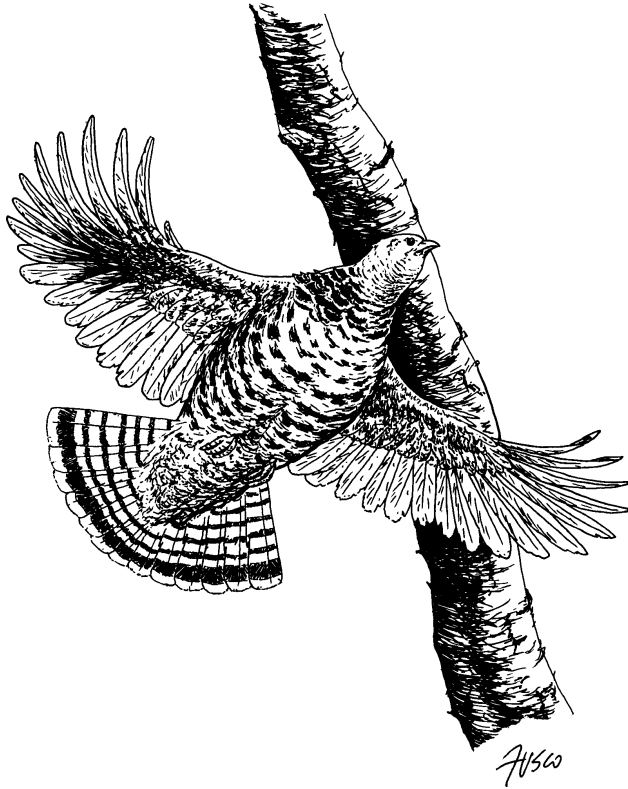


WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

RUFFED GROUSE

Bonasa umbellus



Habitat: Diverse forest habitat containing a mixture of age classes and forest openings.

Weight: Adult weight: 16-28 ounces.

Length: 16-19 inches; wingspan: 22-25 inches.

Food: Typical foods: seeds, buds and fruits of many plants; chicks feed almost exclusively on insects; adults may supplement diet with up to 30 percent insects.

Identification: The ruffed grouse is a medium-sized, fowl-like game bird best known for its courtship displays and thunderous takeoffs. They are distinguished by the dark ruff-like feathers on their neck region. Their broad tail is marked with a prominent dark band near the end. Ruffed grouse exhibit two color phases, reddish brown and grayish brown. This difference in color is most evident in their tails. Gray-phased birds predominate in the northern areas of its range, while red-phased birds predominate to the south. In Connecticut, both color phases are common.

Range: Widespread, these birds range from the woods of Alaska and northern Canada south to the mountains of Georgia and California. The ruffed grouse is non-migratory, spending its entire life within a small area.

Reproduction: The breeding season in Connecticut begins in April. Males begin drumming, sound created by beating the air with their wings, to advertise their

presence to females. Other males are also alerted, and during this time considerable strutting and fighting may occur to determine who will breed with the females.

After breeding, the female is left to nest and raise the young on her own. The nest of the grouse is a slight depression scratched out at the base of a tree or rock, or alongside an old log. The nest is usually lined with dry grass, leaves, pine needles or other materials available near the nest site. The female lays about two eggs every three days. After all the eggs (9-14) are laid, she begins incubation, usually a period of 23-24 days that may be lengthened by cold or wet weather or prolonged absences from the nest. The natural camouflage of the hen's coloration and nest makes it almost impossible to spot her while she is nesting. If the nest is destroyed during early incubation, the hen will usually reneest. Renests are rare if the nest is destroyed late in the incubation process.

Within a few hours of hatching, the grouse chicks are able to run and scurry about and they can fly at 10-12 days. By six weeks of age, the young have well developed plumage and resemble the adult in color. The average brood size by fall is about five birds. Young chicks are very sensitive to dampness, and a period of rain in late May or early June may affect brood survival.

Newly hatched chicks depend upon insects almost entirely as a food source. Fruits and berries become important in the summer, and grouse feed heavily on acorns in the fall. During the winter months, they will feed primarily on catkins, twigs, and buds.

History in Connecticut: Ruffed grouse have been longtime residents of Connecticut. They were native along with the wild turkey and bobwhite quail. The agriculture that was once intensive in Connecticut is now largely abandoned and farmland reverting to forests provides excellent habitat for grouse. As these forests mature, however, their value to grouse decreases. Without forest management practices that create early successional forest, grouse habitat would decline.

Ruffed grouse populations fluctuate in abundance throughout their range. These fluctuations are most noticeable in a particular area. A piece of habitat may be full of grouse one year, and virtually empty the next. Beyond the fluctuations observed in localized areas, grouse populations tend to fluctuate on a region-wide

basis. An eight to ten year cycle has long been referenced in grouse population studies. But the explanation for this cycle is still unknown.

Interesting Facts: Ruffed grouse have several common names including: partridge, ruffled grouse, drummer, woodpile guawkie, and woods pheasant.

In the early fall, many grouse exhibit a dispersal behavior commonly referred to as "crazy flight". At this time of year, grouse are often sighted in unusual habitats or are victims of collisions with trees, cars, houses, etc. This strong urge to disperse is largely exhibited by young birds, whereas adults tend to remain within the previous year's home range.

Evergreen trees are an important source of winter cover for grouse in Connecticut. But during periods of heavy powdery snow, grouse will use snow roosts for cover.

Many animals prey upon grouse. Foxes, bobcat, coyotes, bird-eating hawks and falcons, among others, will take grouse. Ruffed grouse are also an important game bird. Grouse rely on their cryptic color and remain still to avoid detection when predators are about. If sufficiently frightened, they will thunder into the air to escape, although they are capable of near silent flight. When with young, hens will attempt to lead potential predators away by feigning a broken wing.



The Technical Assistance Informational Series is 75 percent funded by Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration—the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Program. The P-R Program provides funding through an excise tax on the sale of sporting firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. The remaining 25 percent of the funding is matched by the Connecticut Wildlife Division.