

The Grouse of Alaska

(The information about Alaskan grouse was obtained from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Wildlife Notebook Series; the department provides to schools and other interested groups or persons. Last week, the Tundra Times focused on hunting the three species of ptarmigan, the Willow, Rock and White-tailed ptarmigan. I also wrote about some common sense practices I have used successfully over the years in all my hunts. This week, the Tundra Times focuses on grouse, namely the Blue, Spruce, Ruffed and Sharp-tailed grouse.)

BY BOB KOWELUK

According to the fish and game, grouse hunting is normally combined with other hunting, like white caribou or moose hunting.

In the fall, grouse hunters try to be out in the open where grouse are coming out for grit, bits of sand and pebbles they eat which helps them digest the plants they eat. Ruffed and Sharp-tailed grouse are harder to hunt (unless with a dog to find them) and can be found sometimes on tops of aspen and birch trees eating buds in late fall and winter.

Grouse do not fit into a classic "10 year cycle" and are never hunted enough to cause population declines. According to Fish and Game, the Blue grouse of southeastern Alaska and the Spruce grouse of coastal areas, never drop to low levels like Spruce, Ruffed and Sharp-tailed grouse in interior Alaska. The causes of these population changes are not completely understood but may be caused by changes in climate, food, cover conditions, pred-

tors, or genetic make-up of the birds.

BLUE GROUSE

The grouse of Alaska, according to Alaska Department of Fish and Game, come in four distinct species or groups. The Blue or "Sooty grouse" lives around the southeastern part of the state from Glacier Bay southward. The Blue is the largest of all grouse here, weighing in at a heavy weight of up to 3½ pounds. It has a pale band of gray on the tip of its otherwise blackish tail. In spring the male develops a deep yellow air sac that becomes encircled with a (frill of white feathers on its' neck. These air sacs produce the hoat that can be heard over a mile away and are used to call the females.

All female grouse of the Blue, Spruce, Ruffed and Sharp-tailed grouse lay from 5 to 15 eggs and incubate them in a simple nest, usually a depression, scratched on the ground in the open or under a log or tree. The male does not help in the incubation or brooding-rearing of the young and leaves the females alone during the summer but joins the hen and brood in the fall.

These flocks do not break up until the spring when the hens lay eggs once again.

a big shot in a tree or on the ground, with his bright red eye combs up, his wings stiffened and dropped on his sides, tail up and opened in a fan with neck and upper breast feathers ruffled.

In May, after the grouse hunting season closes, the male can be seen doing some fancy flying downward from a tree and landing with it's wings beating rapidly, creating a muffled drumming which can be heard for a long way.

During the summer these birds feed on flowers, green leaves, and berries with a liking to blueberries and mountain cranberries.

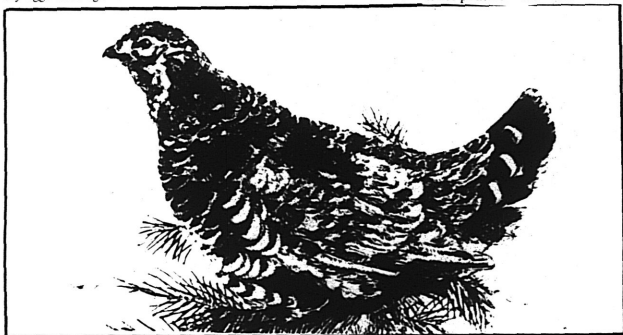
By fall time these birds can be seen at streams, lake shores and roads in early mornings to eat grit for the coming winter months. The grit is used to help

These ruffed grouse are found in woodlands along the Yukon, Tanana, Kuskokwim and Upper Copper Rivers and in the Taku and Stikine River drainages in southeastern Alaska. In summer and fall, these birds can be found in alder thickets, willow bottoms, spruce-brich forests and aspen groves.

These birds have a broad black band near the tip of the tail, dark colored ruffs on each side of the neck and have a slight crest on top of the head. They have two color phases, red and grey.

The ruffed grouse eat blue and bear berries, mountain cranberries and rose fruits. In winter they eat aspen buds and willow, birch, soapberry and berries from high bush berries.

The Sharp-tailed grouse have distinctive field marks with a short-pointed tail and white



SPRUCE GROUSE

The Spruce grouse is a forest dweller that is found throughout Alaska but is most common around Bristol Bay, the Kenai Peninsula and in wooded valleys along the Kuskokwim, Yukon and Tanana Rivers.

It's usual habitat in the interior is a spruce-birch forest home. The Spruce grouse feeds on mountain cranberry, blue and crow berries and spirea.

In southeastern Alaska the Spruce grouse there differs from the interior Spruce grouse by having white-tipped feathers overlaying the base of the tail and in not having a band of rusty brown on the tip of the tail.

In interior Alaska, the brown tipped tail shows the Spruce grouse from the Ruffed and Sharp-tailed grouse.

In April, during the closing days of grouse hunting statewide, the Spruce grouse can be seen beginning his courtship display as he struts around like

grind the fibrous spruce needles that they eat during the winter. These birds loaf around all day in the winter and may sleep under spruce boughs or dive into the soft snow to make use of the snow's insulating quality

spots on the wings. They live in brushy grasslands. They also live in muskeg areas, grasslands, aspen groves and open spruce forests.

The sharp-tails are found in the Yukon River Valley, from

RUFFLED GROUSE

The female Ruffed Grouse is known to defend her young with a fierceness that no other grouse can match. If she cannot scare off a predator with a shrill cry and a charge with all her feathers raised, she will try to lead the predator away from her chicks by pretending to have a broken wing and fluttering along the ground away from her chicks.

Canada to Holy Cross and in the Upper Koyuk and Upper Kuskokwim, Tanana and Upper Copper River valleys.

During mating season the female Sharp-tails walk around the dancing and "booming" males with apparent disinterest like nothing was happening. The Sharp-tails mate in a communal area with the males' courtship displays peaking sometime in May. The "booming" is produced by the male inflating an air sac in his neck.