

Ruff Country News & Timberdoodle Times



Wisconsin, Iowa, & Illinois
Volume 17, Issue 1, August 25th, 2017

Ruffed Grouse Season Dates

Wisconsin

Zone A: 16 Sept – 31 Jan

Zone B: 14 Oct – 8 Dec

Iowa

7 Oct – 31 Jan



Woodcock Season Dates

Wisconsin

23 Sept – 6 Nov

Iowa

7 Oct – 20 Nov

Illinois

21 Oct – 4 Dec

Like most of us, I'm amazed that September is on the horizon. I've still got wood to cut, the garden is in shambles, fishing trips with the kids have been few and far-between, and the lawnmower needs oil. There just never seems to be enough time to cover all of the summer bases. One highlight was watching the recent meteor shower with my kids, while camped on a ridge on our farm (above).

But of course, September opens the door to many of the hunting opportunities we've been dreaming about since the snow melted last spring. Surveys indicate that Wisconsin hunters can expect to see more birds this fall, and with the cyclic peak still a few years away, it's certainly a good time to start a new dog, get your kids involved, and to reconnect with old hunting buddies.

I've also recently accepted the position of Director of Conservation Programs for RGS/AWS. Though I'll continue to serve as our WI/IA/IL Regional Biologist, I'll also help support the outstanding work of our Biologists in other parts of the country, and will engage in Farm Bill policy development. There are many, many, exciting opportunities facing us in the young forest arena, and I'm excited to continue to have the opportunity to work with our members and conservation partners to ensure a bright future for the critters we love.

I've tried to touch on some of the great things ahead in this issue of Ruff Country News. If you have any questions or want to chat about a conservation issue of particular interest, please don't hesitate to drop me a line or to give me a call. I hope to see you all in the grouse woods soon!

Scott

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We're Headed Back Toward the Grouse Peak!

The spring 2017 drumming surveys suggest what we've all suspected- we're well on our way toward the next peak in Wisconsin's ruffed grouse cycle. This suggests generally increased flush rates for hunters this fall, and with peak populations not expected until 2020 or 2021 the next few years should continue to provide excellent opportunities for Wisconsin's legion of grouse hunters.

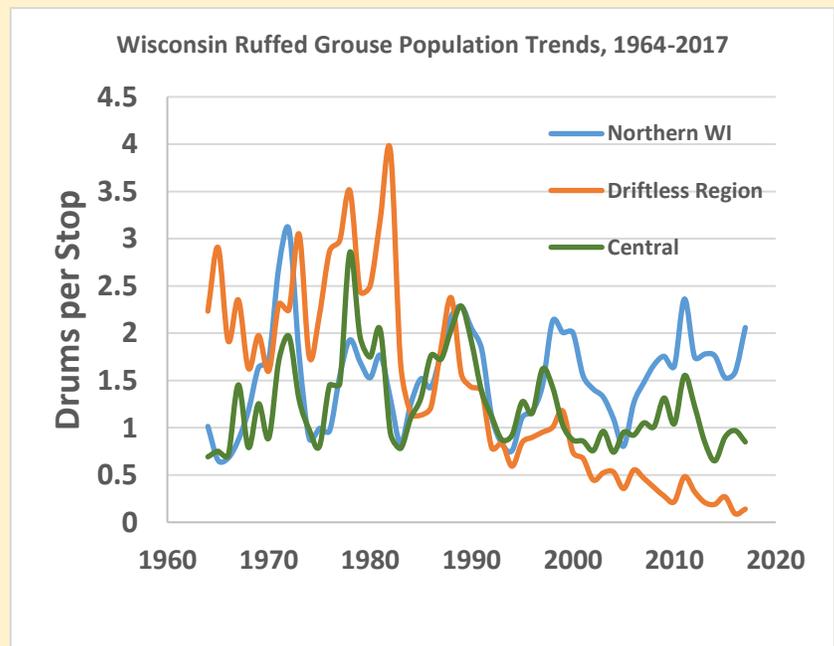
The 2017 survey, conducted by WDNR field staff and volunteers, includes 77 routes scattered in forest cover around the state. Observers drive the survey routes and record the number of drums heard during 4-minute listening sessions at each of 10 points, separated by 1 mile along routes. Data are reported as the average number of drums heard per stop. Survey conditions were considered good for most of the survey period.

Routes in the northern region (essentially Taylor County and points north) had 30% more drumming activity than in 2016. The number of grouse heard drumming is close to the highs noted during the previous 4 cyclic peaks (see figure below). This certainly reflects an increasing grouse population, but also suggests that a solid habitat base is present to fuel this growth. Grouse hunters and others should be quick to recognize the importance of our state's vibrant timber industry as the driver behind much of the quality grouse cover available to them each fall. Our federal, state, and county land managers do an excellent job of ensuring a diverse forest community, with ample habitat for the young forest-adapted species we cherish. The 15 organizations collaborating through the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership (<https://youngforest.org/wisconsin/wisconsin-young-forest-partnership>) have also energized active forest management on private lands in the northcentral part of the state. For a detailed view of how the WYFP is benefiting young forest wildlife, click on the link in yellow on the above home page to access the 2016 annual report.

The drumming survey provided more somber data for the central forest region, where drumming activity was down 17% from 2016 levels. This region includes a transition zone from our northern to our southern forest communities, and has seen increasing parcelization of private lands. These factors make even-aged forest management a bit more

challenging. Regardless, we still expect populations in this region to increase over the next few years, and there are still excellent hunting opportunities for those who locate good habitat (see the article below on Wisconsin's FFLIGHT tool).

Though the survey indicated a 55% increase for ruffed grouse in the Driftless Region of southwest Wisconsin, grouse numbers remain low due to maturing forest conditions. Your RGS/AWS staff



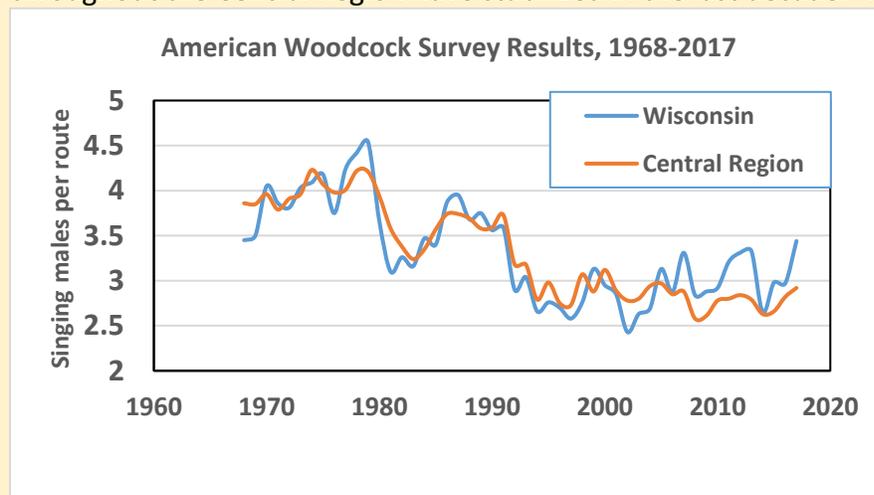
continue to work with partners through the Driftless Young Forest Steering Committee and Driftless Forestry Network (www.mywisconsinwoods.org) to further young forest goals across the Driftless Region. Grouse numbers in the southeast remain extremely low, with only 0.01 drums heard per stop in 2017. For more details regarding the 2017 drumming survey, go to <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/reports.html> and click on “small game.”

Of course, the number of grouse hunters encounter in the fall depend not only on the size of the breeding population, but on the number of young birds produced. Though early June saw some large rain events across northern Wisconsin, many colleagues report seeing numerous good-sized grouse broods through mid-summer. The Wisconsin DNR also assesses annual production levels for game birds via their 10-week game bird brood survey. Though this report has not yet been finalized, interested members may click on the above link as well for more robust measures of grouse production; the 2017 brood survey report should be available by early September.

American Woodcock Trends Stable, but Numbers Remain Down From Historic Levels

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinates the annual Singing Ground Survey, which has proven an excellent means of tracking woodcock populations through time. Similar to the ruffed grouse drumming survey, observers drive along pre-established survey routes, and record the number of male woodcock heard singing at each of 10 survey points.

Though American woodcock populations in both the Central and Eastern regions remain well below levels recorded in 1970, the survey indicates that woodcock populations in Wisconsin and throughout the Central Region have stabilized in the last decade. The number of singing males



heard in the state in 2017 increased from 2016, and the trend over the past 10 years has been positive, though neither increase was statistically significant. Wisconsin’s timber products industry and conservation community both certainly deserve credit for their efforts to expand the habitat base for woodcock.

The Singing Ground Survey report also incorporates data from the annual wing bee to track reproductive success (juveniles per adult female). The number of juveniles in the fall flight was slightly up in both Wisconsin and the Central Region last fall compared to 2015, but production levels remain well below the long-term average. For those RGS/AWS members interested, the full 2017 Singing Ground Survey report can be accessed at <https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/american-woodcock-singing-ground-survey>.

USFS Ramps Up Young Forest Work on the Chequamegon-Nicolet NF Upcoming Projects to Add >31,000 Acres of YF Habitat!

RGS/AWS members are well aware of our organization's efforts to promote sustainable forest management on our federal lands. In 2015, we filed a Petition for Rulemaking with the USFS in response to failures to meet minimum harvest goals on many national forests in the eastern U.S., and RGS/AWS field staff across the country work closely with local USFS staff to ensure that young forest management remains on the table as a priority forest management goal.

While timber harvests lag significantly on many national forests, USFS staff have proven to be strong and impactful advocates for the needs of young forest wildlife in Wisconsin. Numerous forest management projects announced over the past few years **will add over 31,000 acres of young forest habitat on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest**. These projects include:

Project Name	Resulting Young Forest Acres
Morgan Lake Vegetation Management	4,546
Lakewood-Laona Early Successional Project	12,013
Townsend Project	734
Medford Aspen II	3,002
Fourmile Project	2,260
Black Torch Project	8,590
Total Young Forest Acres Produced	31,145

The Lakewood-Laona project further identifies >100 acres of overmature alder for shearing, and the Medford-Aspen II project identifies 19 alder patches in need of regeneration. An additional project, the "Multi-year Openings Maintenance Project," also identifies 842 acres of forest openings to be managed on the Great Divide Ranger District, which will provide excellent breeding and roosting habitat for American woodcock, and foraging habitat for deer, turkeys, and numerous other wildlife species.

Although these projects are at various stages in the federal review process, it's clear that USFS staff have delivered a set of projects sure to greatly expand the habitat base for ruffed grouse, American woodcock, and the myriad other wildlife species dependent upon young forests in the coming years. The 2015 Good Neighbor Authority agreement between the USFS and the Wisconsin DNR (<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/TimberSales/GNAGeneralInfo.html>) has also greatly expanded the capability to move wood off the forest, with over 25 million additional board feet authorized for removal in the first year alone.

As advocates for young forest wildlife, it's important that we recognize the many committed partners who are working to enhance the critical habitat base the wildlife species we cherish require. It's clear that we've got a set of extremely committed partners among the USFS staff on the Chequamegon-Nicolet NF. For more information on these projects, project maps, and to track their development and implementation, please check out the Schedule of Proposed Actions for the CNNF at <https://www.fs.fed.us/sopa/forest-level.php?110913>.

RGS/AWS Provides Record \$119,227 to Improve Wildlife Habitat and Hunter Access in Wisconsin

****RGS/AWS news release, 2/24/17***

Coraopolis, PA- The Ruffed Grouse Society and its sister organization, the American Woodcock Society, provided \$119,227 to support eighteen outstanding projects in Wisconsin in 2017 that will enhance habitat for young forest wildlife and increase hunter access to prime hunting areas. Partners will bring an additional \$199,811 to complete these projects, resulting in over \$319,000 in forest habitat improvements. Over 1,789 acres will be enhanced directly; funds used to support expanded landowner outreach efforts and forest access road improvements will indirectly support habitat improvements on thousands of additional acres. Over 88 miles of hunter walking trails will also be created or enhanced with these funds. To accomplish these projects, RGS/AWS will partner with the United States Forest Service, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Wisconsin County Forests Association, Class ACT Charter School in Park Falls, Price, Eau Claire, Langlade, and Marinette counties, and the city of Merrill.

RGS/AWS members hold local banquets each year to generate the Wisconsin Drummer Fund, which supports proactive conservation work in the state. The Drummer Fund was supplemented in 2017 by donations from the David V. Uihlein family, David Wahl, and the Susan Smith family. The T. Stanton Armour, Rib Mountain, Flambeau River, and Marinette County RGS chapters also provided important funding for these projects via additional fundraising events held throughout the year.

“Our increasing support for forest conservation work in Wisconsin stems directly from the dedication and investment of our members, who clearly understand the challenges faced by forest wildlife and the need for appropriate management,” said John Eichinger, RGS/AWS President and CEO. “The Wisconsin Drummer Fund allows RGS/AWS to directly apply our mission of supporting healthy forests, abundant wildlife, and sporting traditions to boots-on-the-ground conservation work that enhances both our forested landscapes and the public’s ability to enjoy them.” RGS/AWS has been a dedicated supporter of forest habitat work in Wisconsin since 1985. Since that time, RGS has contributed over \$1 million in support of active forest management efforts across the state. “Disturbance is a natural and critical component of healthy forests, ensuring that the diverse array of habitats required by forest wildlife are present,” noted RGS/AWS Regional Biologist Scott Walter. “The Drummer Fund therefore allows our members to play a direct and meaningful role in forest wildlife conservation.”

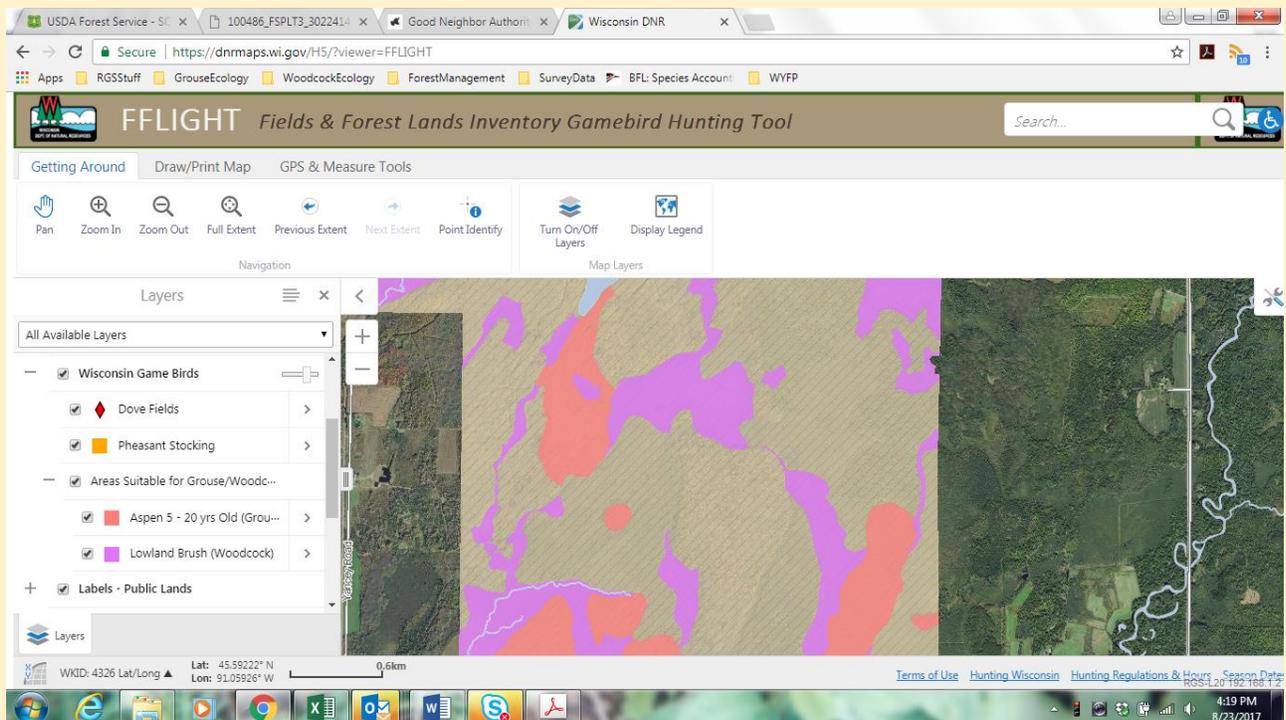
Wisconsin Drummer Fund Projects approved for 2017 include:

- Rahm Access Project- Price County
- Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership- 21 northern Wisconsin counties
- Eagle River/Florence Hunter Walking Trails- Vilas and Florence counties
- Marinette County Aspen Regeneration- Marinette County
- Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area Hunter Walking Trail Network- Oneida County
- Marathon County Young Forest Management- Marathon County
- Hunter Walking Trails and Alder Management- Langlade County
- Parkland Aspen Regeneration- Douglas County
- Promoting Ruffed Grouse Hunting on County Forests- 12 county forest parcels
- School Forest Ruffed Grouse Project- Ashland County
- Clam Lake Wildlife Area Habitat Improvement- Burnett County

- Blockhouse Alder Shearing- Price County
- Tamarack Creek Wildlife Area Shrub Regeneration- Trempeleau County
- Merrill Memorial Forest Wildlife Area Alder Project- Lincoln County
- Hunter Access & Grouse/Woodcock Habitat Improvement- Eau Claire County
- Hunter Walking Trail Improvement Project- Langlade County
- Colburn Wildlife Area Aspen & Alder Regeneration- Adams County
- Forest Wildlife Specialist Position- Northwest Wisconsin counties

2017 Hunting Tip: Don't forget to FFLY!

Both novice and experienced grouse hunters can improve their grouse and woodcock hunting experience by checking out the Wisconsin DNR's FFLIGHT tool before hitting the field. The Fields and Forested Lands Interactive Gamebird Hunting Tool allows hunters to quickly identify young aspen and lowland alder stands on both state- and county-owned lands in their favorite, or new, hunting areas. This mapping tool can be explored at <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/fflight.html>. The web page includes a short video tutorial to foster use of the site, and users can either download .pdf maps or use the application directly on their mobile device while in the field. The mapping interface allows the user to quickly identify public lands, roads, parking areas, and many other features- along with prime grouse and woodcock habitat. The map below provides an example of FFLIGHT's attractive interface. It shows one of my favorite hunting spots in northern Wisconsin (sorry- road names and other identifiers have been removed ☺)- 5-20 year old aspen stands are in red; lowland brush in purple. Take a moment to check this great tool out as hunting season nears- you may find additional sites to explore in the field this fall.



RGS-NRCS-WDNR Partnership Expands Young Forest Work in Wisconsin!

Earlier this year, RGS/AWS launched a new program with huge potential to expand the habitat base for young forest wildlife. Valerie Johnson was hired as the Society's first Forest Wildlife Specialist through a partnership among the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Wisconsin DNR, and RGS/AWS. Recognizing that 74% of our eastern forests are in private ownership, your RGS/AWS staff understand the importance of providing landowners the technical and financial assistance necessary to engage in the active forest management that will enhance forest diversity and provide habitat for young forest wildlife. Toward this end, Valerie works daily with landowners across northwestern Wisconsin to help develop and implement sustainable forestry practices, and providing landowners access to funding via federal Farm Bill conservation programs. ***Valerie's knowledge, energy, and enthusiasm have generated 38 forest management contracts that will enhance over 3,500 acres of forest wildlife habitat- in the first 6 months of 2017 alone!***

If you own land in the northwestern part of the state, and are interested in exploring your management options, please contact Valerie at her Spooner office at (715) 635-8228 ext. 115 or ValerieJ@ruffedgrousesociety.org.

Recognizing the incredible value and impact of Valerie's work, RGS/AWS staff and our partners at NRCS and the WDNR are developing an agreement that will support a 2nd position in Wisconsin. This position will similarly benefit landowners and expand our young forest habitat base, and will be stationed in northeastern Wisconsin.

RGS/AWS is excited to see the Forest Wildlife Specialist program expand, and appreciate the efforts of our partners at NRCS and the WDNR on behalf of young forest wildlife!

Coverts Workshop "Doubles Down" for Landowners in 2017

With 74% of our eastern forests in private ownership, engaging private forest landowners is key to achieving conservation goals related to healthy forests and abundant wildlife communities. The Wisconsin Coverts Project has risen as one of the most effective means of empowering landowners to engage in sound forest management. Since 1994, Twenty-seven workshops have been held, and a total of 710 attendees have benefited from the in-depth discussions of forest and wildlife habitat management. Collectively, these landowners manage over ½-million acres, and have become strong advocates for active forest management in their communities. One of the great strengths of Coverts is the "train the trainer" approach, whereby attendees are expected to reach out and engage their neighbors and other community members in land management. This approach has engaged an estimated 10,000 additional landowners, resulting in the Coverts message touching an estimated 499,000 additional acres. RGS/AWS is proud to be an active

New Oak Regeneration Promotional Video

Declines in oak forests constitute one of the major challenges we face in striving to preserve healthy forest systems. Oak forests provide vital food and cover for a diverse assemblage of wildlife species, but are being replaced by maple and other more shade-tolerant species due to the lack of appropriate management. UW Extension faculty have collaborated on a new video that presents the issue in an appealing, eye-catching fashion. Such outreach tools are vital tools in our efforts to educate private landowners and the general public about the importance of oak forests and the need for improved management. View the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySOk>

sponsor of this important outreach effort, and would like to recognize UW-Extension staff and Wisconsin's Sustainable Forestry Initiative Implementation Committee for its important support. For more information on the Coverts program, or if you might be interested in attending a future workshop, please go to <http://forestandwildlifeecology.wisc.edu/coverts>.



Attendees at the August 3rd – 6th (left) and August 17th – 20th Wisconsin Coverts Workshops. These landowners received training on a variety of forest and wildlife management topics that will better enable them to engage in active forest management on their lands, as well as equip them to spread the word about the needs of forest wildlife within their communities. Collectively, 41 landowners responsible for managing over 145,000 acres of land benefited from this year's workshops!

Research Corner: Sure, Woodcock Rock! But Why?

Understanding wildlife populations requires applying accepted scientific and statistical methods that produce defensible results; however, results are often difficult for the general public to interpret. The wildlife research literature is filled with lengthy descriptions of mathematical modeling exercises, statistical analyses, and tables full of data. While this research is critical to attaining a better understanding of wildlife populations and improving our management capability, it is occasionally refreshing to read a report that simply and eloquently expands our understanding of animal behavior. Such a paper was released recently: *Note on the Woodcock Rocking Display*, by the well-known naturalist Berndt Heinrich (Northeastern Naturalist 23(1):N4-N7. 2016).

Most woodcock hunters are likely familiar with the rocking display performed by American woodcock, where the bird gently rocks forward and backward, stepping carefully along the ground. There have been many explanations proposed for this behavior, and one I've heard (and repeated) many times is that the display either helps the bird locate earthworms or draws the worms to the surface (the reason given here is that the rhythmic footsteps may mimic the patter of raindrops). Heinrich does an excellent job summarizing previous reports and the various explanations for this behavior. However, an interaction he had with a displaying woodcock led him to propose a unique explanation: the birds are telling the observer (or potentially a fox or coyote) that they've been seen, and that any attack would therefore be unsuccessful. In essence, they're telling the observer "You're busted! You might as well give up now, as I see you and will simply take flight if you move any closer!" In Heinrich's words, the woodcock are "advertising their unprofitability" to the potential predator.

Heinrich makes a couple observations in support of this idea: 1) displaying woodcock often have their tail fans erect, with the white edge feathers prominently displayed (this should not enhance foraging abilities, but would make it more conspicuous to a predator that's moved too close) and 2) the display is more often given in prime foraging habitat, which the bird might be

less willing to flush out of (the display would be, then, a "last-ditch" effort to convince the predator to give up to preclude having to flush from a good feeding area).

Those who spend time in the woods are aware of the flashing white tails of deer that have been flushed from cover, or the tendency of squirrels to bark at intruders with their furry tails wagging vigorously. Neither of these behaviors make sense if the animals are trying to hide from or escape from predators, and both have been similarly explained as attempts to tell the predator they've been seen and that further pursuit is useless, or to "advertise their unprofitability." Perhaps that's what woodcock have in mind as they're rocking back and forth—they're actually communicating directly to us that further pursuit (at least, outside woodcock season!) is useless. The next time you see a woodcock performing this behavior, try backing off to a non-threatening distance to see if they stop rocking. This is something Heinrich observed, and it strongly suggested the behavior was not intended to improve foraging, but was performed due to his close proximity to the bird.

Of course, only the woodcock truly knows why he or she rocks, but through thoughtful consideration of what we see while in the woods, we can better understand and appreciate the critters we share the woods with. If you'd like a copy of this article, drop me an e-mail and I'll attach the article to my response. ScottW@ruffedgrousesociety.org.

Upcoming RGS Regional Events

August 31st: St. Germain (Eagle River, WI) Chapter Banquet
September 7th: Northeast Wisconsin (Green Bay) Chapter Banquet
September 12th: David Uihlein (Nashotah, WI) Chapter Banquet
September 14th: Marinette County (Crivitz) Chapter Banquet
September 21st: Superior (Hurley, WI) Chapter Banquet
September 23rd: Wilderness Wings (Stone Lake, WI) Chapter Banquet
September 27th: John Keener (Madison, WI) Chapter Banquet
October 17th: Westcentral Wisconsin (Marshfield) Chapter Banquet
October 19th: Flambeau River (Fifield, WI) Chapter Banquet

*For more event details, see: http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/banquets_events#.WZ7jWD6GPIU

Enjoy your time afield this fall. As always, please don't hesitate to contact me with comments, questions, or to chat about young forest conservation.

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The Ruffed Grouse Society is North America's foremost conservation organization dedicated to preserving our sporting traditions by creating healthy forests for ruffed grouse, American woodcock and other wildlife. For information on the Ruffed Grouse Society, please call 888-564- 6747 or check out the RGS website at www.ruffedgrousesociety.org.

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