

# FROM THE COVERTS

- FALL 2017 -

The Grouse and Woodcock Cooperators' Newsletter



**PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION**

2001 Elmerton Avenue, Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797



## Biologist's Report

THANK YOU. In January 2017, I made the controversial recommendation to close the Late Season for grouse. Then I braced for a public outcry. 220 of you provided written comments. You wrote with passion and with regret. Some of you wrote in anger. In the end, 72% of you supported the closure of the Late Season in the hopes that sacrifice now will help future populations. I thank you for your support and for taking the time to relay your passion for grouse hunting to the PGC Commissioners. They heard you!



By Lisa Williams,  
PGC Grouse &  
Woodcock Biologist

There is a lot of bad news with PA grouse. Cold wet weather dominated the late spring when chicks were hatching. In Centre county, it rained nearly every day, May 27 – June 6. On top of that, Spring 2017 was a record early year for WNV detection in PA, followed by an overly wet summer. A recent update from DEP indicated that WNV detection is occurring at levels well-above their 10-year average. Finally, we are facing a winter with no post-Christmas hunt for the first time since 1960. But, we will keep the faith. Optimism paired with hard work is the only way forward.

I am focused on a 3-prong attack of managing habitat, harvest and disease. We must stack the deck in favor of grouse. The problems are daunting, but we will fight to give grouse their best chance. Working hard while working smart is our best weapon. If this can be solved, we will do it. Onward!

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## Cooperators Take Note

The PGC relies heavily on your Cooperator data. Your hunting logs serve as long term indicators of grouse populations in good habitat, and PA's data stretching back to 1965 is quite valuable. The more info the better: Please send in your hunt results no matter how often you hunt or how many birds you flush.

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

**Neighboring States:** PA is not alone in our grouse decline. In 2016-17, grouse flushes per hour decreased in all nearby states: OH, KY, MD, NY, VA, WV. This drop followed the slight bump in numbers that occurred in the Mid-Atlantic region in 2015-16. Though grouse biologists hoped that the 2015 bump might be the beginning of a regional recovery, that did not occur. The synchrony in grouse trends is further evidence that a large-scale and annually varying force is driving populations. Hence our continued focus on West Nile Virus.

**Cooperator App:** You asked. We answered. To make the Cooperator Survey simpler for some, our PGC technical team developed a mobile app for reporting grouse and woodcock hunts. Last year the app received data on 1,000+ hours of hunts. So I guess you liked it! Like all apps, changes have been made to simplify user experience and to improve the data I receive. **YOU WILL NEED TO DOWNLOAD and/or UPDATE THE APP BEFORE USING IT THIS YEAR.** To do this, go to the App Store (iPhone) or Google Play Store (Android) and search for 'Grouse Woodcock Survey'. You will be required to provide an email and verify your contact information so the app can provide you an end-of-season report. New features: Contact the Biologist email option, end of season report emailed to you, and running stats on flushes per hour kept for you. Enjoy!

**Grouse Film Wins National Recognition:** The 10-minute video detailing our Grouse/West Nile Virus research was chosen as an Entry and now a "Select" film of the American Conservation Film Festival. It will be screened in New York City. A real honor for our video team who put such care into making this film! You can find it on our website under 'Recent Videos'.

## LIMITED WING COLLECTION THIS YEAR

Most of you are not receiving wing collection envelopes this year. The 4-yr grouse parts collection survey has provided valuable information on sex and age ratios in the harvest. We have confirmed declines in juveniles as a proportion of harvest and decreases in juveniles per adult hen compared to historic grouse populations. Now the focus is on improving the situation through a combination of harvest and habitat management.

I will repeat the statewide parts collection survey in future in hopes we find more juveniles in our samples. But for now:

1. If you have wing envelopes left over from last year, please send in samples: wings, rump feathers and central tail feather. Use up the envelopes that are out there!
2. If you received a blood filter kit(s) and wing envelope(s) in [this](#) mailing, please send in blood and feather samples (wings, rumps, tail feathers).

## THE MAKING OF A PASSIONATE HUNTER

The best advocates for grouse and woodcock are passionate hunters. So how do you create a passionate grouse or woodcock hunter? It takes one to make one!

The folks in the RGS Allegheny Chapter broke the mold on meaningful hunter recruitment this summer when they offered an intensive, multi-day training program for new grouse and woodcock hunters. Richard Elliott and his team designed a program organized into multiple days: gun handling & safety, grouse and woodcock biology & habitat information, and dog handling. The capstone occurs this fall when graduates take part in a wild bird hunt accompanied by an experienced hunter and bird dog.

By meeting over multiple days and building real relationships between experienced and new hunters, I think this approach will be very effective. If you are interested in organizing a similar course in another part of the state, I encourage you to contact the Allegheny Chapter of RGS to learn how to proceed.

**WEST NILE VIRUS UPDATE:** Summer 2017 brought us another very bad year of West Nile Virus (WNV). PA had record-early cases in April, and above-average detections in DEP surveillance efforts continued through summer. I spent the summer trapping mosquitoes on SGL 176 (Scotia Barrens) in Centre county, looking for WNV carriers. In all, we found 8 species that can carry WNV and also bite birds. The mosquito *Culex restuans*, a primary carrier of WNV, was detected at every trap site on SGL 176. Having this mosquito in grouse habitat is not good news for grouse. WNV was detected in our *C. restuans* samples in mid-July, confirming that WNV occurs in deep woods grouse habitat, not just in areas near human development where it is most-often found. By looking at mosquitoes, I hope to learn something about how WNV occurs on the landscape—info that can improve our ability to site grouse habitat projects.

## Loyal Order of The Dedicated Grouse Hunter — Free Membership Offer

Ken Szabo of the LODGH is once again offering a free 1-year membership to any PGC Grouse Cooperator who is not currently enrolled in this great organization. This membership gets you a subscription to Grouse Tales, the long-running newsletter of the LODGH that contains grouse news items as well as first-person hunter observations from across the grouse range. To take advantage of Ken's offer, just clip your mailing address from this newsletter or send a note to: GROUSE TALES, 35162 Schoolhouse Lane, N. Ridgeville, OH 44039.

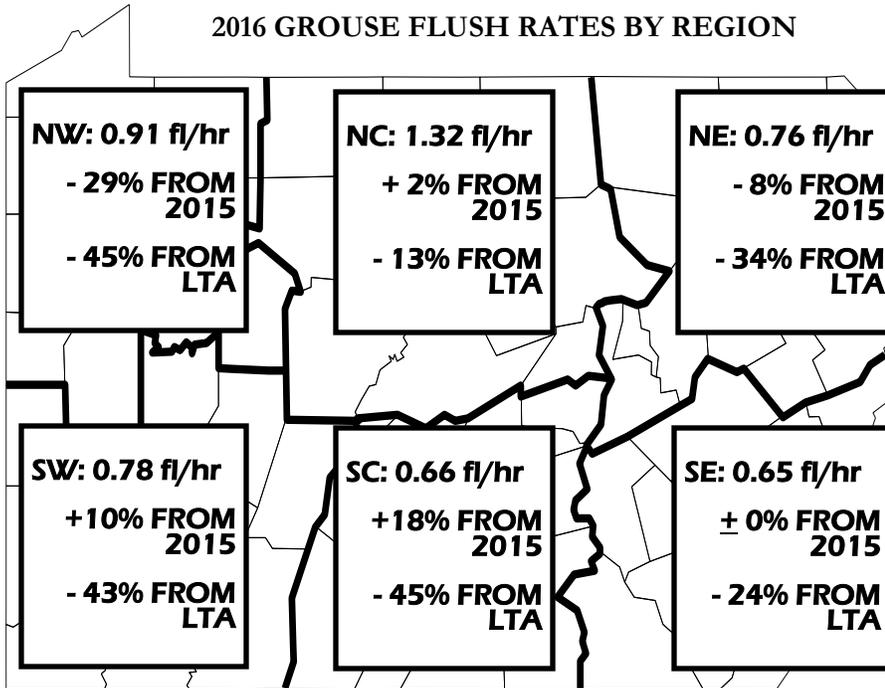
## PGC HABITAT MATTERS

Some of the Game Commission's habitat management accomplishments for 2016-17:

- 8,549 acres of forest commercially harvested on Game Lands (a 40% increase from previous 10 year average)
- More than 1,200 acres of non-commercial forest harvests on Game Lands
- 13,490 acres improved through controlled burning, 11,576 in critical grouse habitat

PGC has plans in motion to nearly double our harvest acres over the next several years. This will be accomplished by staffing of new forest technicians in the field. These foresters will be key in setting up additional forest management projects to benefit forest wildlife.

## 2016 GROUSE FLUSH RATES BY REGION



**Grouse Season 2017-18: Poor.** The 2016-17 statewide flush rate of 0.94 grouse/hr was the 2nd-lowest recorded in 50 years. With 2016 and 2017 brood sightings at near-record lows, I am not expecting a robust recovery in the 2017-2018 season. Though hunters who know where to look will always find hot spots.

### Responsive Grouse Management

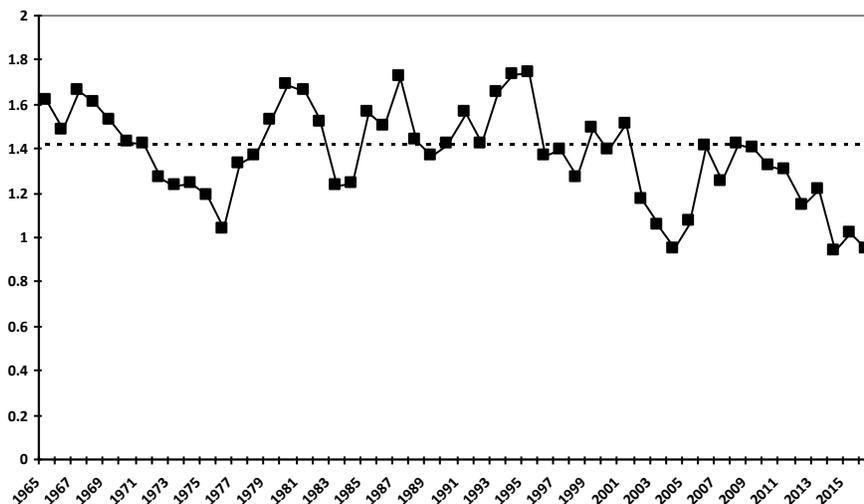
For 2017-18, there is NO post-Christmas season. This is an attempt to carry more birds into the 2018 breeding population. In addition to wanting more breeding birds, we also want the 'right' birds. Population modeling indicates that increasing the proportion of WNV-resistant birds in the breeding population will help fuel future population growth. Since many birds harvested after Christmas are WNV survivors, reducing late season harvest is prudent.

As promised, I have drafted a new season-setting framework which responds as grouse populations rise and fall over time. The framework is under review by PGC senior staff at this time.

If approved, the framework triggers a conservative season (no post-Christmas hunt) during years of low grouse abundance and productivity. It triggers a liberal season (4 weeks post-Christmas) during years of high abundance, and it recommends a moderate season (1 week post-Christmas) during average to moderate years.

The framework divides PA into 2 zones, with the 7 WMUs in core grouse range having different thresholds and triggers than the other 16 WMUs. Press releases and the web-streaming of the January and April Commission meetings will provide more details. A public comment period will occur.

## PA GROUSE FLUSH RATES, 1965-2016



### 2017-18 SEASONS

#### GROUSE

Oct. 14 – Nov. 25

Dec. 11—23

(2 daily, 6 possession)

No Post-Christmas season

#### WOODCOCK

Oct. 14 - Nov. 25

(3 daily, 9 possession)

**GOOD LUCK IN THE**

**COVERTS!**

## Woodcock 2016: Best in 10 Years!

I hope you were able to chase the “little russet feller” in 2016. If you did, you may have experienced the best hunting in a decade!

In the 2016 season, Woodcock Co-operators averaged 1.4 flushes per hour. This is the highest we’ve seen since 2006. Many hunters reported 20+ bird days, with one lucky fellow being treated to the sight of 48 flushes in 4.5 hours of hunting!

The 646 woodcock hunts you reported averaged just under 3 hours in length and you flushed between 3-4 birds in that time. On average, the 2016 season required 4.4 hours of hunting for every woodcock bagged.

Breeding woodcock numbers in PA continue to hold steady at roughly 1.2 singing males per survey route, according to the 2017 Federal Singing Ground Survey. At the Region level, 2017 results show slight decline (2.4 males/route compared to 2.6 in 2016).

PA woodcock hunters outnumbered those of all other states in the Eastern Management Unit, with 6,300 active hunters, according to US Fish and Wildlife Service figures. PA-harvested woodcock made up 9% of all harvested birds in the 17-state Eastern Region. PA ranked first among Eastern states in woodcock hunter effort (18,200 days afield). With this level of hunting pressure,

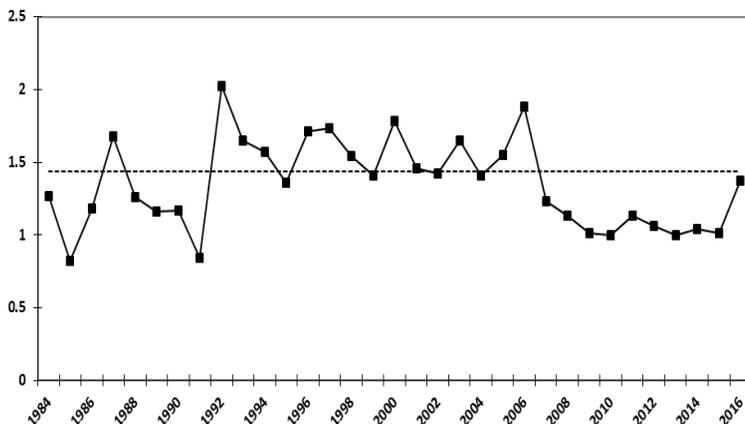
it’s clear that providing high-quality habitat should be a major emphasis of woodcock management in PA.

### Further proof that Habitat matters!

Federal singing ground figures are from randomly-chosen sites that may or may not have suitable habitat nearby. Based on our surveys in managed habitat sites, PGC and other partners involved in Young Forest restoration are supporting 7 to 9 times the number of breeding woodcock as occur along the Federal routes!



PA WOODCOCK FLUSH RATES, 1965-2016



I was fortunate enough to experience a 20+ woodcock day last fall. I had my young setter with me, and I can attest to the power of woodcock to train a pointing dog!

In the morning ‘Ruffed Mountain Chief’ was running through cover too quickly—obviously bumping birds left and right. All adrenaline and no sense . . . his field trial predecessors must have been rolling in their graves.

By afternoon, the game was beginning to make more sense. He was flash pointing. Progress, but . . .

With his lack of wild bird experience I was unsure how to handle it . . . Replace and steady him each time? Or use this day to let him learn to love the game on his own? An inexperienced dog and handler is a bad combination!

Luckily, by the end of the day, the woodcock had made their point: Be steady or be left behind. Woodcock # 20 cemented the lesson. We were able to shoot his first pointed woodcock!

Professor Timberdoodle schooled another student....

## Woodcock Migration Telemetry Coming to the Eastern US?!

Exciting news this summer as plans are coming together to conduct woodcock migration research in the East, using satellite telemetry. Many of you are familiar with the project that has been conducted in the central US, with migration maps featured on the Ruffed Grouse Society’s webpage. A similar project with our Eastern birds will reveal the same important management information: timing of spring and fall migration, reproduction, annual survival, harvest, details on migratory flyways and the critical stopover sites that birds rely on during migration. All of this information will have important management implications and be quite valuable to those of us charged with stewarding populations. The Pennsylvania Game Commission plans to be actively involved in this project, so stay tuned for more information!