Northeast Region

FAN UPDATE Summer 2015

The Ruffed Grouse Society/American Woodcock Society is an international non-profit conservation organization dedicated to promoting conditions suitable for ruffed grouse, American woodcock and related wildlife to sustain our hunting tradition and outdoor heritage

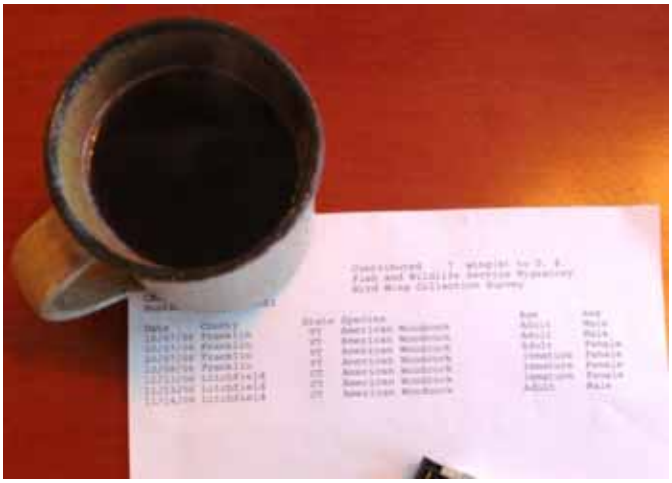
Ruffed Grouse Society Members, Supporters and Friends:

Good Summer to you! Spring sure came on fast, after a real winter's winter that seemed to be in no hurry to let go. And so far this summer the woods look to be full of food – an abundance of berries and bugs. Next issue we'll do the fall forecast, but based on the grouse broods I've seen I'm pretty optimistic… but let's not get ahead of ourselves. In this issue of the newsletter we've got updates on woodcock surveys and a ruffed grouse research project, and food for thought on how these birds fared coming out of winter into the nesting and brood-rearing seasons.

RGS Western Great Lakes Biologist Gary Zimmer Retires

This spring our supervising biologist, Gary Zimmer retired after 14 ½ years of dedicated service with the Ruffed Grouse Society. As one whom Gary supervised I've got to say "Thank You!" We'll miss you, Gary. But especially – congratulations! I'm sure Gary and his Brittany will be enjoying the fruits of his labor a bit more this fall.

Woodcock – Looking Back, Looking Forward

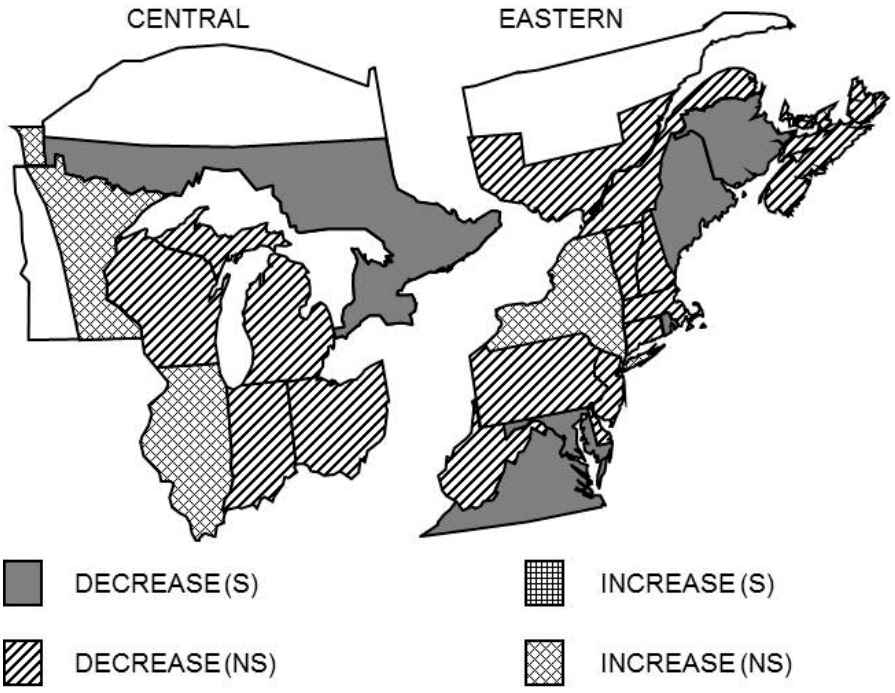


Being a migratory bird, primary management authority for the American Woodcock lies with the federal government – the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) – and FWS works closely with the state wildlife agencies to deliver woodcock conservation. One of the management tools used is the Parts Collection Survey, which relies on a sample of woodcock hunters to send one wing from every timberdoodle he or she kills in postage-paid envelopes to the FWS. As woodcock are making their northerly migration in the spring, the wings that were submitted by hunters are examined by a team of 20 or so state, federal, and non-governmental organization (e.g. RGS) biologists at the late-winter meeting known as the "wing bee". Then along about May, when woodcock are nesting and chicks are hatching in a covert near you, each contributing woodcock hunter receives in the mail a short report on the wings he or she sent in the previous season: for each wing, the date, location, sex and age of each bird.

Later, in June about the time those late April- and May-hatched woodcock chicks are about adult-size and independent of the hen, the *American Woodcock Population Status* report becomes available from FWS. This annual report has all the woodcock information in one place – results of the Wing Collection Survey, the Singing-Ground Survey, and the Harvest Information Program Hunter Activity Survey. It's available on the RGS website: http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/Woodcock-Facts#PopStat.

In early summer a woodcock hunter's thoughts are filled with planning or dreaming about the autumn to come, and the woodcock status report is great fodder for such planning and musing. We often combine the results of the spring Singing-Ground Survey with observations of local woodcock activity and breeding-season weather to form a hunch on how the fall woodcock population may shape up. The Singing-Ground Survey indicated that the number of singing male woodcock in the Eastern Management Region this spring was not significantly different from last year, however there was a statistically significant decline in woodcock numbers across the region during the most recent 10-year period (see information for individual states and provinces in the figures below). Once winter released its grip on the Northeast, weather during the nesting season seemed by-and-large favorable to woodcock nest success – little in the way of late-season lingering snow storms nor long rainy stretches. It was actually starting to look a little dry until June rains arrived, and since then the woods have been moist and the bug-life has been abundant – all in all, breeding and brood-rearing conditions seem favorable this year.

American Woodcock Status 2015

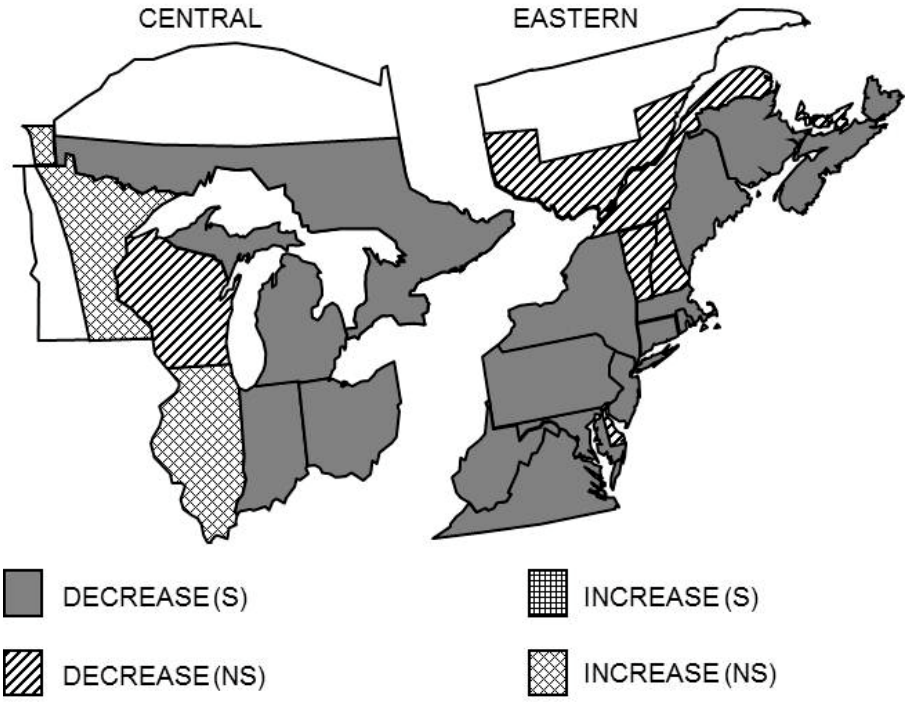


2005-2015 Woodcock Singing-Ground Survey

S = Significant

NS = Not Significant

A significant trend indicates a true change in population either decreasing or increasing depending on pattern on the graphic. **No S increases in population, there are S decreases in both 10 year and long term survey.**



1968-2015 Woodcock Singing-Ground Survey

Ruffed Grouse

The University of Maine and Maine Department of Inland Fisheries, with support from RGS, are in year two of a ruffed grouse study. The following article by John Holyoke appeared in the April 10, 2015 on-line version of the Bangor Daily News:

Winter took a toll on grouse in study, but biologists unfazed

By John Holyoke

Late last summer, biologists teamed up with a University of Maine professor to begin a project that will provide a clearer picture of the state's ruffed grouse population. Using radio tags, the researchers are monitoring those birds and compiling data on their survival rates and breeding success.

A glimpse at the data collected so far indicates that the grouse in two study areas — one southwest of Bangor, the other in a commercial timberland east of Old Town — struggled through a bitter winter that is still holding on in some regions.

"We're down to 41 [grouse alive] out of 106," said Brad Allen, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife's bird group leader. "So throughout the hunting season and throughout the winter, 62 percent of them have died."

Allen said it didn't appear that hunting was the main cause of death, however.

"At the site to the west of [Bangor], 10 were shot out of 60. That's 17 percent," Allen said. "On the commercial timberland, six of 46 were shot, so that's 13 percent. Just averaging, about 15 percent of the birds that were on the ground on Oct. 1, [which was the first day of hunting season], were taken by

hunters, which is well within the framework of other studies that have looked at hunting mortality in grouse."

Kelsey Sullivan, the game bird biologist for the DIF&W, said that the radio transmitters attached to each bird in the study gives off a specific signal to indicate when a bird has died.

"If they're stationary and there's no movement whatsoever for eight hours, it goes from one [transmitted] blip every half second to two blips every half second," Sullivan said. "And [the transmitters] are pretty sensitive. If it moves just a little bit, it will send the signal. It has to be very still for an eight-hour period, and that's typically a dead bird."

Despite losing 62 percent of the study group, neither biologist is overly concerned.

"[When compared] to other studies of mortality, we were on the high end of normal," Sullivan said. "It wasn't out of bounds for what you could expect, but it was definitely on the high end for what's been found in other states."

Allen said the data that's being gathered is especially important because it will allow Maine biologists to track trends that exist in the state rather than extrapolate based on data gathered in other states.

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife biologist Kelsey Sullivan pulls a ruffed grouse from a trap used to study the birds in September 2014 at the midcoast Maine survey site. (photo by Brian Feulner| BDN)

"The [University of Maine] professor, Erik Blomberg, points out that the literature lacks information on winter survival of grouse in northern climates," Allen said. "There haven't been any recent studies on birds in the north. They've studied birds in the Appalachian region and other places."

This winter's data seems to fly in the face of conventional wisdom, Allen said, but shows that there are a number of factors that contribute to winter survival rates.

Brittany King (left) and crew leader Brittany Currier fit a ruffed grouse with a radio collar during a Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and University of Maine study on the bird in September 2014 in midcoast Maine. (photo by Brian Feulner| BDN)

"The conventional wisdom for deep, powdery winters is that it's better for grouse because they can hide under the snow and spend the night in their night roosts and be away from predators," Allen said.

Crusty snow, Allen said, has been thought to be a threat to grouse, which become unable to burrow into a night roost.

This year's snow conditions in the study areas was largely powdery, but that opens the birds up to another threat, especially when it's extremely cold.

"It's kind of interesting. What goes on during a winter when it's super cold, an animal has to feed more," Allen said. "And if you have to be out and feed more, you're more vulnerable to predators."

Allen said the birds may have died as a result of the extreme cold, but more data will help inform biologists.

"Maybe next year will be different," he said. "That's why you study for several years."

The study will move into another phase in the near future, and biologists face a challenge that the loss of birds has created.

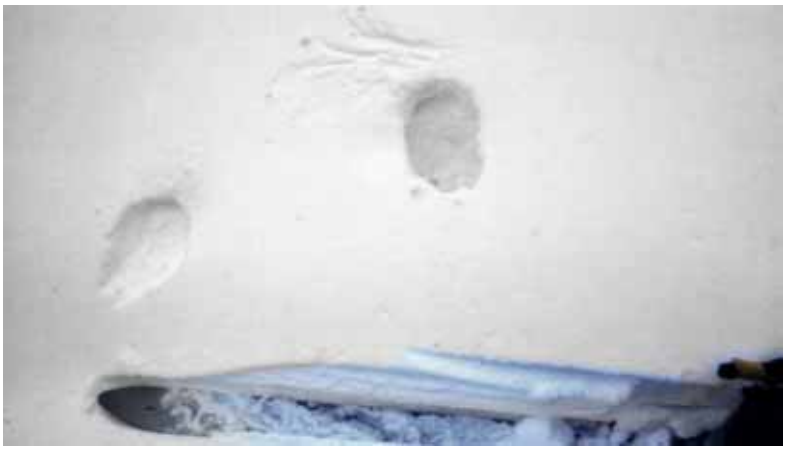
"One of the downsides of this is that a major part of this project is to study nesting ecology and we have fewer females going into the spring than we would have liked," Allen said. "We have 11 at one study site and only four at another. So our goal is to get some more birds radioed before the nesting period. Like now. As soon as we can get into the woods."

John Holyoke can be reached at jholyoke@bangordailynews.com or 990-8214. Follow him on Twitter: @JohnHolyoke.

Snow Conditions Conducive to Snow-roosting by Grouse

Across much of the Northeast this past winter, plentiful snow and consistently cold weather resulted in little in the way of crust forming on the snow. In fact, I didn't detect a crust in the snow-pack where I live in the southern tier of New York until early March. Snow conditions were excellent for snow roosting for a great part of the winter.

I took this photo while cross-country skiing in upstate NY the third week of February. When I stopped to examine a hole in the snow (near tip of ski, on the left) a ruffed grouse erupted in flight about 15 inches closer to me. What a thrill! In the photo you can see the wing marks in the snow where the grouse exited her burrow (I say "her" – I was that close and had a great view of the bird). This bird had entered its roost by plunging from flight.



When the snow is ten inches or deeper, grouse will snow roost by either burrowing or plunging from flight into the snow. Then it will burrow horizontally a foot or more and hollow out a small place to spend the night, or long periods of the day when it is not feeding. Snow roosting confers two benefits: thermal efficiency and security. Being in the snow burrow reduces the bird's energy expenditure by about 1/3 compared to roosting in the open, and it also provides cover

from predators. The more time a grouse spends feeding and moving, the greater the risk of detection by predators. So, the grouse's strategy is to feed quickly to fill its crop, then spend time inactive in secure cover that also provides protection from wind and cold.

My take on how the winter affected grouse? I think across the region, on average, it was favorable for grouse. As always, local weather events and local predator populations will cause variation, but taken as a whole I liked this winter.

RGS Sponsors and Presents at House Congressional Briefing

Dan Dessecker, Director of Conservation and Policy for RGS, presented at a recent House congressional briefing re: HR 2647. The proposed legislation includes language that would establish a Categorical Exclusion (CE) for projects where the sum of the harvest units does not exceed 5,000 acres if the purpose of the project is to establish early successional wildlife habitat. Currently a CE can be used if the project is less than 3,000 acres and similar projects have been done in the past without objection from public user groups. The key in this section 104 of HR 2647 of the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015 is in explicitly naming the creation of "Early Successional Wildlife Habitat" within the project. CEs can be considered a 'fast track' and may not require NEPA, and environmental assessment, or an environmental impact statement and therefore decreases all the public comment periods prior to implementation of the project. This would enable the USFS to more efficiently plan and implement the projects designed to provide the necessary habitat for sustaining viable populations within this ephemeral habitat.

RGS to Co-Sponsor Grouse and Woodcock Hunting Workshop in NH

Get set for the fall grouse and woodcock season at a free workshop on **Ruffed Grouse and Woodcock Hunting** on Saturday, August 29, 2015, from 9 a.m. to noon at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department's Owl Brook Hunter Education Center in Holderness. Pre-registration is required. To sign up, call 603-536-3954.

The workshop covers the basic skills needed for the pursuit of these challenging birds. Participants also will learn about grouse behavior, recognizing and scouting for habitat, hunting safety issues, hunting with or without dogs, gaining permission to hunt/landowner relations, clothing choices, shotgun and ammunition options, creature comforts for an enjoyable hunt, and recipes for grouse and woodcock.

The session will be led by grouse hunting enthusiasts/Hunter Education instructors Sean Williamson and Dan Keleher, and Andy Weik, the Northeast biologist for the Ruffed Grouse Society.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions and notify me of any email address changes:

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