

Wildlife Express

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FOREST GROUSE

Dusky GrouseCCBY Paul Hurtado Flickr

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Meet the Grouse

Have you ever had a quiet hike interrupted by an exploding bird? If so, you 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 group of birds. Their short, rounded wings can beat very fast. This lets the bird suddenly fly into the air. Just like it startles you, it can also startle a predator just long enough for the bird to fly away to safety.

Grouse belong to a large group of birds called “galliforms.” This group is often referred to as upland game birds. It includes birds like turkeys, quail, and grouse. They are all ground-dwelling birds that feed mostly on plants and insects. About 183 species of these birds live around the world. They are found everywhere except Antarctica and South America. Twelve species of galliforms are native to North America. Here in Idaho, we have five native grouse species. Several other species of galliform birds live in Idaho, but they were introduced as game birds for hunting.

Upland game birds 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 this group, 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 it starts snowing 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 upland game birds can walk, run, and find food as soon as their feathers dry. 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!



Forest Grouse

As you might guess, forest grouse live in forests. They are medium-sized birds, weighing one to two pounds. Unlike grouse living in desert areas, forest grouse are solitary. They eat seeds, buds, and other plant parts. Young forest grouse also eat insects. Let's take a closer look at Idaho's forest grouse.



Ruffed Grouse

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



Ruffed grouse eat plant parts 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. This helps their feet act like snowshoes so it is easier for the grouse to get around in deep snow. To avoid winter cold, ruffed grouse use what is called a snow roost. The bird buries itself in the snow! Snow acts as insulation to keep 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. The rapid thump, thump, thump, thump-thump-thump sound carries for a long distance. Listen for ruffed grouse drumming in April and May.

Dusky Grouse

This grouse is a bird of the western United States. It is twice the size of the ruffed grouse and weighs two pounds. It 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.



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. 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 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 dark-colored bird with white speckling or barring on their lower chest and belly. Females are dark brown.

Spruce grouse eat mostly pine, spruce, and fir needles. Their beak is specially adapted for clipping off these needles. If you have ever nibbled on a pine needle, you know how bitter it tastes. This bitterness is caused by chemicals that are toxic to many animals. The digestive system of spruce grouse is 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. This lets the birds store, and later digest, the large amount of food needed to survive cold winter nights. These grouse are able to store up to 10 percent of their body weight in food each day. That would be like an 80-pound 5th grader having an eight-pound bedtime snack every night!

Moving Up

When you think of migration, you usually think about birds flying south. Spending a cold Idaho winter in a nice warm spot is the best option for many kinds of birds. But the dusky grouse prefers to spend the winter where it is cold. They move higher up in the mountains instead of down into warmer valleys. This is called ***altitudinal migration***. What's up with that?

Dusky grouse eat the needles of many conifer trees such as pines, douglas-fir, hemlock, and fir. Spending the winter at a higher elevation separates dusky grouse from other species, like spruce grouse, that also eat conifer needles. Because of the snow, dusky grouse spend most of the winter up in the trees, not on the ground. This helps keep them safe from hungry predators. Thick stands of conifer trees also block wind and snow, giving the grouse a snug shelter out of the weather. Once spring arrives, the dusky grouse move downhill to spend the summer.



Leaving Home

Very young birds can be grouped into two broad categories—*precocial* and *altricial*. What group they are in depends upon the kind of bird.

Precocial (pre-CO-shall) birds leave the nest as soon as they hatch and dry off. This is often within 24 hours of hatching. These birds include grouse, ducks, geese, swans, cranes, gulls, terns, and shorebirds. Being able to leave the nest right away is important because these birds nest on the ground. A nest full of baby birds would make a great meal for a predator.

Precocial birds hatch covered with down. Their eyes are open. They can walk and feed themselves soon after hatching. They depend upon their parents to keep them safe. Think about a pair of geese and their fluffy yellow goslings. The parents keep a careful watch over their youngsters. They take their goslings to places where they can find food and shelter. Precocial baby birds can stay warm by snuggling close to their parents.

Many other birds are not precocial. Songbirds, hawks, owls, herons, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, and others are *altricial* (al-TRISH-all). Like you, these youngsters have to hang around the nest and grow up before they can leave home.

When altricial birds hatch, they have very little down. Their eyes are closed and they are helpless. They depend upon their parents to feed them and incubate them to stay warm. Altricial birds like songbirds grow quickly. They leave the nest in about 10 days to two weeks. Hawks and owls spend longer in the nest, and eagles may spend three months in their nest before they are ready to fly. Birds with altricial young hide their nests or build them high in trees or on cliffs to avoid predators. In autumn you can see exactly how well-hidden nests can be when the leaves fall. Check out the trees in your yard and neighborhood this fall for nests. You might be surprised where you find them!



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Madeline Aberg PhD, Boise State University

HEY BABY.....

SAGE-GROUSE

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.

Desert grouse like sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse use an area called a “lek” for their displays. This is a small, open area within a habitat where a group of males gather to display for the hens. 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 desert 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. If you are in the forest next spring, listen carefully for courting grouse.



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Be Outside!



Fall is hunting season in Idaho. Hunters head into the field to harvest a number of game animals including deer, elk, waterfowl, and upland game birds like grouse. Many hunters will tell you that they enjoy hunting because it gets them outside in beautiful country. They also enjoy seeing many kinds of wildlife. If they are lucky and harvest an animal, hunters also enjoy the added benefit of delicious wild game meat.

Hunting for forest grouse is a great way for young hunters to get started with hunting. It will teach you to be patient while out in the woods. Searching for forest grouse will also help you become a good observer.

If you are 10 years old, you can legally go hunting. Youth hunters under 12 years old must be accompanied by an adult hunter who has a hunting license. You also need to be close enough to the adult to be able to speak without shouting. Before you can get your hunting license, you must take hunter education. The information you learn will teach you how to be a safe and responsible hunter.

Even if you are not ready to hunt, you can go on hunting trips with your parents, other family members or family friends. This is a great way to learn about hunting. You can help spot animals, carry equipment, and help with field dressing an animal that someone has harvested. You will also learn a lot about wildlife. Tracking deer and elk can teach you a lot about their habitat, where they go, what they eat, and what they do. Trying to find grouse in a forest will give you a whole new look at the importance of camouflage. All your observation skills will be put to the test as you look for game animals. Added together, these things will help you be a better hunter when it is your turn to head into the field.

When you go hunting, make sure to wear warm clothing that you can layer. Adding layers lets you warm up when it's cold or you can take off a layer if you get hot. Leave your tennis shoes at home and wear good boots to protect your feet. You should also wear a hunter orange hat and vest so you are visible to other hunters. Bring binoculars to observe wildlife and a camera to take pictures of what you see. Going hunting will give you the chance to enjoy wildlife in some of Idaho's most beautiful places.



GROUSE WORD SEARCH

Words

CAMOUFLAGE

COURTSHIP

DRUMMING

DUSKY

EGG

FOREST

GALLIFORM

GROUND NEST

PRECOCIAL

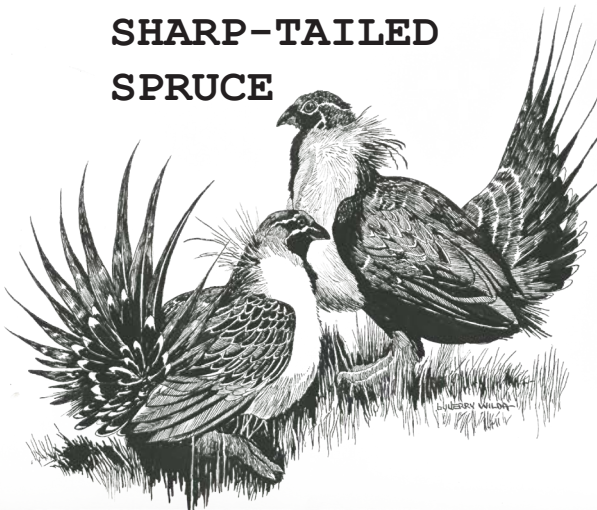
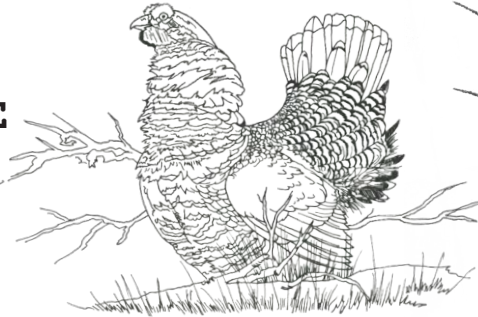
RAPID FLIGHT

RUFFED

SAGE-GROUSE

SHARP-TAILED

SPRUCE



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:

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or

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