



# Ruff Country News

## & Timberdoodle Times



Wisconsin, Iowa, & Illinois

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*As I write this, it appears we're finally heading toward winter-like weather in Wisconsin. Unseasonably warm weather has dominated much of the fall hunting season so far, with mild temperatures making for pleasant days afield. My brothers and I enjoyed our annual hunting excursion on the beautiful Rusk County Forest, encountering more grouse than we had in the previous few years—supporting survey results that indicate grouse are beginning their cyclic upswing. A highlight for me was watching my young son take his first shots on grouse; though he missed, he handled the gun very well and his smile told me he'll be back with us next year (shortly thereafter, he harvested his first buck [above], which greatly alleviated his frustration!). Our young Lab also performed well and hunted much closer than his hyper personality would have suggested. All-in-all, it's been a wonderful fall, and I hope your season is similarly producing both flushes and memories. Though there's snow on the ground and deer season is behind us, don't hesitate to get back out there with your dog and shotgun. Late-season grouse hunting provides a very different experience than pursuing the birds in October. Following leaf drop and with snow on the ground, the birds will likely be more concentrated and associated with winter coverts. Check out winterberry or highbush cranberry patches, or aspen stands with a nice hazelnut understory, especially those near dense spruce or balsam thickets. Though the birds will increasingly be feeding on aspen buds, shrubs like these continue to draw grouse due to the berries and catkins they provide.*

*It's been a very exciting and rewarding fall on the conservation front as well, with your Ruffed Grouse Society providing leadership on a number of significant conservation initiatives. A partnership between RGS, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Wisconsin DNR will bring additional and significant capacity to expand our young forest work in the northwestern part of the state, and a broad partnership among multiple organizations is addressing long-term declines in young forest habitat across the Driftless Region. More detail on these, and other, endeavors, is below.*

*I sincerely wish you all a safe and enjoyable holiday season. After your cup of egg nog, consider donning your boots, bundling up your kids, and taking them for a walk in Wisconsin's winter woodlands. Engaging the next generation is key to ensuring Healthy Forests, Abundant Wildlife, and sustaining our Sporting Traditions.*

*Scott*

## ***RGS-NRCS-WDNR Partnership to Bring Forest Wildlife Specialist Position to Wisconsin***

Healthy forests are the centerpiece of the RGS/AWS mission, and this mission is shared by colleagues from many other conservation organizations. By engaging with our conservation partners, we can pool “time, talent, and treasure” and have a synergistic impact on Wisconsin’s forest resources - an impact far greater than would be possible acting independently. Throughout 2016, your RGS/AWS staff collaborated with staff from the USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Wisconsin DNR to develop an agreement that will greatly increase our collective conservation capacity in Wisconsin. The agreement formalizes a collaborative model that will support a new, full-time staff person dedicated to forest habitat development in the northern part of the state. The Forest Wildlife Specialist will work with forest landowners to identify and implement sound forest management practices on their lands, emphasizing practices that enhance or expand the young forest habitat base. From initial consultation to practice implementation, the Specialist will be able to provide landowners all the technical assistance needed to achieve their forest wildlife habitat objectives, and will provide financial assistance via the application of federal Farm Bill conservation dollars. This new initiative will greatly expand RGS/AWS’ ability to directly improve habitat on the ground, and is only possible due to the hard work and passion of our partners at NRCS and the Wisconsin DNR. Our hope is that the new person will be on board early in 2017, stationed in the Spooner, WI USDA office. Great things to come!

## ***“Grouse Camp Tour” Continues to Celebrate the Ruffed Grouse Society’s Mission***

The fall of 2016 found numerous RGS staff touring several eastern states, engaging with local members and celebrating young forest habitats and our storied upland bird hunting heritage. Initiated in 2015, the Grouse Camp Tour has become a popular and visible means of showcasing the spiritual and community-building benefits of grouse and woodcock hunting, while also depicting the importance of diverse and healthy forest wildlife habitat. Follow this year’s grouse tour through the Appalachians at

<http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/camptour16>.



*RGS/AWS staff share time with local members in Virginia during the 2016 Grouse Camp*

## ***Driftless Committee Seeks Landscape Impact on Wisconsin's Forests***

As a species entirely dependent upon disturbance, ruffed grouse populations ebb and flow based on the extent to which even-aged management strategies are incorporated into forest management. In northern Wisconsin, for example, market-driven aspen harvests predictably provide young forest habitats, resulting in healthy grouse populations. Elsewhere, where pulpwood markets are lacking, selective harvests of hardwood species can be the norm. These harvests tend to maintain current forest conditions and don't generate the expansive, dense, young forest habitat that grouse need. As a result, grouse populations decline. Maturing forests across the southern periphery of the ruffed grouse range have, in this manner, led to wide-spread declines in young forest habitat. Recently, RGS/AWS joined the Wisconsin DNR, Minnesota DNR, Iowa DNR, National Wild Turkey Federation, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in hosting the Driftless Young Forest Symposium, to address long-term declines in young forest habitat- and young forest-adapted wildlife- in this region. A primary goal of the symposium was to develop long-term collaborations among organizations, so that solutions can be identified, and implemented, to enhance forest diversity in this important landscape. RGS/AWS staff have therefore initiated the Driftless Young Forest Steering Committee, which includes representatives from 9 different conservation organizations with interests in Driftless Region forests. This group, which will meet in January to begin developing a course of action, will work to explore alternative markets for the region's timber resources, develop a landscape-scale forest management plan that incorporates the importance of oak and young forest habitats, and expand the financial and technical assistance available to private forest landowners. While the goals for this initiative are lofty, the concerted efforts and significant interest among the many participants and organizations involved suggest a bright future for the region's forests. More to come.....



*Wisconsin DNR Deputy Secretary Kurt Thiede welcomes representatives from 16 conservation organizations to the Driftless Young Forest Symposium in August.*

## ***Student-Led Habitat & Research Project Gets Underway in Wisconsin***

A group of high school students at Class ACT charter school in Park Falls, Wisconsin are engaging in a long-term ruffed grouse project with significant resource, educational, and outreach benefits. Under the tutelage of staff members Paula Zwicke and Travis Augustine, the students have developed and are implementing a project to enhance young forest habitat on the Tracy Lake school forest, and also to better understand habitat use, survival, and movements of ruffed grouse utilizing the property. With a grant from the RGS Wisconsin Drummer Fund, and additional support from the school district and Ashland County Forestry and Recreation Department, the students have already seeded multiple wildlife openings and nearly a mile of hunter walking trail, and established numerous patches of wildlife shrubs. They have also worked with resource professionals to identify other habitat management objectives, including diversifying the age structure of aspen on the property, and regenerating over-mature stands of upland alder.

Via engagement in this project, the students are developing a deep appreciation for sound wildlife and active forest management practices, and routinely provide updates on the project to RGS members at the local Flambeau River Chapter banquet in nearby Fifield. "The grouse project not only helps us in school, but will also benefit the general public who all utilize the Tracy Lake area," noted Dawson Weik, a student involved in the project. The project will be ongoing for years to come, and will provide myriad opportunities to both educate students and inform the general public about the values inherent in active forest management.



*High school students Calvin Tank and Raymond Yunk affix a radio transmitter to a juvenile ruffed grouse as part of their school's RGS-sponsored effort to better understand grouse response to habitat improvements on the school forest.*

### ***Log-A-Load Event Educates and Assists Youth in Wisconsin***

On September 28, 2016, the Great Lakes Timber Producers Association hosted the 2016 Log-A-Load event near Florence, WI. The event allowed over 450 local school children to experience and learn about the timber industry in a very direct and interactive manner. Numerous timber industry representatives, foresters, and biologists led demonstrations throughout an active logging site to explain the numerous natural resource and economic benefits that accrue from Wisconsin's timber industry, and the kids were able to observe modern logging equipment in operation. "It was wonderful to see how engaged the kids were; I was barraged with questions all day," noted RGS Regional Biologist Scott Walter, who discussed the value of young forest habitats and their link to timber harvests. "Many of the kids began the day thinking that clearcuts and other forms of intensive timber management are bad, but nearly universally went away understanding how they can be used to both improve wildlife habitat and generate jobs and revenue to fuel the local economy. It was a very successful event."



*RGS/AWS Biologist Scott Walter with a few of the >450 students who participated in the 2016 Log-A-Load event. The students came away with a greater appreciation of the importance of the timber industry to healthy forests and abundant wildlife populations.*

An added benefit of the national Log-A-Load campaign is that loggers and others can donate the revenue from a load of logs, or any amount, to the Children's Miracle Network, which works to make hospital stays easier for children with serious illnesses. By engaging in and supporting events like Log-A-Load charitable harvests, RGS/AWS staff continue to educate the public about the importance of the timber industry to healthy forest communities.

## ***Coverts Continues Important Efforts on Behalf of Private Forests***

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-six workshops have been held, and a total of 669 attendees have benefited from the in-depth discussions of forest and wildlife habitat management. Collectively, these landowners manage over 377,000 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 sponsor of this important outreach effort, and would like to recognize Wisconsin’s Sustainable Forestry Initiative Implementation Committee for its important support.

In addition to the traditional workshop, Coverts organizers also invite past participants to 5-year reunions, to receive information on more advanced land management options and to strengthen and expand relationships among Coverts participants. The 2016 reunion was held in Rothschild, WI, from August 7-9, and featured a wonderful set of engaging speakers, hands-on activities, and enjoyable social time. Reflecting how valued participation in Coverts is among Cooperators, ninety-nine past Coverts participants attended the reunion. Via support for outreach efforts such as the Wisconsin Coverts Project, RGS/AWS continues to strive toward our mission of *Healthy Forests, Abundant Wildlife, and Sporting Traditions*.



Attendees at the 2016 Wisconsin Coverts Workshop pose outside the Lodge at Kemp Natural Resources Station near Minocqua.

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>.

### ***Research Corner: Be Realistic In Your Assessment of Predator Impacts***

As a wildlife biologist, I am daily amazed at the passion the public has for wildlife. From interactions at public meetings to informal chats at the local gas station, I frequently speak to individuals with a sincere concern for the health of wild critters. Unfortunately, passion uninformed by science can lead to incorrect conclusions about the factors that may be impacting populations of favorite wildlife species and, more problematic, promote ineffective management responses. When discussing declining wildlife populations (e.g., ruffed grouse in the Driftless Region), one of the alleged drivers most often cited by people is predation. It’s apparently intuitive for many people that, if a wildlife population is in decline, then predators must be responsible. In reality, there are many, many things that govern wildlife population dynamics- from weather and disease to habitat quality and distribution. Predation is but one of these factors. *For an in-depth discussion about the interactions between predators and prey, see the article “On Predation” in the Winter 2015 edition of the Ruffed Grouse Society magazine.*

Often, people extrapolate from individual observations to population-level impacts. Comments such as “There are way more raccoons than there used to be around here- the grouse don’t have a chance!”, “You can hear coyotes every night on my farm. No wonder the turkeys are gone.”, and “I saw a hawk eating a pheasant

along the road the other day- if we ever want good pheasant hunting again, we're going to have to do something about all those hawks!" Frequently, people will cite the apparent abundance of mammalian predators (raccoons, skunks, coyotes, opossums, etc.) as evidence that declines of ground-nesting birds is obviously an artifact of heavy nest predation. They wonder how a hen grouse, quail, or pheasant could possibly succeed in raising any chicks at all. One of my favorite studies in the wildlife literature weaves into this discussion, and describes how difficult it indeed can be for mammalian predators to locate nests. In their article, *Detection of forest grouse by mammalian predators: A possible explanation for high brood losses in fragmented landscapes*, European researchers used hunting dogs to search for black grouse and capercaillie nests and broods. Their surprising finding? Even well-trained hunting dogs had to come within 1.6 meters of a capercaillie nest, and 1.1 meters of a black grouse nest, before the nests could be detected. Like most ground-nesting birds, the hens are well-camouflaged and difficult to locate visually; this study also suggests that grouse nests give off very little odor, and so are also difficult to locate using olfactory cues. Since nests were dispersed throughout large patches of suitable nesting habitat, the authors suggest predators would gain little by actively searching for nests. The dogs were, however, much more able to detect broods by scent, locating capercaillie broods when within an average of 39 meters. On their study area, suitable brood-rearing habitat was in short supply, causing capercaillie broods to be concentrated. Predators would therefore achieve higher gains by focusing their search efforts in brood cover, and impacts of predators on chick survival are likely higher where broods are concentrated in small pockets of suitable habitat. Again, here we see that, while predators are impacting survival, their impacts are mediated through habitat change- in this case fragmentation of the available brood-rearing habitat. The authors also suggest that the availability of alternative prey (small rodents) would serve to reduce impacts on both grouse nests and broods.

Predator-prey relationships are fascinating and complex. Consider this complexity when thinking about wildlife populations in your neck of the woods. 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](mailto:ScottW@ruffedgrousesociety.org).

***Enjoy your family and friends this holiday season. 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](http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org).**

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