

FROM THE COVERTS

- FALL 2016 -

The Grouse and Woodcock Cooperators' Newsletter



PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

2001 Elmerton Avenue, Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797



The Season Ahead

Biologist's Report

I normally pick a random Cooperator to receive a prize. This year, Ken Szabo of the Loyal Order of Dedicated Grouse Hunters is offering the prize. Cut out your address label on this mailing and send to Ken Szabo [35162 Schoolhouse Ln, N. Ridgeville, OH 44039]. Those new to LODGH will get a free 1-year subscription to the Grouse Tales newsletter. Thanks Ken!



By Lisa Williams,
PGC Grouse &
Woodcock Biologist

The Season Ahead: Unfortunately, I'm predicting another modest grouse season in 2016-17. Your flush rates last year were the third lowest in 50 years. Though some parts of the state saw heavy rain in early June, nesting and brooding weather in 2016 was largely hot and dry. This should have been good for reproduction. But June 2016 brood sightings were down 28% and July brood sightings were down 88% compared to long term average. Total grouse sightings were down 26% in June compared to long term average and down 68% in July. July sightings of both broods and total grouse were the lowest recorded in 36 years. So my preliminary forecast is for another below-average grouse season.

For woodcock, the winter of 2015-16 was mild enough that many remained in southern PA. I received reports of peenting and displaying woodcock straight through the end of February! The spring survey findings were same as they've been since 2014 (~1.2 males per route). Spring surveys were followed by good weather conditions for nesting and brooding in most of the state. As always, hunting success will be largely affected by the timing of migration through PA, but I'm optimistic that you'll see plenty of action if you head afield this fall for woodcock.

Good Luck in the Coverts!

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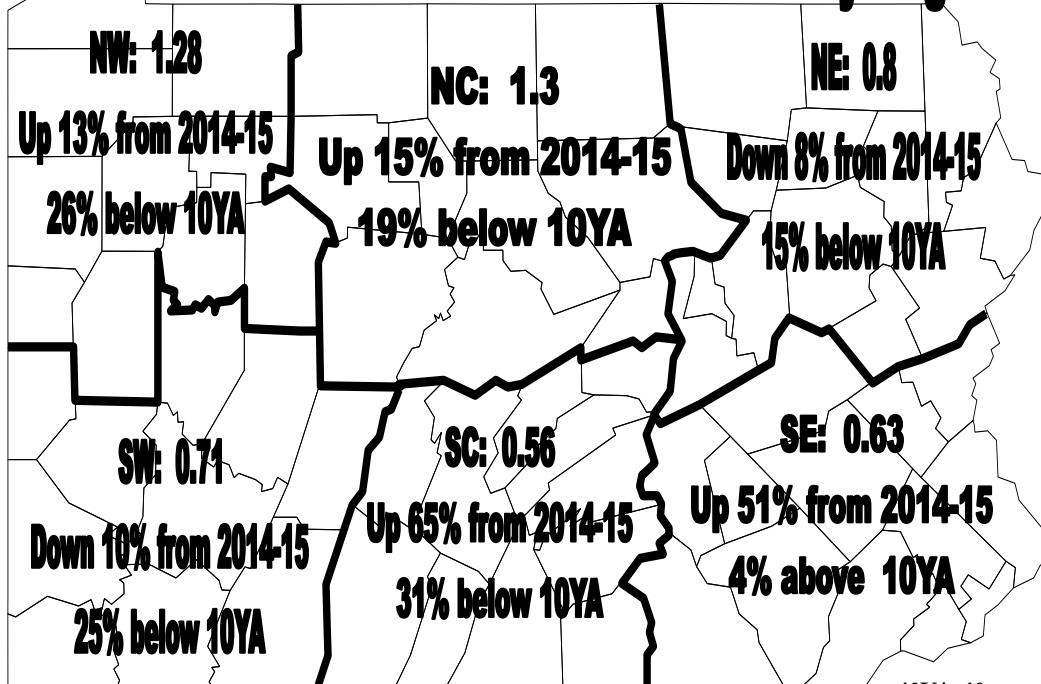
Grouse Parts Collection—2015 Results

Thank you once again for your help with the grouse parts survey! I'm a little slow on getting them done this year—budget cuts mean no biologist aides or field techs to help enter the data. But in a sub-sample of 320 birds completed so far, 283 samples had the feathers needed to determine age. Of these 283 samples, 125 were adults, 151 were juveniles and 7 were unknown age. The sample contained 1.2 juveniles per adult birds in the harvest. These 'juvenile per adult' numbers are an improvement compared to the 2014-15 samples (up 41%) and 2013-14 samples (up 20%). The all-important 'juvenile per adult hen' figures will not be calculated until all 2015-16 samples are assessed.

Of the 2015-16 sub-sample, juveniles accounted for 53% of the harvest and adults comprised 44%. Historically, adult grouse made up less of the statewide harvest than they did in our 2013-15 samples. We know that 2nd and 3rd year hens are the most-successful breeders. [In a large-scale study of turkeys, the reproductive rate of 3 year old hens was six times the rate of first year breeders! Second year hens had 3 times the reproductive rate of first year hens.] This is why previous biologists (Lang, Kriz and Liscinsky) cautioned that adult birds should not exceed 50% of the annual harvest.

The 2014-15 wing samples indicated the only time we achieved that harvest goal (adults less than 50% of harvest) was during the October season segment. (41% adults in harvest). With each passing season segment in 2014, the percent of adults increased: Adults comprised 55% of harvest in November and 62% in December. By the post-Christmas late season, a full 65% of the harvested birds were adults. I will be looking carefully at the 2015-16 wing data to see if this trend holds. The Post-Christmas season skewed toward the harvest of adults is worrisome, due to the importance of experienced breeders on reproductive rates.

2015-2016 Grouse Flushes/Hour By Region



10YA: 10-year avg.

Grouse Season 2015-16: Poor.

The 2015-16 statewide flush rate of 1.02 grouse/hr was the 3rd-lowest recorded in 50 years. 4 of 6 regions saw increases in flushes per hour, yet 5 of 6 remain below recent 10-yr averages. I am not expecting great things from the 2016-17 season. I hope I'm wrong!

Cooperator APP on the Way.

You asked. We listened. An online option for submitting hunt info will soon be here. Once completed, the 'Grouse Woodcock Survey' app will be available in Apple's 'App Store' and Google's 'Play Store'. I'll let you know of its availability via press release and email. Some of you will be asked to field test it beforehand.

The normal paper method will always be an option!

Glancing Back / Looking Ahead

The Luckiest Hour, 2015-16:

18 grouse/hour – November 11

25 woodcock/hour—October 30

Most Days Hunted, 2015-16:

Grouse:

72 days—R. Zukas for the 3rd year!

52 days—J. Powell

Woodcock:

31 days—J. Sorber

27 days—F. Grena

2016-17 Seasons:

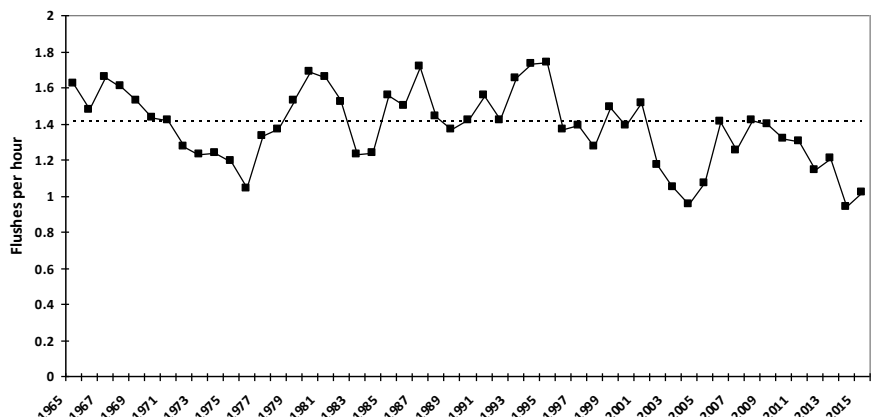
Grouse: Oct. 15—Nov. 26

Dec. 12—24

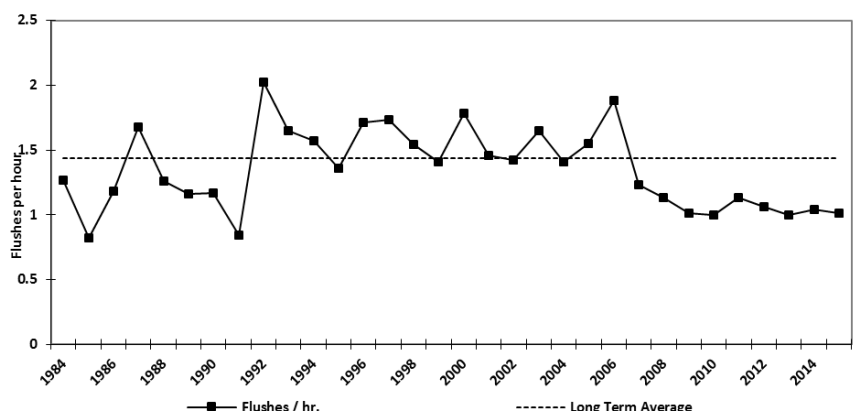
Dec. 26—Jan. 21

Woodcock: Oct. 15—Nov. 26

Pennsylvania Grouse Flush Rates, 1965-2015



Pennsylvania Woodcock Flush Rates, 1984-2015



Grouse Disease Surveillance

Most have heard of our ongoing study of West Nile Virus, but that's not the only disease investigation we're working on. Justin Brown, PGC wildlife pathologist, has strong connections to the research world. Through his work, we've been able to fill in the blanks on some other potential grouse diseases (even though we're on a shoe-string budget.)

LPDV (Lymphoproliferative Disease Virus)—This virus can cause cancer in domestic turkeys. While the virus is common in wild turkeys throughout the eastern US—infected wild turkeys only occasionally develop tumors. To check for potential grouse impacts, we collected leg bones from many of you last year. We tested the marrow and did not detect the virus in any grouse. Great news!!

Parasites—We are working with Ted Phillips, fellow Grouse Cooperator and Professor of Biology at Gannon University, and Rick Gerhold of Univ. of Tennessee to examine internal parasites of grouse. We are identifying the species and # of parasites in the ceca (part of the intestine) and looking at their role in potential disease. Collections will continue this year, so I may be contacting some of you to request carcasses with intestines intact.

West Nile Virus (WNV) - An introduced virus first found in New York in 1999. Carried by mosquitoes and spread by various bird species, WNV was found throughout PA by 2002.

Birds are the primary group of species impacted by WNV. Some (e.g. crows) are highly vulnerable and die quickly. Others (e.g. robins) serve as carriers. We

are still studying grouse impacts.

For information about the WNV study, see the September issue of Game News. You can also find summary information and study results on our website: www.pgc.state.pa.us and click through to the Grouse>>Research page.

In short, we found WNV is potentially an important driver in grouse declines, but the impact of the disease may be mitigated by abundant and high-quality habitat. As always, habitat is key!

WNV blood testing of harvested birds continues this year. **IF YOU RECEIVE BLOOD FILTER STRIPS THIS YEAR, PLEASE TAKE THE TIME TO COLLECT AND SUBMIT A SAMPLE. OR PASS THE STRIPS TO SOMEONE WHO WILL USE THEM. THANK YOU!**

Habitat, Hunting, Predation, Disease, Weather—Straws That Break the Camel's Back

With the attention paid to disease in the past year, it's important to remember this isn't the only issue impacting grouse. We can't forget the importance of other factors. Here is a rundown of the large-scale forces acting on grouse populations and what we can do about them:

Habitat Loss: PA agencies create more young forest acreage than those of most surrounding states. Yet the management of PA forest lands is barely in our control. 75% of PA forest land is privately owned and most of those owners are NOT making grouse habitat. If you really want to help grouse, educate your

neighbors and fellow hunters about the value of active and responsible forest management. We are loving our forests to death – death by old age. There are plenty of web resources to help with your education efforts. Start with www.youngforest.org

Predation: The management of avian predators is not in the control of the PGC. The management of terrestrial predators is directly in the control of PA hunters and fur takers.

Severe Weather: Cold wet springs can reduce brood survival due to decreased insect availability or outright exposure. Unfortunately, hot dry summers benefit

species of WNV mosquito that breed in stagnant water.

Hunting: Not thought to suppress populations in abundant, high-quality habitat. But most of PA no longer boasts ideal grouse habitat. Hunting is the only mortality factor we can directly control. We are currently re-assessing the appropriate season length for grouse.

West Nile Virus: Another weight on the camel's back. The PGC is upholding our public trust responsibility by working to understand how important this new factor is for grouse. Unfortunately, at this time there is nothing we can do to control WNV in wild populations.

Please help recruit grouse hunters in the NE, SE, SC, AND SW REGIONS who might be willing to submit feathers or blood strips. 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 1 or 2 central tail feathers from each bird (see diagram). If you don't want to submit a tail feather, please submit rump and wing feathers. Rumps & wings are the best samples.
- B) Pluck 5 or more rump feathers (see diagram for location). Rump feathers are located centrally 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, dislocate the wing at the outer joint (see diagram). Do not separate the 3 feathers.

- 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 as needed. If blood or sinew is attached, dry before mailing. Do not mail wet.
- B) Do NOT send the meaty part of the wing, just the outer joint and primaries.
- 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.

Labeling Postage Paid Envelopes

– It is important to provide your Name, County and Township of kill, WMU of kill, and Date of hunt.

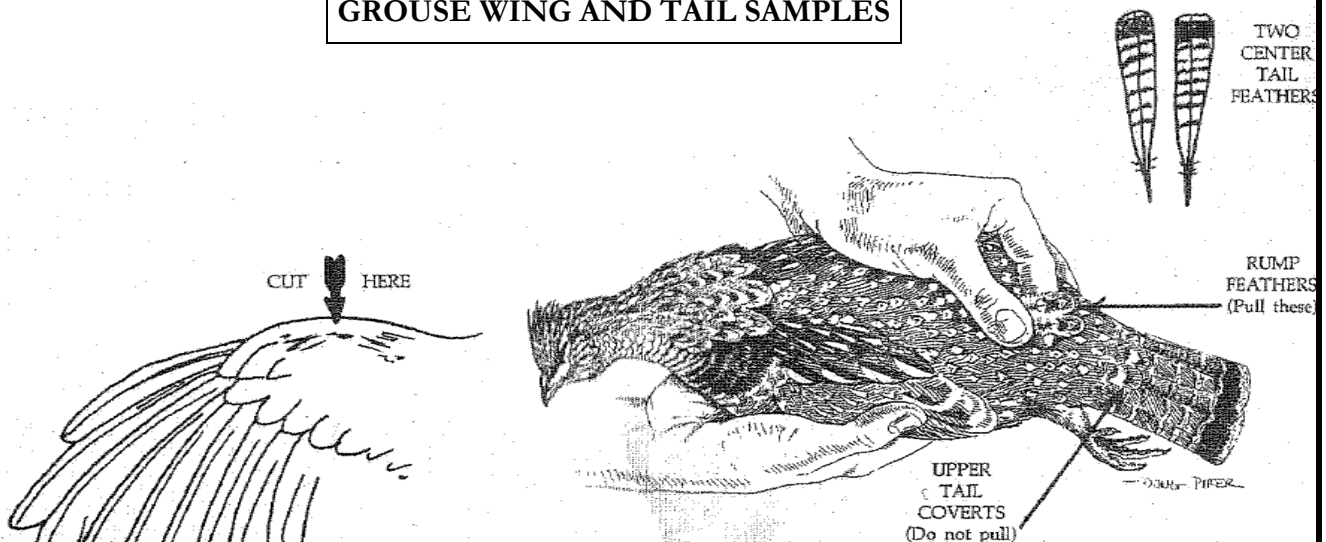
**** MAIL SAMPLES TO:**

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

Call 717-787-5529 for more envelopes. Please leave message with your name & address.

THANKS FOR YOUR HELP!!!

GROUSE WING AND TAIL SAMPLES



DRAWING ABOVE SHOWS how and where to pluck rump feathers which can indicate sex of grouse; one dot is typical of females, two or three dots, male.