank You prize for submitting his Habitat Survey for Susquehanna county! Want your chance? Send me samples!



By Lisa Williams,
PGC Grouse &
Woodcock Biologist

The Season Ahead: While I eagerly await your hunting logs and grouse parts, I know you're more interested in the season ahead. Unfortunately, I'm predicting a more modest season than last year. 2014 has been called the 'summer that wasn't' and I'm afraid that the cool, wet weather and flooding of this spring and summer may have taken a toll on grouse production. Of course, there will be birds out there, but you'll need to really hone in on areas with good food and cover.

The PGC Grouse Summer Sighting Survey reinforces my caution about the coming season. Brood observations for June and July are down 22% and 33% from 2013. Individual grouse sightings for June and July are down 12% and 18% compared to 2013. August sightings were also reduced in 2014. Statewide, brood sightings were down 21% compared to last summer, and total grouse sightings are down 6% for 2014. So my preliminary forecast is for an average to slightly below-average 2014-2015 grouse season.

For woodcock, 2014 may also be more modest than recent years due to the uncooperative weather. The singing male survey was up 17% in PA this spring (good news!), but all states and provinces to our north showed declines except VT and PEI. The real question is how broods fared in PA and northern states after the singing ground counts were conducted. As always, hunting success will be largely affected by the timing of migration.

Lisa Williams,
Wildlife Biologist
2001 Elmerton Ave
Harrisburg, PA 17110
Phone: 717-787-5529
liswilliam@pa.gov

NEW THIS YEAR!

Expanding the Grouse Parts Collection Study

The **Grouse Parts Collection Survey** shows the ratio of juveniles to adults in the fall harvest – an important indicator of the well being of the grouse population. Last year, 91 useable feather samples were received. See summary, page 3. This year, I'd really like to increase that sample size!

Larger sample sizes are needed to better understand the make up of the PA grouse harvest. Permission has been secured from the Loyal Order of Dedicated Grouse Hunters (LODGH) to send survey requests to all PA members. Ruffed Grouse Society is also partnering with the Game Commission and mailing our Survey request to all RGS members in PA. This means that you may receive more than one mailing requesting feather samples.

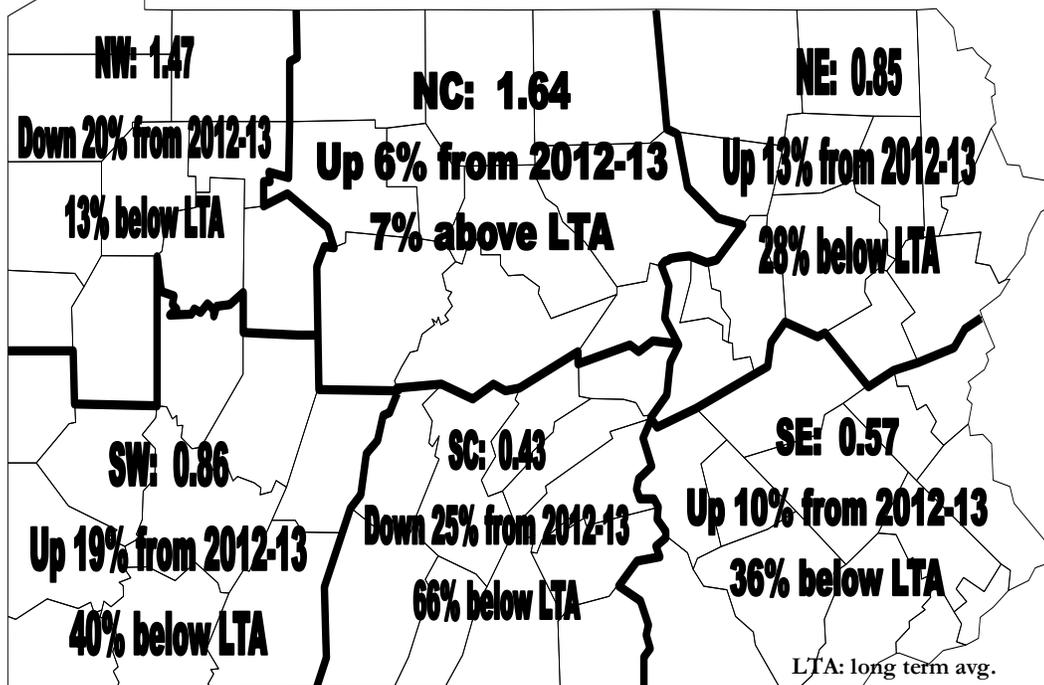
If you won't hunt this year, or if you receive extra envelopes, please feel free to give survey materials to others who will harvest grouse.

Some samples had to be thrown out last year because of avoidable mistakes. Follow instructions on page 4 of this newsletter carefully to ensure that your grouse is counted.

1. DO NOT cut any feathers across the quill. We need the full length of the wing and tail feathers.
2. DO INCLUDE rump feathers. These are best for sexing birds. Collect from the middle of lower back. See diagram pg 4.
- 3 COMPLETE ALL information requested on envelope.
4. DO SUBMIT rump feathers and a wing even if you do not want to give up a tail feather.

P.S. The Grouse Habitat Survey is on hold until results are analyzed. 208 surveys came in from 45 counties. Thank you!!

2013-2014 Grouse Flushes/Hour By Region



Grouse Season 2013-14: Good & Bad. Last year I predicted a booming grouse population based on very high counts in the Summer Sighting Survey of 2013. True to my prediction, PA on the whole and 4 of 6 individual regions saw increases in grouse flushes per hour.

The bad news is that the NW and SC regions tanked, with one year drops of 20% and 25% below 2012-13 flush rates. Unfortunately, this is where many of you hunt—so you may have had a disappointing season. If you went out and bought a puppy based on my forecast, I'll gladly give it a good home :) Hopefully 2014-15 will see a return to more-normal flush rates in these regions.

Glancing Back / Looking Ahead

Highest Flush Rates, 2013-14:

13.3 grouse/hour – October 21

11.3 woodcock/hour—October 19

Highest # grouse flushing from 1 spot = 11 birds

Most Days Hunted, 2013-14:

72 days—grouse— R. Zukas

23 days—woodcock— A. Armstrong

Average # days Cooperators hunted grouse:

8 days

Average # days Cooperators hunted w/c:

5 days

2014-15 Seasons:

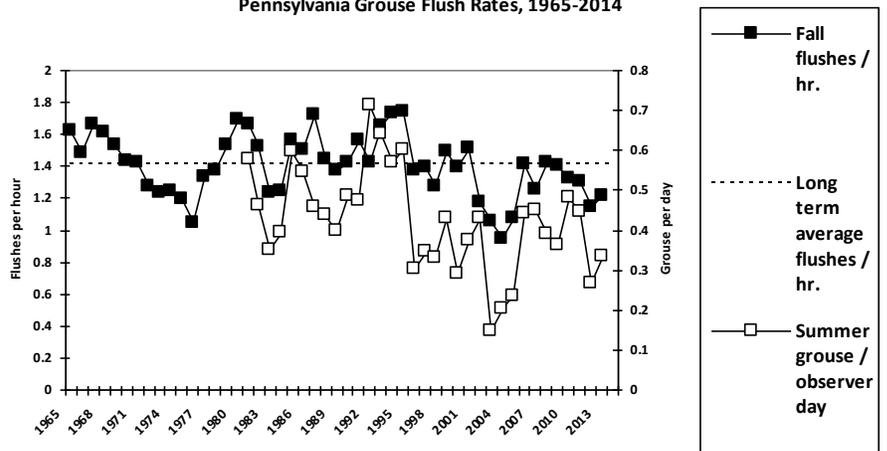
Grouse: October 18-Nov. 29

Dec. 15—24

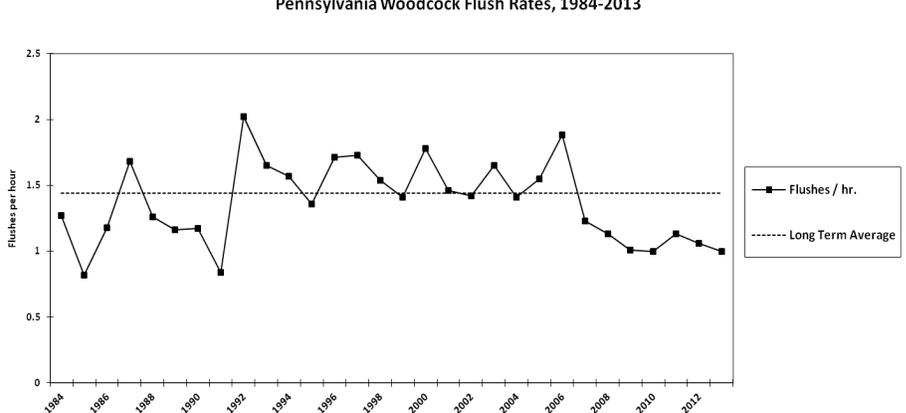
Dec. 26—Jan. 24

Woodcock: October 18—Nov. 29

Pennsylvania Grouse Flush Rates, 1965-2014



Pennsylvania Woodcock Flush Rates, 1984-2013



Grouse Parts Collection Survey- Last Year's Results

Of 91 useable samples, 45 were adult grouse, 45 were juveniles and one was unknown age. This small sample contained a 1.0 ratio of juveniles to adult birds in the harvest, and 2.25 juveniles per adult female.

Compared to historic data, these values are low. During the "good old days" of high grouse populations in the 1970s and 1980s, the averages of young birds per adult hen ranged from a statewide low of 2.75 during the low production year of 1983 to a high of 4.55 in 1978 (data from 1977-1987). At the region scale, 11-yr historic averages were 3.42

in the northwest region, 3.46 in the southwest, 5.06 in the northcentral, 3.77 in the southcentral, 4.76 in northeastern counties, and 3.45 in southeastern PA. During this same period, adult grouse made up less of the statewide harvest than they did in our 2013-14 sample. Since adult grouse are typically the most-successful breeders, the finding that adults accounted for a full 50% of the 2013-14 samples is another reason for concern.

The less-desirable numbers we saw in the 2013-14 sample compared to historic values could indicate lower springtime production in

the grouse population and/or lower juvenile survival through the year. This change could be due to declining habitat quality compared to the 1970s-1980s, or a number of non-habitat factors such as disease, changing weather patterns, and increases in predator populations, to name a few.. We are currently investigating the impact of recent weather patterns and disease as possible factors impacting today's grouse populations. Getting more feathers submitted is the best way to make sure these findings are accurate, so please take part in the parts collection effort!

Notable Grouse of 2013-14:

The longest tail feather submitted in the 2013 Parts Survey came from a red phase drummer with a 7 ³/₄ inch tail fan length, taken in southcentral PA by T. Hurd. The most unique was a 7 ¹/₂ inch tail feather from a gray phase male – the only gray phase bird submitted last year. This bird was taken in southwestern PA by J. Russell. Tied for largest birds in northern PA were two red phase drummers with 7 ¹/₂ inch tail fans, taken by J. Brancato and D. Diefenbach. Both of these birds were taken in northcentral PA.

Smallest grouse goes to a bird roughly the size of a dove which was caught by a soft-mouthed dog and released in late October, Washington County!

One timberdoodle mystery solved!

On summer evenings, many woodcock fly from their daytime coverts in forests and shrubs to nearby night-roosting fields. Why they do this has long been debated: Is it to find food or avoid predators? Finally, researchers in Rhode Island settled the debate in a study published last year. Roger Masse spent two summers following woodcock to roost fields and measuring the availability and diversity of woodcock prey, soil properties, and mammalian predator activity.

Roger found that earthworms were 3–4 times more abundant in the moister soils of day-time coverts than in night-roosting fields. He also determined that mammalian predators visited day-time coverts more frequently than nocturnal roost fields. The number of days until initial predator visit was 1.8 times greater at nocturnal roost fields. This research provided the first empirical support for the predation-risk hypothesis. In short, woodcock expend the extra effort to fly from their day-time coverts to nocturnal roost fields in order to avoid predators and not to feed.

Habitat Happenings

The Game Commission created or restored just under 10,000 acres of young forest habitat on Gamelands since last fall. This included roughly 4000 acres of prescribed burning, 3300 acres of timber management, and nearly 1500 acres of shrub and old field management. In addition, our private lands biologists provided young forest management plans for more than 1,000 acres of private lands.

Hunter flush rates for grouse and woodcock can rise or fall based on many variables: The timing of migration for woodcock, weather during the hunt, food supplies that scatter or

concentrate grouse, and even how well the dog behaved on hunt day. Many of these variables are beyond our control.

If you want to permanently stack the deck in your favor when it comes to flush rates (while also improving your deer, bear and turkey hunting), create young forest habitat. Timber harvesting, managing shrub lands, and proper tending of overgrown farmlands are all important parts of habitat creation. Resource agencies are working hard to create habitat on public lands, but more private landowners need to join the effort. Call your nearest Game Com-

mission Region Office and leave a message for the Private Lands Biologist if you'd like to learn more about managing your property for young forest habitat.



Please spread the word to fellow hunters who might be willing to submit feathers. All they need to do is call 717-787-5529 and ask to be put on the list!

GROUSE PARTS COLLECTION SURVEY – INSTRUCTIONS

Thank you for helping with this important survey! Please follow the instructions below as closely as possible so that we get the best information from your efforts.

IF YOU HARVEST A GROUSE

Collecting Feather Samples

- A) Pluck one central tail feather from each bird killed (see diagram). If you don't want to submit a tail feather, please submit rump and wing feathers. These samples are still valuable.
- B) Pluck two or three rump feathers (see diagram for location). Rump feathers are located on the lower portion of the back but do not extend out onto the tail. **THESE FEATHERS ARE VITAL TO IDENTIFYING SEX. PLEASE SUBMIT!**
- C) Collect the three outer wing feathers from one wing of each bird. Do NOT pluck or

cut them. Instead, cut the wing tip off at the outer joint (see diagram). DO NOT SEPARATE THE 3 FEATHERS. LEAVE THEM ATTACHED TO THE WING STRUCTURE.

- D) DO NOT CUT ANY FEATHER OFF AT THE SHAFT. The full length of the feathers and quills must be examined.

Preparing to Mail Sample

- A) Lay feathers on window sill to dry for a day or two if needed. Do not mail wet.
- B) Do NOT send the meaty part of the wing, just the outer joint and primaries. If some blood or sinew is attached, lay out to dry before mailing.
- C) Wrap sample in one or two layers of paper towels for mailing. DO NOT use plastic wrap or baggies for shipping. This leads to rot and

Post Office will reject.

- D) Place ONE bird's sample in ONE envelope. Do NOT mix samples from different birds, dates, or hunts into one envelope. Separate envelopes are provided for separate birds.

- E) You can receive more envelopes by calling Joan at 717-787-5529.

Labeling Postage Paid Envelopes –

Please be sure to provide ALL of the information requested on back of the postage paid envelopes. It is important to provide your name, county and township of kill, WMU of kill, and date of hunt so we can compare data from different regions.

**** IF USING YOUR OWN ENVELOPES, MAIL TO: PGC GROUSE SURVEY
2001 ELMERTON AVE
HARRISBURG PA 17110-9797**

