

Wildlife Express!

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Grouse

April 2010

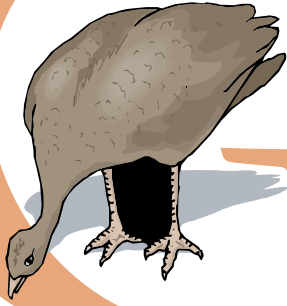


The Dancing Grouse



Photo courtesy Terry R. Thomas, © April 2010

Let's Talk About



ROUSE

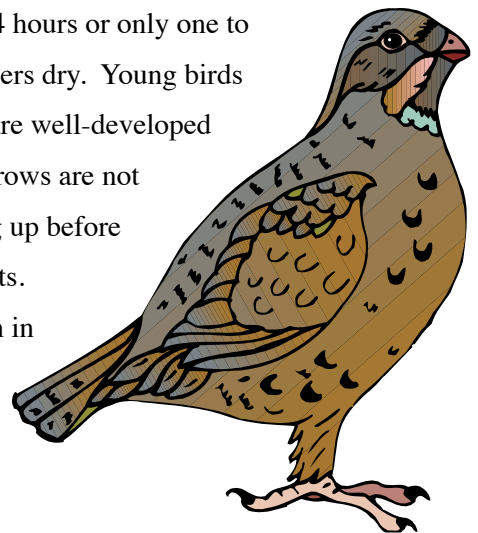
Have you ever had a quiet hike interrupted by an exploding bird? If so, you may have met a member of the grouse family. While they do not really explode, their sudden get-away right at your feet seems like a feathered explosion. In fact, this sudden rapid flight is common in this family of birds. Their short, rounded wings can beat very fast. This lets the bird fly into the air very suddenly. Just like it startles you, it can also startle a predator long enough for the bird to fly away to safety.

Grouse belong to a large group of birds called “galliforms.” This includes birds like turkeys, quail, and grouse. They are all ground-dwelling birds that feed mostly on plants. About 183 species of galliform birds live around the world on every continent except Antarctica and South America. Twelve species are native to North America. Here in Idaho, we have five native grouse species. Several other species such as ring-necked pheasant, chukar, and gray partridge are not native, they have been introduced to Idaho and other states as game birds.

As a family, grouse are well camouflaged. Their colors are mainly brown, tan, buff, gray, black, and white. Because they spend a lot of time on the ground, being camouflaged is very important. Three members of the grouse family, called ptarmigan (TAR-mi-gan) even turn white in the winter. As the winter ends, the ptarmigan begin to lose their white feathers and grow brown ones. When the snow starts flying in the fall, the ptarmigan turn white again. Grouse also nest on the ground. Camouflaged or “cryptic” colors help the female stay hidden as she incubates her eggs.

If you find a grouse nest, you will probably not think it is much of a nest. Usually, it is just a scrape on the ground under a shrub or at the base of a tree. It is used only for incubation and hatching. As soon as the eggs hatch, the chicks leave the nest with their mother. This can take as long as 24 hours or only one to three hours. Young grouse can walk, run, and find food as soon as their feathers dry. Young birds that can do this are called “precocial” (pre-CO-shall). This means that they are well-developed when they hatch and leave their nest quickly. Songbirds like robins and sparrows are not precocial. They are kind of like you, having to hang around the nest growing up before they can leave home. Grouse chicks grow quickly by eating insects and plants. They will stay with their mother through the summer and set off on their own in the fall.

Grouse are secretive birds except in the spring when the males of some species put on pretty impressive courtship displays. These displays are considered one of nature’s most amazing wildlife spectacles!





Hey Baby ...

In the bird world, it is the handsomest guy with the coolest moves and the prettiest song that gets the girls. Male grouse put on quite a show to attract the hens. First, there are the sounds: hoots, pops, scrapes, rasps, drumming, and stamping. Then there are the moves: wing fluttering, foot stamping, wing beating, leaping, tail fanning, and bows. Finally, the look: tail fans, colorful air sacs, ruffs around necks, decorative feathers, and colorful eyebrow combs. Put this all together and you have an impressive courtship display that is sure to attract attention.

Species such as sage grouse and sharp-tailed grouse use an area called a “lek” for their displays. This is a small, open area where a group of males gather to display for the hens. They are also trying to impress one another. Sometimes, fights between males break out if they get too close or a hen walks nearby. Older birds often have the most impressive displays and are the most likely to attract a mate. Leks are sometimes used for many years. Because of this, biologists can keep track of grouse populations by observing the number of grouse using a lek. Grouse

that use leks usually display very early in the morning when it is quiet. This allows for their booming and popping sounds to be heard for a long way. Sage grouse can be heard three miles away!

Forest grouse like ruffed and dusky grouse do not gather on leks. Instead, they display by themselves. Dusky grouse have air sacs that make a soft hooting sound. They also fan their tails and display their colorful eyebrow-like combs to attract attention. Ruffed grouse beat their wings very quickly, making a drumming sound that can be heard a quarter-mile away. The small spruce grouse makes its courtship swishing and clapping sounds by using its wings and tail.

The courtship displays of grouse, especially on leks have impressed humans for many years. Some Native American tribes based their dances on those of sage and sharp-tailed grouse. Today, birdwatchers eagerly await the springtime gatherings of these remarkable birds.



Sounds of Spring!

Spring brings many sounds including birdsong. Birds begin to sing in the spring to establish a territory and attract a mate. Some of these songs are very simple and others are very complex. If you take the time to listen, you can learn to identify birds by their songs and calls. This is called “birding by ear.” Start by focusing on one or two songs that you hear a lot. Do they have a rhythm? Do the notes change? Does the song sound like words? Putting the song into words can be very helpful when learning birdsongs. Here are a few descriptions of the songs of some common birds---see if you can hear them in your yard or neighborhood:

Black-capped Chickadee

Killdeer

Northern Flicker

American Goldfinch

American Robin

Yellow Warbler

Mourning Dove

*“Cheese-burger” &
“chick-a-dee, dee, dee”*

“killdeer, killdeer, killdeer”

“flicka, flicka, flicka”

“potato chip, potato chip”

“cheerily cheer, cheer-up, cheer-up”

“sweet, sweet, I’m so sweet”

“hooooo-la, hoop, hoop, hoop”

Take a trip to check out grouse habitat near you to see if you can see or hear grouse. Bird watching groups like Audubon clubs often plan spring trips to watch sage grouse displaying on their leks. Contact your local Fish and Game office to learn about these groups. If you are lucky enough to live near a landowner that has a sage grouse or sharp-tailed grouse lek on their property, talk to them to see if they allow visitors. They may be willing to take you and your family out to see the grouse. You will have to get up very early so you can arrive near the lek before the birds begin displaying. Stay in your vehicle and be very quiet so you do not disturb the birds. Bring binoculars, a camera, snacks and water, and dress warmly. Even though it is spring, it can be cold early in the morning. Watching these large grouse displaying on their lek is an unforgettable experience. Here in Idaho, we are lucky to have the chance to watch this springtime display.



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Ruffed Grouse

The ruffed grouse is a medium-sized grouse weighing a little over one pound. They live in thick, mixed forests of pine, aspen, and other deciduous trees. With their mottled gray, brown, buff, and black feathers, they are well camouflaged. You can see ruffed grouse in northern, central, and southeastern Idaho.

Ruffed grouse eat a variety of plant materials including leaves, berries, twigs, buds, and catkins. Insects are also eaten, but mostly by the chicks in the summer. During the winter, the scales on ruffed grouse feet get larger and act like snowshoes, helping the grouse get around in the snow. To avoid winter cold, these grouse use what is called a “snow roost.” The bird buries itself in the snow which acts as insulation, keeping the bird warm on cold winter nights.

Ruffed grouse are well known for their drumming courtship displays. A male will often stand on a log when drumming. As the bird flaps its wings, it cups air between its chest and the wing surface. This makes a sound wave that we hear as drumming. People who hear ruffed grouse, often say they feel the drumming before they actually hear it. Listen for ruffed grouse drumming in April and May.



Photo courtesy David Musil

Dusky Grouse

This large grouse is a bird of the western United States. It is twice the size of the ruffed grouse and lives in open forests of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees. Males are bluish-gray and females are brownish-gray. This species used to be called the blue grouse because of the color of the male. Dusky grouse live in northern and central Idaho.



Photo courtesy Gregory Lowell

During the summer, dusky grouse eat leaves, flowers, buds, berries, and insects like grasshoppers, ants, and beetles. Unlike most birds, when winter comes dusky grouse move up into the mountains instead of down where it is warmer. This backwards migration brings the grouse into its evergreen forest winter habitat. Few other birds spend the winter in this cold environment, so the grouse do not have to compete with many other species to find food. After a winter of eating the needles and buds of pine, fir, and spruce trees, the grouse head back down the mountains for the summer.

Spruce Grouse

The solitary, little spruce grouse is Idaho's smallest grouse. While they can be seen in northern and central Idaho, you will need to search the evergreen forests at higher elevations to find them. Spruce grouse are a very dark-colored bird



Photo courtesy Pete Zimowsky

with white speckling or barring on their lower chest and belly. Females are dark brown in color.

Spruce grouse live on a diet of mostly pine, spruce, and fir needles. Their beak is specially adapted to clip off these needles. If you have ever nibbled on a pine needle, you know how bitter they taste. This bitterness is caused by chemicals that are toxic to many animals. The digestive system of spruce grouse has adapted to

handle these chemicals. During the winter when evergreen needles are the only source of food, the digestive tract of spruce grouse grows in size and length so the birds can digest the larger amount of food needed to survive cold winter nights. These grouse are able to store up to 10% of their body weight in food. This food is digested overnight. That would be like an 80-pound 5th grader eating eight pounds of food every night before bed!

Sharp-tailed Grouse

This medium-sized grouse is the least common grouse in Idaho. It gets its name from its tail which has longer feathers in the middle, making it come to a point. The bird is brown, buff and black in color and easily blends in with its open grassland habitat. Unlike some grouse, sharp-tailed grouse have a varied diet. They eat plants, fruits, grains, buds, insects, and flowers.



Photo courtesy Terry R. Thomas, © April 2010

Like the sage grouse, this species puts on impressive courtship displays in the spring. Males gather on a lek and use their dark pink air sacs to make strange hooting sounds. They bow their heads, droop their wings, and raise their tails trying to impress the females. Scuffles between males are common. Once the breeding season is over, sharp-tailed grouse are very social with small groups staying together for most of the year.

Sage Grouse

This impressive 6-pound bird is the largest North American grouse. They are brown, buff, and white with a long tail and black belly. Although they were familiar to native people, sage grouse were first scientifically described by Lewis and Clark in 1805.

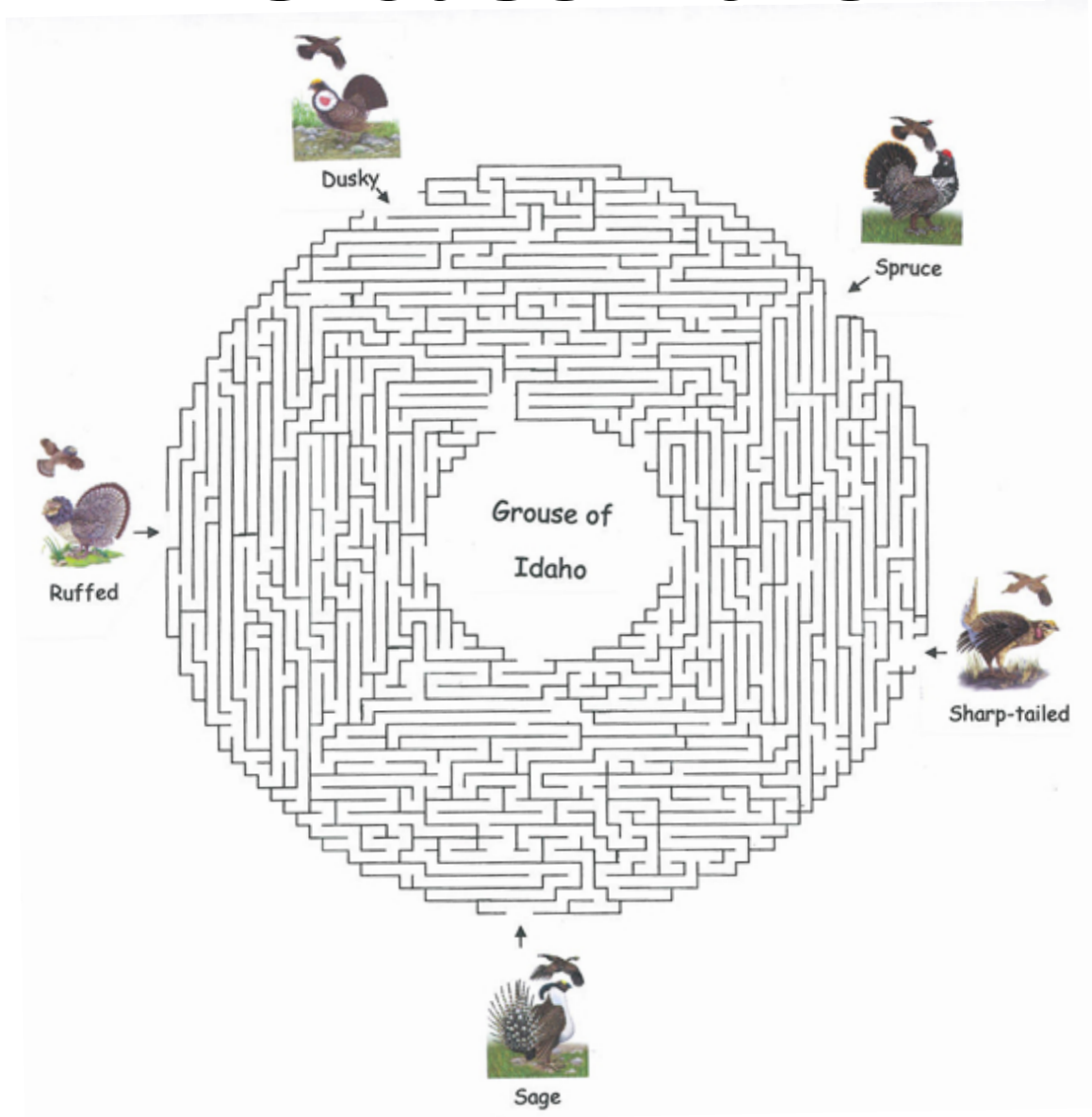
Sage grouse are birds of the sagebrush plains. Here they eat flowers, leaves, buds, and insects. In the winter, their diet is made up of sagebrush leaves and buds. Sagebrush habitat is so important to sage grouse that the loss of this habitat has hurt these birds in large parts of the western United States. Fire, invasive species, and human activities have all destroyed sagebrush habitat, and this hurts sage grouse. Fortunately, we now understand how important sagebrush habitat is for many species. Hunters, landowners, bird watchers, and many others are working together to help restore and preserve sagebrush habitat.

Sage grouse are best known for their incredible courtship displays. A displaying male sage grouse is an impressive sight as he fans his tail, fluffs his ruff, and hoots and pops with his yellow-orange air sacs. This courtship display is part what makes the sagebrush plains such a special place.



Photo courtesy IDFG

Grouse Maze



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