

# FROM THE COVERTS

- FALL 2018 -

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 two prizes! 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. And one lucky hunter will receive a beautifully embroidered hunting cap. Thanks Ken!



*By Lisa Williams,  
PGC Grouse &  
Woodcock Biologist*

**The Season Ahead:** Unfortunately, I'm predicting another modest grouse season in 2018. Your flush rates last year were the lowest in 53 years. Brood prospects were not much better, with torrential and frequent rains occurring throughout much of the summer and much of the state. June observations of adult grouse were up 25% compared to 2017, and chicks per hen in the 26 broods observed was a healthy 3.6 chicks/hen. However, observations of broods in July were down 42% from last year., suggesting that low survival may suppress recruitment into the fall population.

For woodcock, spring survey findings were roughly the same as they've been since 2014 (~1.2 males per route). Your fall flush rates were down quite a bit from 2016, but 2016 was a very high year. So essentially, 2017 was a return to the recent 'normal' for woodcock flush rates. I feel like woodcock squeaked their broods out before the serious rains began this summer, so I'm optimistic they had good production this year. As always, hunting success will be largely affected by the timing of migration through PA, but I think you'll see plenty of action if you reserve a few days this fall for chasing woodcock.

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

*Good Luck in the Coverts!*

I AM TIRED OF WEST NILE VIRUS. Can I say that out loud? I am tired of the steady stream of bad news. I bet you are too. And I am REALLY tired of being the messenger!

If you are receiving this mailing, I know you train dogs or maintain shotguns in anticipation of the unique magic of thundering grouse wings. I do too. So how do we keep our chins up when the news around us is bleak? I do it by focusing on the info we need to make headway against this threat.

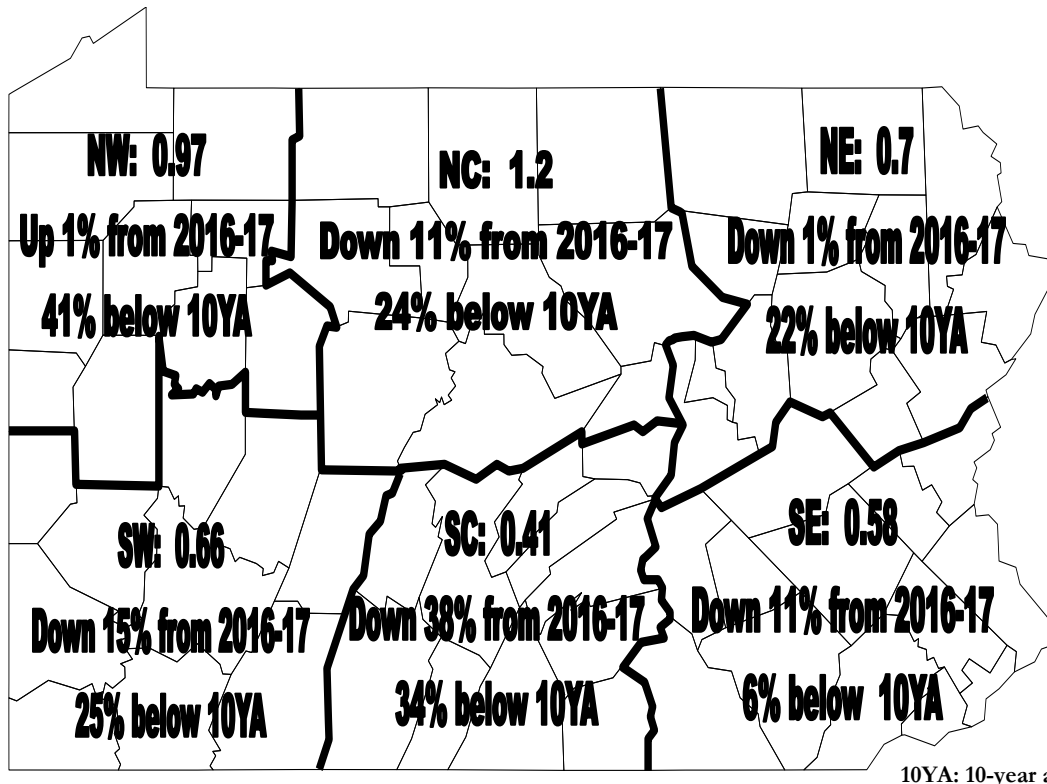
What will 'making headway' look like? How do we fight a disease carried on the tiny wings of countless mosquitoes? We fight it as we have always fought threats to grouse—by working hard to make high-quality habitat. But we **MUST** work smarter, not just harder.

Working smart means understanding the scope and scale of the problem. Read about how we are attacking that question on Page 3.

Working smart means putting habitat in places where grouse can take advantage of new opportunities. When I talk to foresters now, I talk about building habitat where we already have grouse nearby to serve as source populations. Knowing that grouse only disperse a few miles in their entire lives means that we should build habitat near good habitat.

Working smart means putting habitat in places where West Nile Virus risk is lower and where grouse are more likely to survive. We are continuing to collect blood samples to see where grouse are surviving WNV. We are building maps that can guide our habitat efforts. And we are collecting mosquitoes on Game Lands to see if there are landscape barriers to the disease that we can take advantage of.

The best antidote to bad news and bad moods is to stay busy. Let's stay focused on what we **CAN** do—working harder **AND** smarter.



## Grouse Season 2018:

**Poor.** The 2017-18 statewide flush rate of 0.88 grouse/hr was the lowest since record-keeping began in 1965.

June 2018 brood observations were comparable to June 2017, but July sightings were down 42% from 2017. With low flush rates and low summer sightings, I expect poor prospects for 2018.

Local hotspots are out there but will be tough to find.

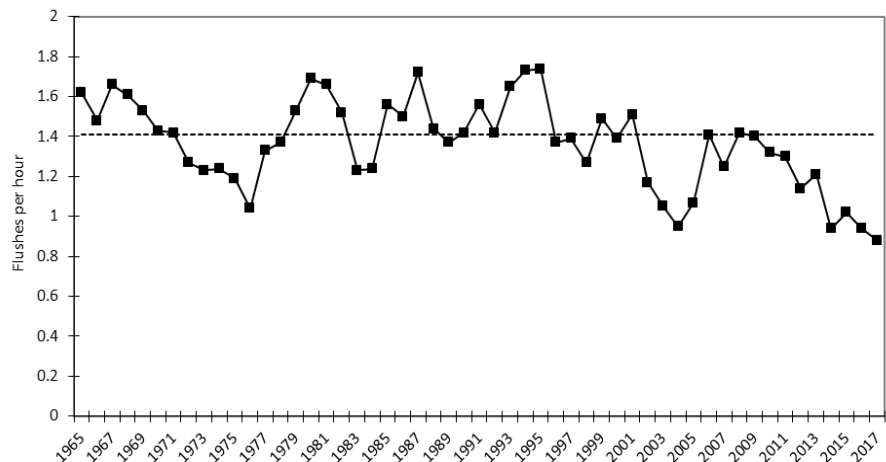
## Woodcock Research:

The PGC plans to put satellite transmitters on woodcock in Sept/Oct as part of a large scale study of migration movement, habitat use and survival. We plan to make study info available on our website by linking to RGS or Univ of Maine project leader's site. So stay tuned and wish us luck in capturing the li'l russet fellers!

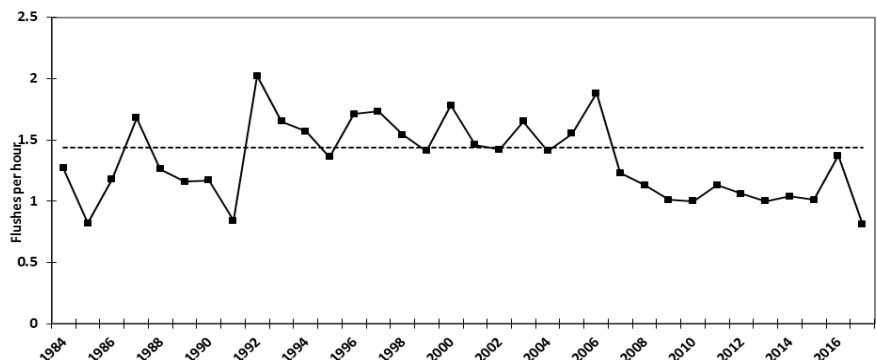
## Woodcock Numbers:

Your flush rates averaged 0.81 flushes/hour. This flush rate is down 41% from 2016 and the lowest PA hunters have seen since 1985 and 1991. Spring survey data did not change considerably between 2016 and 2017, so it is likely this decrease (or the 2016 increase) in flush rates was due to the timing of migration through PA, rather than dramatic population changes.

Grouse Flush Rates, 1965-2017



Woodcock Flush Rates, 1984-2017



## Multi-State West Nile Virus Surveillance—First of its kind Research!!

In response to back-to-back years of high West Nile Virus prevalence in 2017 and 2018—and grouse population declines in the Great Lakes region in 2017—a large-scale research project is underway.

State agencies in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Appalachians, and the Great Lakes regions, as well as partners in Canada, are collaborating on the most-comprehensive grouse disease sampling effort ever conducted.

Wildlife health experts and the Southeastern Cooperative

Wildlife Disease Study (SCWDS) are working with state grouse biologists to collect hunter-harvested blood samples from across the ruffed grouse range.

This project will estimate regional patterns in West Nile virus infection rates in wild grouse. This will help managers across the grouse range by shedding light on the potential for WNV to impact grouse populations in their areas.

Researchers will also collect information on sex and age of birds in the harvest (i.e. age

structure). Juvenile to adult ratios (i.e. recruitment of young birds into the fall population) are an important index to the well-being of a population.

So even beyond disease surveillance, this is an exciting opportunity to ‘take the temperature’ of grouse populations, range-wide!

**IF YOU RECEIVE BLOOD FILTER STRIPS THIS YEAR, PLEASE COLLECT A SAMPLE OR PASS THEM TO SOMEONE WHO WILL USE THEM.**

## Habitat, Hunting, Predation, Disease, Weather—Straws Weighing on the Camel’s Back

With the attention paid to disease in recent years, it’s important to remember there are many issues impacting grouse. 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](http://www.youngforest.org)

**Predation:** Predators have taken their share of grouse since time began. In good habitat with healthy populations, grouse can withstand predation pressure. Improving habitat and mitigating disease is the best long-term approach to minimizing predator effects.

**Severe Weather:** Cold wet spring weather can reduce brood survival through decreased insect availability or outright exposure. Hot dry summers benefit WNV mosquitos that breed in stagnant water. Habitats stocked with abundant

food and secure cover can help grouse weather the storms.

**Hunting:** Hunting does not suppress populations in abundant, high-quality habitat. But most of PA no longer boasts ideal grouse habitat. At the same time our grouse face unprecedented threats. The Game Commission is attempting to reduce hunting pressure on grouse populations by reducing season length when grouse numbers are low.

**Disease:** Disease can have widespread impacts on populations. But PA preliminary data suggests that high-quality habitat seems to support more survivors. Research on this issue is ongoing.

***Habitat Matters!***

***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 BLOOD and FEATHER COLLECTION - IF YOU HARVEST A GROUSE

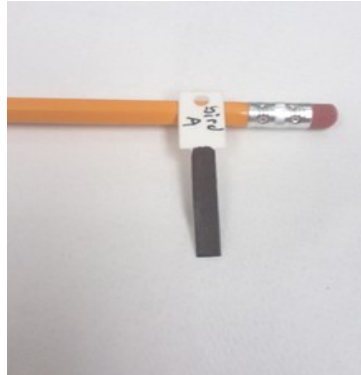
### Collecting Blood Sample:

This should be done within 30 minutes of grouse harvest. If that's not possible, collect as soon as possible after harvest.

1. Hold wide end of the filter strip with your fingers.
2. Dip the narrow end of the strip into fresh blood. This blood can be from anywhere in the carcass.
3. Soak the strip until **both** sides are saturated with blood.
4. Place the blood-soaked strip in small bag and seal. You can now carry it during your hunt. Air-dry strip after hunt.

If you harvested grouse in the past 2 years and did not receive a blood filter strip, Call 717-787-5529. Leave message with request for kit and your name & address.

### Drying Sample:



1. Prop the strip up on a pen or pencil to allow both sides to dry.
2. Leave the strip out at room temperature in a protected place for 2 days.
3. Do not place the strip in direct sunlight.
4. After the strip has thoroughly dried for 2 days on both sides, place it back in the same small bag.
5. If you harvest multiple birds, be sure to match the correct blood samples with the correct bird.

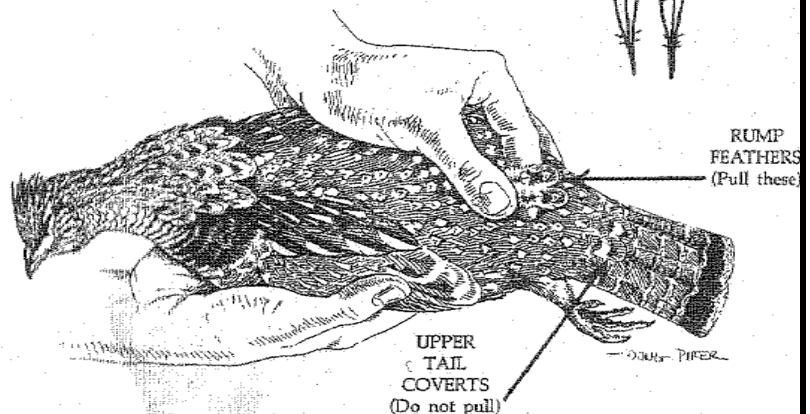
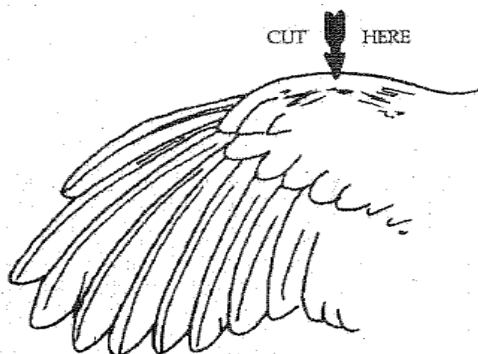
### Collecting Feather Samples:

1. Pluck 1 or 2 central tail feathers. If you don't want to submit a tail feather, please submit rump + wing feathers.
2. Pluck 5-10 rump feathers (see diagram for location). Rump feathers are located centrally on the lumbar portion of the back and do not extend onto the tail. **THESE FEATHERS IDENTIFY SEX OF BIRD. PLEASE SUBMIT!**
3. Collect the three outer wing feathers from one or both wings. Detach wing at the outer joint (see diagram). Do **NOT CUT** feathers across shaft—full length needed.

**Labeling Envelopes** – Please provide all info requested.

***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.