

FROM THE COVERTS

- FALL 2015 -

The Grouse and Woodcock Cooperators' Newsletter



PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

2001 Elmerton Avenue, Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797



The Season Ahead

Biologist's Report

Remember my promise of a prize if you took part in last year's Grouse Parts survey? Well, 499 samples were sent in! B.Clark of Doylestown was randomly selected to receive a small prize for his sample of a juvenile male taken in Potter county during a November hunt. Want a chance to win? 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 an even more modest season than last year, if you can believe it. Of course, there will be birds out there, but you'll need to really hone in on areas with good food and cover. I also suggest you hunt areas surrounded by good grouse habitat in the larger landscape.

The Summer Sighting Survey reinforces my caution. Brood observations for June and July are down 22% and 28% from 2014. Total grouse sightings for June and July held steady compared to 2014, but we all know it's brood production that produces good hunting (and sustainable populations). August sightings are not yet fully analyzed, but I don't expect August broods to save the season. So my preliminary forecast is for another below-average 2015-2016 grouse season.

For woodcock, 2015 should be on par with average. They had cooperative nesting and brooding weather, at least in PA. The spring SGS survey was identical to 2014. 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

Grouse Parts Collection—Results

You really came through on the grouse parts survey! Of 479 useable samples, 260 were adults, 208 were juveniles and 11 were unknown age. The sample contained a 0.8 ratio of juveniles to adult birds in the harvest, and 2.1 juveniles per adult female. These numbers are slightly below the first-year sample collected in 2013-14.

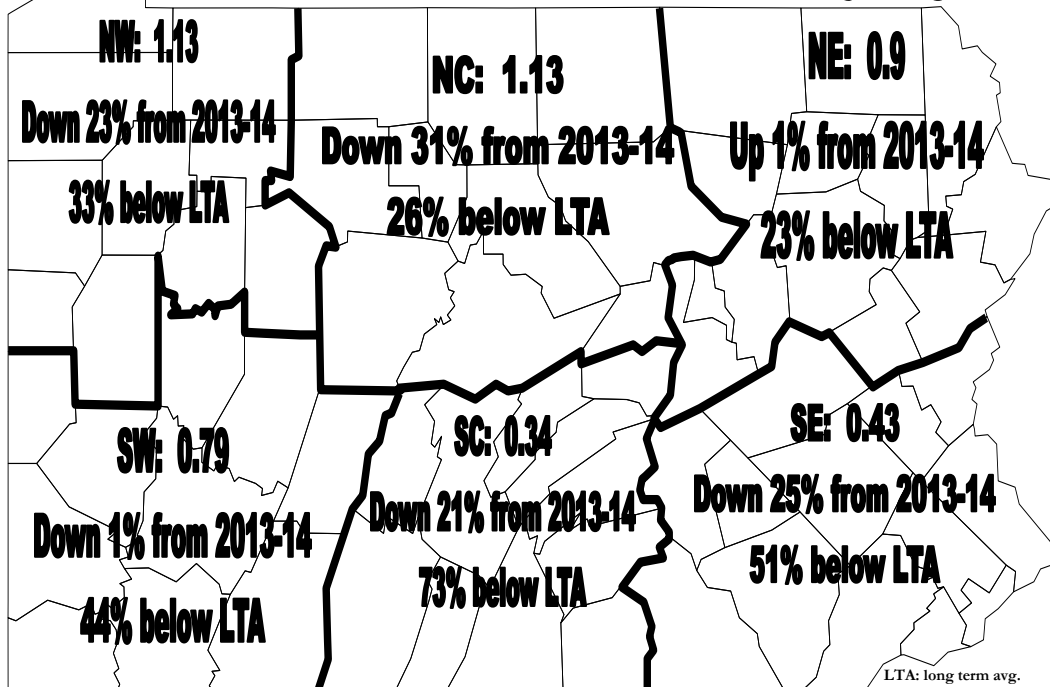
Compared to historic data, these values are low. During the good old days for grouse (the 1970s and 1980s), juveniles per adult hen ranged from a statewide low of 2.75 during the poor production year of 1983 to a high of 4.55 in 1978. From 1977-1987, the statewide average was 3.7 juveniles/hen. During this period, juveniles/hen averaged 3.42 in the NW region, 3.46 in the SW, 5.06 in the NC, 3.77 in the SC, 4.76 in the NE and 3.45 in the SE.

Historically, adult grouse made up less of the statewide harvest than they do in our 2013-15 samples. Since 2nd year breeders and older birds are typically the most-successful breeders, finding that adults accounted for 54% of the 2014-15 sample is a reason for concern. Previous biologists (Lang, Kriz and Liscinsky) cautioned that adult birds should not exceed 50% of the annual harvest.

The less-desirable numbers we saw in the 2013-15 samples compared to historic values could indicate lower springtime production in the grouse population and/or lower juvenile survival through the year. This could be from declining habitat quality compared to the 1970s-1980s, or a number of non-habitat factors such as disease, changing weather, and/or increased predator populations. I will continue investigating the impacts these issues are having.

Notable Grouse of 2014-15: Longest tail feather submitted in 2014-15 was a drummer with a 7 ¾ inch tail fan length, taken in northwest PA by C. Aldrich. Tied for second-largest birds were two drummers with 7 ½ inch tail fans, taken by R. McFate and J.Tokar. The most unique were 1 gray phase (Bowser), 2 cinnamon phases (Zukas and Powell), and one handsome intermediate bird that had ample portions of red and gray in the fan (Bowen). Thank you for submitting!

2014-2015 Grouse Flushes/Hour By Region



Grouse Season 2014-15: Poor.

Last year I predicted a below average grouse season based on declines in the Summer Sighting Survey of 2014. Unfortunately, I was right. The 2014-15 statewide flush rate of 0.94 grouse/hour is the lowest ever recorded in the 50-year history of this survey.

As you can see on the map, nearly every region saw decreases in grouse flushes per hour. The very bad news is that the NW and NC regions tanked, with one year drops of 23% and 31%. This is where many of you hunt. Even more worrisome, this is the stronghold of PA grouse production. Therefore I do not expect a recovery to normal for 2015-16.

Glancing Back / Looking Ahead

Highest Flush Rates, 2014-15:

14 grouse/hour – January 16
 13 woodcock/hour—November 6 and 22

Most Days Hunted, 2014-15:

72 days—grouse— R. Zukas for the 2nd year! (I want to be Mr. Zukas!)
 27 days—woodcock— F. Grena

Average # days Cooperators hunted grouse:

9 days

Average # days Cooperators hunted w/c:

5.5 days

2015-16 Seasons:

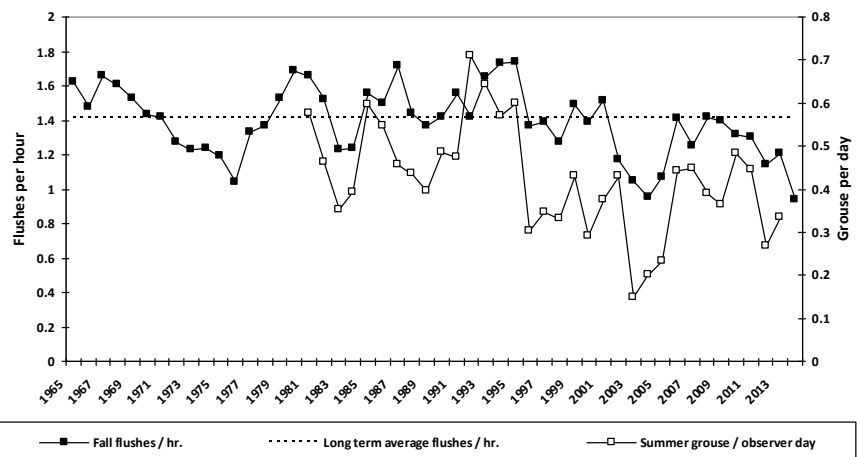
Grouse: October 17-Nov. 28

Dec. 14—24

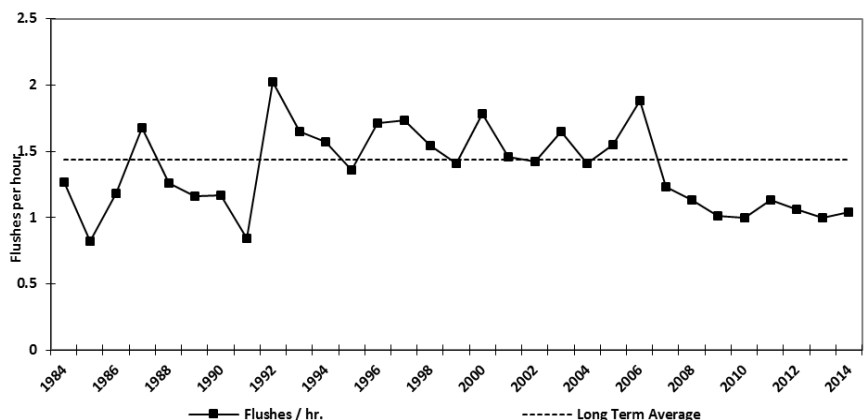
Dec. 26—Jan. 23

Woodcock: October 17—Nov. 28

Pennsylvania Grouse Flush Rates, 1965-2014



Pennsylvania Woodcock Flush Rates, 1984-2014



Grouse and Woodcock Hunter Survey—Summary Results

Thanks for completing the Grouse and Woodcock Hunter Survey!

Of 3000+ respondents (Cooperators + general hunters), the majority have hunted grouse and woodcock for more than 30 years. Most (80%) feel the current Regular Season length and bag limit for grouse is “about right,” with slightly less support for the Late Season. Of the 27% dis-satisfied with the Late Season, sentiment was about equally split between “it’s too short” and “it’s too long”. You can’t please everyone! Support for splitting grouse season regulations into a northern versus southern zone was lukewarm (58% in favor).

Satisfaction with woodcock season

length and bag limits was somewhat lower, with roughly 53% of hunters saying it’s “about right.” Most of those dissatisfied with woodcock season felt it is too long and bag limit too high.

Grouse hunters hunt more frequently on public lands than they do private lands. Yet user conflicts were not identified as a significant problem: 76% of respondents said they rarely or never experience conflicts. When conflicts arise, they are most often with other hunters—deer hunters as well as other grouse/woodcock hunters.

A full 85% of those who had an opinion felt the PGC focuses too much on other species and not enough on grouse and

woodcock. Yet 89% have never contacted the PGC to provide an opinion. You will never be heard if you do not speak!

Most grouse hunters indicated that they would like to flush 4-5 birds per day to have a satisfying hunt. Woodcock hunter desires were a bit more modest, with respondents indicating that flushing 3-4 birds per day would suffice.

In the end, 58% of woodcock hunters and 47% of grouse hunters said they are satisfied with a day’s hunt even if they do not harvest a bird. As a group, it seems that grouse and woodcock hunters understand that it’s about the hunt, not necessarily about the harvest. But we already knew that, didn’t we? :)

Grouse Disease Surveillance

West Nile Virus (WNV) is an introduced pathogen first documented in New York in 1999. Carried by mosquitoes and spread through forest systems by various bird species, WNV was found throughout Pennsylvania by 2002.

Birds are the primary group of species impacted by WNV. Some (i.e. crows) are highly vulnerable and die quickly. Others (i.e. robins) serve as resistant carriers. The impact on our ruffed grouse and woodcock has not been studied.

In Winter 2014, I began a focused study of WNV impacts on PA grouse. I’d like to note that Cooperator Richard Weaver provided some of the impetus for this study. Richard repeatedly contacted the PGC during the early years of the WNV invasion in PA. He provided detailed observations of the decline and near-disappearance of grouse in the Southeast and Southcentral regions. When I took this position in 2011, I found his old letters and graphs and began checking his theory to see if it warranted further study.

Here’s what I found: Looking back at your grouse flush rates (pg 2), it is clear that the years following 2001 are a significant period in the PA grouse decline. In fact, we have ‘missed’

two population peaks that should have occurred in roughly 2003 and 2010. Could WNV be playing a role?

I spent the winter of 2014-15 lining up a grouse propagator, a disease researcher and a WNV laboratory who would assist in the study at low or no cost. PGC wildlife vet, Justin Brown, was key in locating the expertise and the lab! Finally, the pieces were in place and a plan was ‘hatched.’ A study of WNV must begin with chicks that have never been bitten by a mosquito. The only way to ensure that is by getting them in the egg. A difficult task with our wily grouse! Could we do it?

Spring 2015 was spent trapping grouse, searching for nests and collecting eggs from around the state. Many Cooperators assisted in the nest searching (Thank You!). We were eventually able to collect enough eggs. Samples spanned the northern border all the way down to Cambria county. The next step is to collect blood from hunter-harvested grouse.

IF YOU RECEIVED A BLOOD KIT IN THIS MAILING, PLEASE TAKE THE TIME TO COLLECT AND SUBMIT A SAMPLE— OR PASS THE KIT TO SOMEONE WHO WILL USE IT! THANK YOU!

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!

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GROUSE PARTS COLLECTION SURVEY – INSTRUCTIONS

Thank you for helping with this survey! Please follow the instructions below as closely as possible so 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 (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 5 or more 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 IDENTIFY SEX OF BIRD. PLEASE SUBMIT!**
- C) Collect the three outer wing feathers from one or both wings. Do NOT

pluck or cut them. Instead, cut the wing 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 ACROSS THE SHAFT. The full length of the feathers and quills must be examined.

Preparing 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 blood or sinew is attached, dry before mailing.
- C) Wrap sample in one or two layers of paper towels for mailing.
- D) DO NOT use plastic wrap

or baggies for shipping. This leads to rot. Post Office will reject.

- E) Place ONE bird's sample in ONE envelope. Do NOT mix samples from different birds, dates or hunts into one envelope.

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.

**** IF USING YOUR OWN ENVELOPES, MAIL TO:**

**PGC GROUSE SURVEY
2001 ELMERTON AVE
HARRISBURG PA 17110-9797**

CALL 717-787-5529 for more envelopes. Leave message with your name/address.

