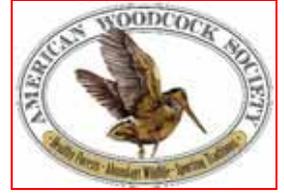




Ruff Country News

Wisconsin, Iowa, & Illinois



Volume 15, Issue 3, September 15, 2015

Wisconsin 2015 Season Dates

Ruffed Grouse

Zone A: 12 Sept – 31 Jan

Zone B: 17 Oct – 8 Dec

Woodcock

19 Sept – 2 Nov



Scott Walter and friend in 2007, while both were engaged in a 4-year study of ruffed grouse ecology in southwestern WI.

Iowa 2015 Season Dates

Ruffed Grouse

3 Oct – 31 Jan

Woodcock

3 Oct – 16 Nov

Illinois 2015 Season Dates

Woodcock

17 Oct – 30 Nov

Scott Walter Assumes Duties as WI/IA/IL Regional Biologist

I am excited to step into the large void created with Gary Zimmer's retirement in May of this year. As RGS and AWS members are well aware, Gary's tireless efforts on behalf of young forest-dependent wildlife created multiple ongoing partnerships, increased visibility and awareness of the conservation challenges faced by those interested in healthy forest wildlife populations, and opened many opportunities to address these challenges going forward. I'm both humbled and energized to be named Gary's successor as the RGS/AWS wildlife biologist for Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois.

For those whom I have yet to meet during my travels throughout the region, I'd like to take a moment to introduce myself. I'm a Wisconsin native, and currently live on my 6th-generation family farm in southwestern Wisconsin. It was on this farm that my passion for wildlife conservation ignited, and some of my most exciting childhood memories involved chasing grouse through dense stands of sumac and prickly ash, or trying to walk in on a drumming male. Driven by these experiences into the conservation field, I later earned a B.Sc. degree in Biology from Beloit College and M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees in Wildlife Ecology from University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison. Though my graduate work focused on the reproductive ecology of Canada geese, I had a long talk with my advisor, Don Rusch, about instead initiating doctoral research on the declining ruffed grouse population in the Driftless area. This project would later come to fruition via a 4-year study in Richland County, conducted when I was a professor at UW-Richland, where I served on the faculty for 11 years. In 2011, I then took a dual position as Upland Wildlife Ecologist and Farm Bill Coordinator for the Wisconsin DNR. In this role, I was able to meet and interact with

many outstanding conservationists in the state, and many of these relationships will continue to be valuable in my new role.

Working for the Ruffed Grouse Society in many ways feels like coming home for me, in part due to my life-long fascination with the ruffed grouse, but also because I've been engaged with RGS for over 20 years as a member. I have long respected RGS' focus, and ability to use science to drive action on behalf of natural resources management. I'm very excited to engage our conservation partners in young forest management, and have already enjoyed my first couple months on this new journey. Look for me at your local chapter banquet- I'll be the 6'7" guy. Please stop to say 'Hi', and to discuss your ruffed grouse interests and habitat goals. I look forward to meeting each of you in the near future.

Scott

Ruffed Grouse Society Speaks Out For Forest Wildlife in Congress

Coraopolis, PA –The Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) co-sponsored and spoke at a congressional briefing for United States House of Representative members and staff on Wednesday June 24, 2015. The briefing was hosted by the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and highlighted proposed legislation that would dramatically enhance the ability of the U.S. Forest Service to sustain the young forest habitats required by ruffed grouse, American woodcock and many other species of game and nongame wildlife. The Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015, HR 2647, includes language that would establish a streamlined planning process for projects designed to establish young forest wildlife habitats.

In his comments, Dan Dessecker, RGS director of conservation policy, stated, *"Clearly, we must work to increase the abundance and the distribution of young forest habitats throughout our Eastern forests, including our national forests. The Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015 would enhance the ability of the U.S. Forest Service to play its essential role in the conservation of forest wildlife and the protection of our nation's hunting heritage."*

Ruffed grouse populations are experiencing population declines throughout the East and these declines are, in part, a result of habitat loss on our national forests and other public lands. Indeed, directly due to a lack of the forest management necessary to sustain young forest habitats, ruffed grouse have been virtually, if not in fact, eliminated from the Chattahoochee (Georgia), Hoosier (Indiana) and Sumter (South Carolina) National Forests.

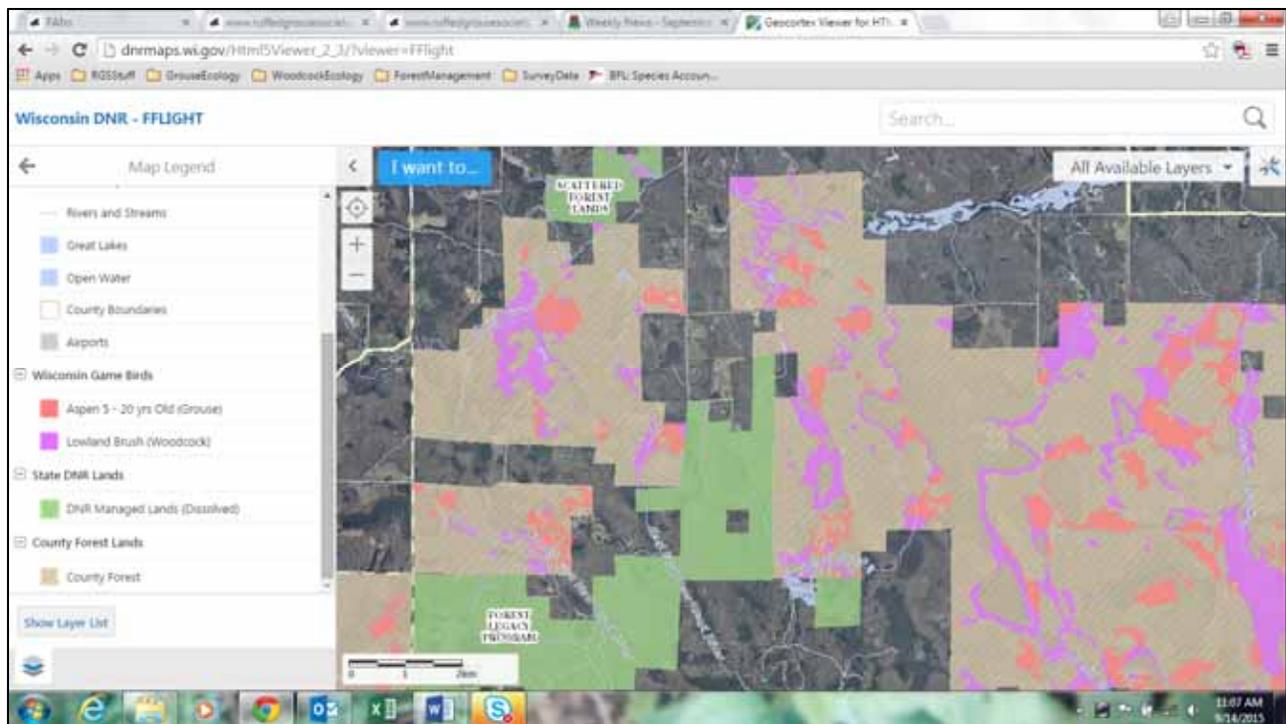
Young forest habitats on national forests and other public lands are critically important to the 11 million sportsmen and women who pursue white-tailed deer each year in the United States. Deer hunting is a foundation of the economy of many of our nation's rural communities, contributing billions of dollars annually. According to the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, *"... national forest deer habitat can be considered suboptimal or marginal from a deer management perspective."* An assessment of deer management in Wisconsin found that, *"... national forest management policy has had a dramatic impact on deer herd productivity..."*

Likewise, many species of nongame wildlife require young forest habitats. Across the eastern United States, 59 percent of the songbird species that use these habitats for breeding are declining, while only 11 percent are increasing. Conversely, only 29 percent of the songbird species that breed in mature forest habitats are declining, while 31 percent are increasing.

The ultimate fate of the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015 remains uncertain, but it's encouraging that Congress is increasingly recognizing the need to increase wildlife habitat management on our national forests and other federal public lands. Additional co-sponsors of the event included the Boone & Crockett Club, National Wild Turkey Federation and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Wisconsin Offers Interactive Maps of Grouse, Woodcock Hunting Areas

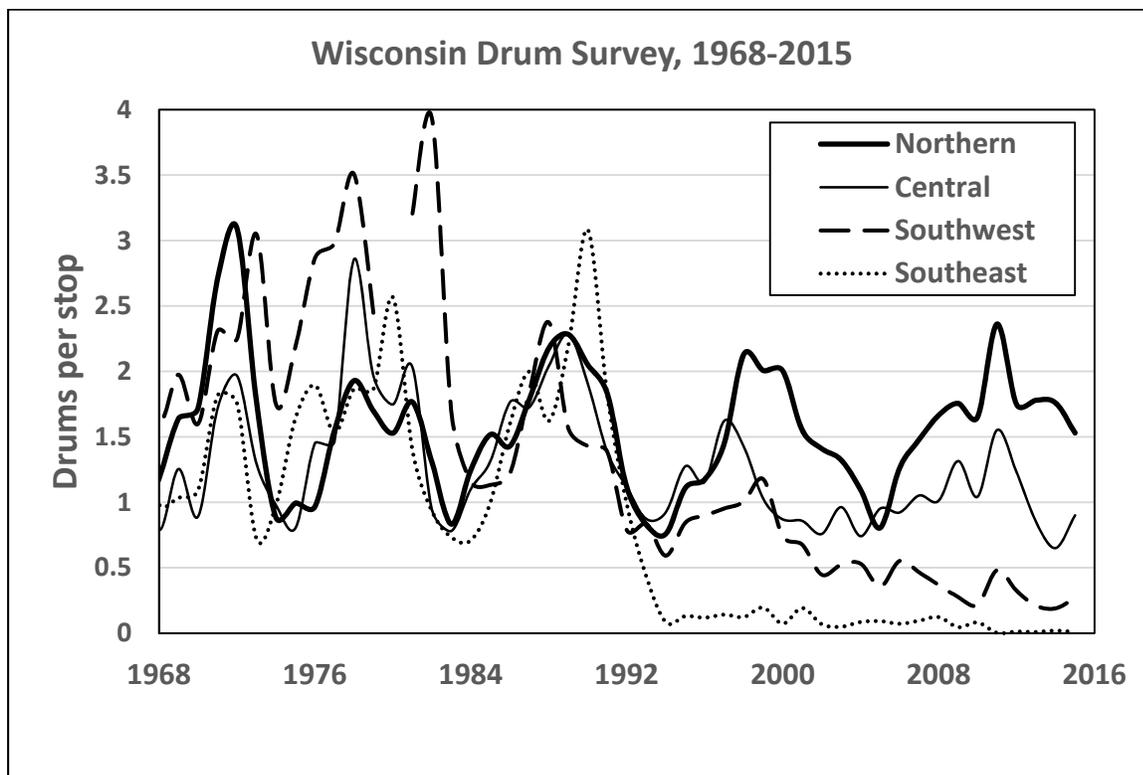
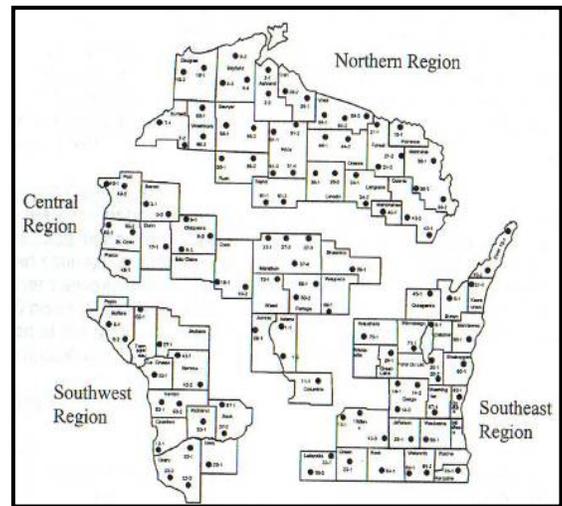
For those grouse and woodcock enthusiasts who have not yet taken advantage of this tool, in 2014 the Wisconsin DNR released the Fields and Forest Lands Interactive Gamebird Hunting Tool (FFLIGHT). This easy-to-use web-based application allows hunters to identify quality ruffed grouse (5-20 year-old aspen) and woodcock (lowland brush) habitat. The interactive tool allows users to create and develop outstanding maps of their hunting areas, and can be converted to .pdf files and printed for use in the field. Aerial photos, topo maps, and roads can easily be added. A mobile version allows viewing on portable devices (smart phones), and hunters can use their phone's GPS to locate themselves on the map. A short tutorial (video) is available on the site to get new users up-and-running quickly. To access FFLIGHT, go to <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/FFLIGHT.html>.



Example of the mapping environment in FFLIGHT.

Wisconsin Drum, Brood Surveys Paint Picture of 2015 Season

Statewide, Wisconsin ruffed grouse population indices were similar between 2014 and 2015, based on the number of drumming grouse heard during roadside surveys. However, indices to breeding grouse populations varied by region, with the number of drums heard per stop increasing by 38% in the central forest region, and declining marginally (by 2.4%) in the north. Interestingly, survey results indicate that grouse densities in the Northern region have not tapered off as sharply as during the preceding four cyclic declines, with 1.5 – 1.8 drums/stop recorded the past four years as opposed to 0.7 – 1.0 drums per stop during previous low phases of the cycle. Ruffed grouse populations continue at low levels in the southwest and southeast regions in response to the aging forests in these areas. In summary, grouse numbers continue near their cyclic low, but are expected to begin to increase toward peak levels in the next few years.



Though large increases were not seen in the number of breeding grouse during the spring drum surveys, the subsequent 10-week brood survey revealed good production across the state. This will lead to increased numbers of first-year birds in the woods this fall, and greater flush rates for hunters. Good production this year also paves the way for a more rapid increase toward peak

numbers in the next few years. "Brood production surveys for ruffed grouse, pheasants and turkeys were conducted during June, July and August by DNR staff as they went about their normal work duties," said Brian Dhuey, wildlife survey coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. "These data are still preliminary and may change, but they can be used as an index to production and help to forecast fall hunting prospects."

According to Dhuey, while most of the winter was below normal for temperature and snowfall, a lack of heavy snow cover may have led to an early spring green-up. Timing of spring green-up can affect game bird survival and physical condition going into the breeding and nesting season and in turn effect brood survival.

Wisconsin's 2015 brood-rearing conditions were average for temperature, with much of the state seeing temperatures close to average for the month of June and average to slightly below average for July and August. Precipitation was close to normal, with no large or prolonged rain events followed by cold weather. Early June weather is the most critical for turkey, pheasant and grouse broods - this is when recently-hatched chicks are most susceptible to hypothermia if they get wet. Weather during July and August was excellent for brood-rearing and survival.

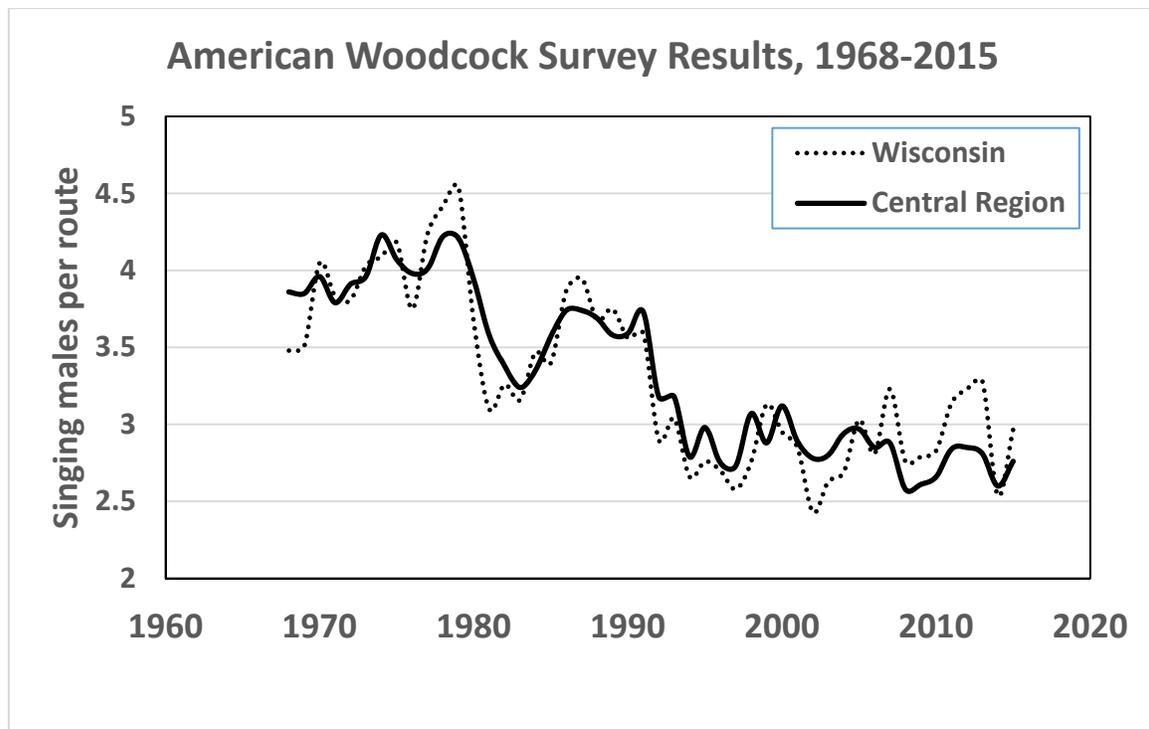
Statewide, ruffed grouse broods seen per observer-hour increased 18 percent compared to 2014 levels. Ruffed grouse production was up 132 percent in the central region and 20 percent in the northern region - these areas compose two-thirds of primary range for ruffed grouse in Wisconsin. Ruffed grouse production declined 41 percent in the southwestern region. Overall, ruffed grouse brood size rose from 4.1 young per brood in 2014 to 4.2 in 2015.

"Breeding grouse numbers were down slightly this spring, while brood production in the primary ruffed grouse range showed a notable increase," said Dhuey. "Ruffed grouse are currently in their cyclic low period, and while an increase in production is a positive sign, it will likely still be a few years until Wisconsin is at its cyclic high. While some areas of the primary ruffed grouse range will be better than others, it appears that ruffed grouse numbers will be similar or slightly better than last year."

For more details on the 2015 Spring Ruffed Grouse Drumming Survey or 10-week Gamebird Brood Survey, see <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/reports.html>.

Woodcock Populations Similar to Last Year; Long-Term Trend Still Downward

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinates annual spring surveys of singing male American woodcock, for both the eastern and central population segments. A total of 81 routes were surveyed in Wisconsin in 2015, and 440 total throughout the Central Region. The number of singing males recorded in both Wisconsin and the Central Region were up a bit from 2014 levels, but this increase was not significant. The long-term population trend for woodcock remains negative throughout their range. The average number of males heard on Wisconsin survey routes over the last 10 years is 24% lower than during 1968 – 1977, and 31% lower across the Central Region.



Long-term declines in woodcock and other wildlife species adapted to young forest communities is of great concern to conservationists, and addressing these declines is at the heart of the RGS/AWS mission. RGS staff were instrumental in developing the 2008 American Woodcock Conservation Plan, which has the goal of restoring woodcock populations to 1970 levels of abundance. Based on goals and information in this plan, biologists used known woodcock habitat relationships to step-down habitat goals for each county within the primary U.S. woodcock range. These goals allow managers specific targets with which to drive habitat work, and against which to measure long-term success. To help achieve these important goals, RGS/AWS are primary partners in the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership, dedicated to promoting active forest management in Wisconsin. This partnership allows multiple agencies and organizations to pool resources and collaborate on outreach, education, and implementation of habitat work. The American Woodcock Conservation Plan can be reviewed at http://timberdoodle.org/sites/default/files/woodcockPlan_0.pdf, and more information on the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership can be found at <http://youngforest.org/wisconsin/wisconsin-young-forest-partnership>.

Good Neighbor Authority to Improve Forest Health

By Wisconsin DNR Central Office Staff, August 6, 2015. Wisconsin will be the first state east of the Mississippi to participate in forestry management under an expanded federal-state partnership effort that aims to increase and streamline work on federal lands. The Department of

Natural Resources will be working side by side with the U.S. Forest Service to ensure the program delivers environmental as well as economic benefits here in Wisconsin.

Called the Good Neighbor Authority, the program was expanded nationally in the 2014 Farm Bill and allows the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management to enter into cooperative agreements with states to perform forest, rangeland and watershed restoration projects on federal and non-federal lands. In Wisconsin, DNR and USFS leadership anticipate the partnership will facilitate forest and watershed work on the 1.5 million acre Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. As part of the national forest's approved forest management plan, the results will create economic opportunities through increased timber sales which supports one of Wisconsin's largest economic sectors.

"Wisconsin is a leader in forest management and watershed restoration and the Good Neighbor Authority allows us to work hand in hand with the U.S. Forest Service to increase the public benefits from the federal forest," said Governor Scott Walker. "Our very first project will help support jobs in northern Wisconsin by increasing the amount of timber offered for sale. It will provide more of this renewable resource for producing valuable paper and wood products, while improving desired wildlife habitat."

DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp credited careful management of Wisconsin's forests for sustaining a vibrant wood and paper products industry. "Wisconsin's paper industry has retained the No. 1 spot in the nation for more than 60 years," Stepp said. "In addition to the nearly 60,000 jobs and \$4 billion in annual wages from the forest products sector, more than 6 million acres of Wisconsin's forest lands are open to the public for uses including hunting, hiking, bird-watching and other recreational activities. I am pleased that through the Good Neighbor Authority we can work closely with our USFS partners to build on the great work that they do, as together we grow the economy and provide an even better recreational experience for the public."

Under the agreement, the amount of timber offered for harvest under approved forest management plans is anticipated to increase by approximately 25 percent to more than 100 million board feet in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in 2016. That is still below the level authorized in the approved plan for the forest.

DNR's work will focus on preparing, awarding and administering timber sales that have already had all the inventory and planning work completed, said Paul DeLong, chief state forester with DNR.

"We are pleased that we can partner with the USFS to support implementation of the approved plan and increase the public benefits that the forest provides," DeLong said. "Most people don't realize that Wisconsin forests grow one and a half times more wood than is harvested each year. Managing forests to create desired habitat while removing forest products to meet the needs of a growing population and to sustain local communities is an environmental, economic and social win-win-win,"

"The Good Neighbor Authority is a terrific way for the Forest Service to partner with state agencies to make improvements to the land," said U.S. Forest Service Eastern Regional Forester Kathleen Atkinson. "I'm excited to have a new tool that allows us to work together in unprecedented ways as we move forward with state and community partnerships into the future."

"Our first Good Neighbor Authority agreement with the state reflects several months of meaningful collaboration and establishes the groundwork for an even deeper partnership between our agencies going forward," said Paul Strong, Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest supervisor. "We are fortunate to have the capacity and forest management expertise of the Wisconsin DNR and its employees to help increase the work we can accomplish on the forest, which will more closely fulfill the goals and objectives of our Land and Resource Management Plan."

A portion of the receipts from Good Neighbor Authority timber sales will reimburse the state for its costs to do this work, with remaining funds available to be used by the state of Wisconsin to conduct additional restoration activities that will be identified through a collaborative process. To learn more about the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and its Forest Plan and activities, visit: www.fs.usda.gov/main/cnnf/home and navigate to "Land & Resources Management". More information about Wisconsin's forest management can be found by searching the DNR website, dnr.wi.gov, for keyword "[forestry](#)."

Research Corner: Landscape, Landscape, Landscape!!!

Since Gardiner Bump's landmark work on ruffed grouse ecology in the 1930s and 1940s, biologists have learned much about the habitat needs of grouse. Until recently, however, this research was confined to site-specific assessments of habitat use and selection by individual birds; in some cases, the survival or reproductive implications of using various habitats have also been estimated, which has allowed managers to create the highest-quality grouse habitat possible. For example, we all know that aspen and regenerating oak stands are preferable to older forest types, as they provide cover and food sufficient to allow grouse to survive and reproduce well.

However, while a high-quality habitat *patch* can provide outstanding food and cover for the grouse that may occupy it, a healthy grouse **population** requires that quality habitat occurs in quantities and arrangements on the landscape sufficient to allow enough grouse to survive, reproduce, and move around safely that the population will persist through time. While many hunters and landowners can assess the quality of a habitat patch, determining what a quality landscape for grouse is becomes far trickier. When I was studying the long-term grouse decline in southwest Wisconsin, I would frequently talk with farmers who were stymied by the lack of grouse on their land. They would point at a small patch of dense woody cover, often a mixture of prickly ash, sumac, hazelnut, or redcedar, and say "that's great grouse cover, but I haven't heard a grouse in years." Their observation that they had quality habitat but no grouse frequently led to other explanations for the grouse decline, normally predators and/or competition with turkeys. What failed to enter into their thoughts was the fact that their patch of grouse cover existed in a landscape of mature forest entirely hostile to grouse, and that the patch of cover was itself entirely too small to support a grouse population, though an individual grouse may have found it entirely to its liking. As I brought these ideas into our discussions, many landowners began to understand the situation. I recall one

old-timer near Gotham looking off across the valley and stating, “You know, those hillsides did used to be a lot brushier after we took the cows off.” Exactly.

Addressing ruffed grouse conservation on a landscape scale, however, presents its own challenges. While we can use radio transmitters to measure grouse survival or reproduction in different habitat types, how do we accurately determine what landscape configurations are going to sustain grouse? While more cover is certainly better, how do we target limited resources to produce the desired result of a persistent grouse population? These are significant questions that need to be addressed as we try to improve the habitat base for grouse, especially in areas where aging forests have already eliminated much of the previous grouse cover. How much young forest habitat do we need to allow grouse to persist? How big of a landscape?



The above aerial photos, taken in 1937 (left) and 2003 (right) in Richland County, WI, typify the dramatic changes that have taken place in forested communities across the southern ruffed grouse range. Addressing forest maturation and the loss of young forest habitat will require expanded knowledge about how to build “grouse landscapes” in these areas that meet wildlife, forestry, and landowner goals.

Scientists in Rhode Island were interested in these very questions. Grouse populations in Rhode Island, like in other areas of the Northeast, Appalachians, and southern Midwest, had been declining for years. The scientists used estimates of grouse survival and reproduction to predict grouse population behavior in a computer environment, in which they could change the amount of quality habitat available, and the size of habitat patches. Their findings were clear. Without changing current forest management practices, their hypothetical grouse population continued to decline steeply. However, by increasing the amount of habitat available (converting 5%, 10%, 15%, or 20%) of the forest into younger forest types, they could increase the likelihood that their hypothetical grouse population persisted. They also found that the creation of larger patches (250 acres) was slightly better than creating smaller (60 acre) patches. All simulations, however, suggested improved likelihood of grouse persistence with any increase in habitat.

This information provides forest managers the knowledge with which to build future forest management plans and priorities, and emphasizes the importance of the RGS mission of promoting “healthy forests, abundant wildlife, and sporting traditions.” The results provide further evidence that the habitat work we promote has real and tangible benefit to grouse, woodcock, and the myriad other forest wildlife we care about, and will also help direct future work. Knowing where we need to go is an important first step in getting there.

If you would like more details on the Rhode Island project, drop me an e-mail at ScottW@ruffedgrousesociety.org and I’ll respond with the article attached.

Upcoming Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois Events

For detailed information on these and other RGS events go to the [Events page](#) on our website.

Date	Event	Location	Contact
Oct 3 rd	3 rd Annual Hunt for Habitat	Wausau, WI	DaveJ@ruffedgrousesociety.org
Oct 6 – 9	34 th National Grouse & Woodcock Hunt	Grand Rapids, MN	MarkF@ruffedgrousesociety.org
Oct 13 th	29 th Westcentral Wisconsin Chapter Banquet	Marshfield, WI	DaveJ@ruffedgrousesociety.org
Oct 15 th	35 th Flambeau River Chapter Banquet	Park Falls, WI	DaveJ@ruffedgrousesociety.org

I wish everyone a safe and enjoyable fall afield. Please don't hesitate to contact me with comments, questions, or to chat about young forest conservation.

Scott Walter

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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.

