



Ruff Country News

& Timberdoodle Times



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Photo by Matt Soberg

Spring is here, and with it the hearts and minds of upland bird enthusiasts gravitate toward local coverts, pondering the past winter's impacts and potential for good spring production among their favorite young forest species. The winter of 2015-2016 was relatively mild, with less snow and prolonged cold than the preceding two winters. Mild fall weather persisted well into November, resulting in a delayed woodcock migration and hunters reporting major flights moving into Wisconsin late in or after the closure of woodcock season. Spring arrived early as well, with warm weather in early March across most of the upper Midwest and woodcock close on its heels. Woodcock equipped with satellite transmitters as part of an RGS-supported project showed birds arriving in northern Wisconsin by the first week of March. Hunters are reminded that they can follow movements of these woodcock at <http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/woodcockmigration>.

The 2016 Wisconsin drumming surveys are in, and bring what we've all been waiting for- indications of a grouse population that's headed back toward the cyclic peak. Now is a great time to start a dog and to get youth interested in grouse hunting. Great times are ahead!

Scott

Wisconsin ruffed grouse survey results indicate stable population

Wisconsin DNR News Release, June 14, 2016

MADISON - Roadside ruffed grouse surveys completed this spring show that ruffed grouse enthusiasts should expect bird encounters similar to those experienced in 2015 as the population cycle begins to trend upward.

"While statewide trends were essentially stable, the two regions that make up the primary grouse habitat in the state showed increased drumming activity in 2016," said Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources wildlife survey coordinator Brian Dhuey. "Ruffed grouse populations are known to rise and fall over a nine- to 11-year cycle, and the last peak in Wisconsin's cycle occurred in 2011 - survey results suggest that we have reached the low point in the population cycle and may have started the increasing phase, which should continue the next few years as the grouse population moves toward the next peak."

For complete [2016 ruffed grouse survey results](#) [PDF], search the DNR website, dnr.wi.gov, for "[wildlife reports](#)," and click on the drop down for "small game."

Roadside surveys to monitor the number of breeding grouse have been conducted by staff from the department, U.S. Forest Service, tribal employees, and numerous grouse enthusiasts and volunteers since 1964. Surveys begin 30 minutes before sunrise and consist of 10 stops at assigned points. Surveyors listen for four minutes for the distinctive thumping sounds made by drumming male grouse. Surveyors monitored 99 routes this year.



Photo Credit: Paul Carson

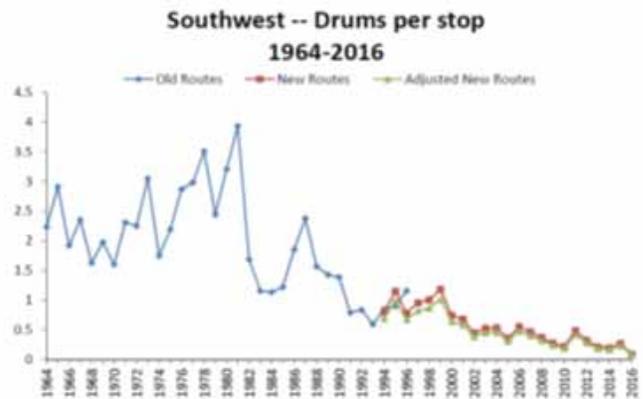
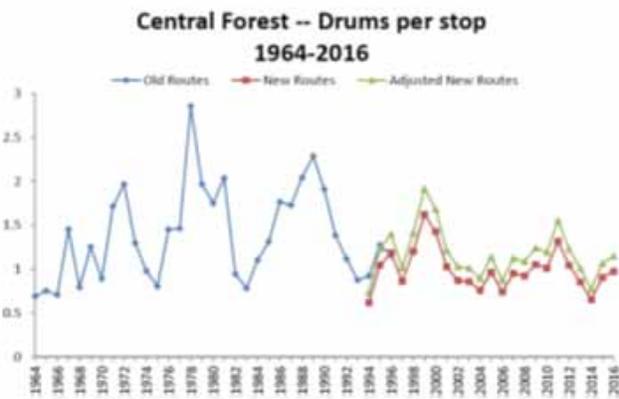
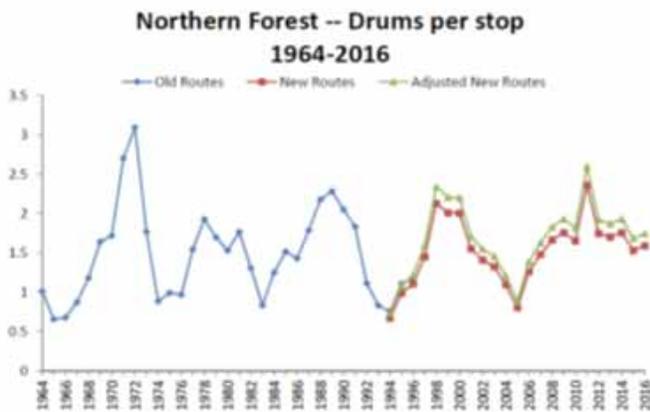
While the number of drums heard per stop statewide in 2016 was similar to last year, there were some notable differences among regions. Both the northern and central forest regions showed increases in drumming activity. The largest increase occurred in the central forest, with an eight percent increase, followed by the Northern forest regions with a four percent increase. The southwest region saw the largest decline at 67 percent. Declines in the southwest part of the state are more than likely driven by aging forest and the loss of prime grouse breeding habitat.

Weather conditions influence drumming activity by male grouse, and most observers felt weather conditions were conducive to accurate surveys this spring. Surveyors rated the overall survey conditions as "excellent" on 45 percent of transects runs, compared to 65 percent in 2015. Surveyors rated 2016 conditions as "fair," the lowest available weather condition rating, seven percent of the time in 2016, compared to five percent in 2015. Results from the 2015 survey show that grouse populations in both the southwest and southeast region remain well below historic levels. According to DNR Upland Wildlife Ecologist, Mark Witecha, maturation of southern Wisconsin's forest community and the resulting loss of dense, brushy areas that grouse need for cover has resulted in lower numbers of grouse in the region in recent decades.

"Ruffed grouse are closely associated with dense, young forest cover," said Witecha. "Young forests are generally the result of some disturbance, like logging or intense wildfires. Forest management and fire prevalence in southern Wisconsin have declined in recent decades, leading to more mature forest communities that are not as suitable for grouse."

Where Are We In The Cycle? A Snapshot Of Wisconsin's Ruffed Grouse Population

The 2016 ruffed grouse drumming survey data reveal a few interesting tidbits for grouse hunters. First, grouse are on schedule to begin heading back toward peak numbers, and this year's survey indicates that they have begun that climb. Second, it appears that grouse numbers in the northern region have not dipped as low during the current cycle as they did during past cycles. This can be inferred by comparing where we are in 2016 with the low points of previous cycles (1974, 1983, 1994, and 2005) in the upper graph below. Finally, grouse numbers continue to be low across southern Wisconsin due to habitat maturation and the relative lack of even-aged forest management practices. Check out the figures below for a general summary of grouse population trends in your hunting area. These surveys provide important information regarding the long-term health of our grouse population and, by extension, the young forest habitats on which they depend.



RGS and USFWS Agreement Provides \$50,000 for Wisconsin Young Forest Habitat

The Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) has partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to expand support for young forest habitat restoration efforts across northern and central Wisconsin. A new agreement secures \$25,000 in FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program funding for forest management practices that will benefit ruffed grouse, American woodcock, golden-winged warblers and other young-forest dependent wildlife species over the next three years.

RGS has also committed an equal amount of staff time and habitat funding over this time period, resulting in \$50,000 in total support for critical habitat efforts in the state. Landowners across northern and central portions of the state will be eligible for assistance, but support will focus on identified priority areas for woodcock and golden-winged warblers. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides technical and financial assistance to landowners interested in enhancing fish and wildlife habitat on their land.



RGS/AWS Regional Biologist Scott Walter and Kurt Waterstradt, Wisconsin State Coordinator of the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, celebrate approval of a new agreement that will bring \$50,000 in dedicated funding to young forest habitat efforts in the state.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service has long been a leader in private lands conservation work in Wisconsin, and we’re thrilled to be able to collaborate with their staff and bring additional resources to address our shared mission of supporting healthy forests in the state,” noted RGS and AWS Regional Biologist Scott Walter. “This agreement is a great example of how, by partnering with agencies that have similar conservation goals, we can magnify our ability to meet conservation objectives. This agreement also brings assistance to those who own 90 percent of the land in the upper Midwest - private landowners.”

For more information on the Partners program, go to <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/partners/>. The Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership website (<http://youngforest.org/wisconsin/wisconsin-young-forest-partnership>) also provides excellent resources for those interested in promoting healthy forests in northern Wisconsin.

New Video Series Showcases the Allure of the Grouse Woods

As RGS/AWS members, we are committed to promoting healthy forests, understanding that properly managed forests support the critters and pastimes we care about. RGS has

teamed with Dangerous Cow Publishing to produce Project Upland - a new series of videos that beautifully demonstrate both the importance of young forest habitat and the allure of grouse and woodcock hunting. Check these videos out by clicking on the Media link on the RGS homepage, and share them with friends and



colleagues to help spread the word about the importance of our mission: “Healthy Forests, Abundant Wildlife, and Sporting Traditions.”

Drummer Fund Provides Record Support for Young Forest Work in Wisconsin

Coraopolis, PA – Ruffed grouse, American woodcock, golden-winged warblers and numerous other wildlife species require regenerating forest stands that develop following timber harvests and other forest management activities. The Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) and its sister organization, the American Woodcock Society (AWS), are pleased to provide \$80,340 through the Wisconsin Drummer Fund to 15 outstanding projects in Wisconsin that will enhance habitat for young forest wildlife and increase hunter access to prime hunting areas. Partners will bring an additional \$130,000 to complete these projects, resulting in over \$210,000 in forest habitat improvements during 2016.

Over 880 acres will be directly enhanced; funds used to support expanded landowner outreach efforts and forest access road improvements will indirectly support habitat improvements on thousands of additional acres. Over 45 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; Class ACT Charter School in Park Falls; Price, Ashland and Bayfield counties; and Golden Sands Resource Conservation and Development Council.

The Wisconsin Drummer Fund was initiated in 2010 to allow RGS/AWS to funnel funds raised at chapter events and through direct member donations to proactive forest conservation work in the state. Since then, over \$376,000 has been made available to support 85 Wisconsin young forest-related projects enhancing an estimated 8,704 acres of habitat and improving hundreds of miles of hunter walking trails. These funds have been matched by other agencies and organizations resulting in over \$1 million worth of projects being funded in Wisconsin since 2010. This year marks the sixth straight year for record funding levels under this program.

“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.”

Wisconsin Drummer Fund Projects approved for 2016 include (project title/county location and partners):

- **Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership**/21 northern Wisconsin counties - 13 partner organizations
- **MPF Wildlife Openings and Hunter Walking Trails**/Taylor & Price counties - U.S. Forest Service
- **White River Wildlife Area Aspen and Alder Regeneration**/Ashland County/Ashland County - Wisconsin DNR
- **Trott Hunter Walking Trail Rehabilitation**/Ashland County - Ashland County Forest & Recreation Department
- **Ruffed Grouse Habitat Management and Enhancement**/Forest County - U.S. Forest Service
- **C.D. Besadny Fish & Wildlife Area Grouse & Woodcock Habitat**/Kewaunee County - Wisconsin DNR
- **Marathon County Alder Regeneration**/Marathon County - Wisconsin DNR & Marathon County Department of Parks, Recreation & Forestry
- **School Forest Ruffed Grouse Project**/Ashland County - Class ACT Charter School and Ashland County Forest & Recreation Department
- **Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area Trail Enhancement**/Oneida County - Wisconsin DNR
- **Black River Country Forest Opening Management**/Jackson County - Wisconsin DNR
- **Borst Valley Wildlife Area Wildlife Shrub and Alder Regeneration**/Trempealeau County - Wisconsin DNR
- **Mud Lake Wildlife Area Grouse and Woodcock Habitat**/Door County - Wisconsin DNR
- **Price County Forestry Aspen Age-Class Breakup**/Price County - Price County Forestry Department
- **Central Wisconsin Demonstration Forest Project**/Green Lake, Outagamie, Portage, Taylor, and Wood counties - Golden Sands Resource Conservation & Development Council
- **Bayfield County Buckthorn Removal**/Bayfield County - Bayfield County Forestry & Parks Department

Drummer Funds are used by project coordinators to directly address forest management goals and enhance diversity. Todd Naas, Wisconsin DNR biologist in Ashland County, suggests that Drummer Funds will be instrumental in achieving forest management goals in Ashland County. “Drummer Funds will be used to initiate a long-term plan to reduce stand size and diversify forest

age classes within a 700-acre portion of the White River Wildlife Area by mowing up to 65 acres of aspen and alder habitat. This portion of the Wildlife Area is also being considered for designation as a Cooperative Ruffed Grouse and Woodcock Management Area. Implementation of this plan is expected to greatly increase breeding population densities of ruffed grouse and woodcock, while maintaining the property's significance as an important deer yard."

Though the Wisconsin Drummer Fund originated in 2010, RGS has been a dedicated supporter of forest habitat work in Wisconsin since 1985. Since that time, RGS has contributed nearly \$1 million in support of active forest management efforts across Wisconsin. "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."

RGS/AWS Engages to Promote Healthier Public Forestlands

Dessecker Leads Key Conservationists in Discussion on Future Federal Forest Management

A Special Session at the 81st North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference this March in Pittsburgh explored the potential future direction of our federal public forestlands. Co-chaired by the Ruffed Grouse Society's Dan Dessecker and Tom Franklin with the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, *2020 Vision: Federal Forest Management into the Next Decade* included speakers with vast expertise and a broad breadth of perspectives, including Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment with the U.S. Department of Agriculture

The speakers agreed that there is clear scientific evidence indicating that the ecological integrity of our nation's public forest lands and the social fabric of nearby rural communities are imperiled. It is essential to make federal forest land management policy relevant to all interests so that the necessary statutory, regulatory, and fiscal fixes can be applied.

There was much discussion about the need to move beyond the rhetoric ("mandated timber harvest targets", "benign neglect", "stripping environmental regulation", "analysis paralysis", "unnecessary litigation") and address this reality. Balanced, common sense legislation and administrative processes that allow for science-based active management of our public forestlands to conserve wildlife, enhance forest health and protect water quality while meeting society's needs and interests is a lofty but achievable goal.

In his opening remarks, Dessecker read the following quote from a youth counselor as relayed in Richard Louv's seminal book; *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. "In my first counseling job, with another organization, I took children with AIDS to the mountains who had never been out of their urban neighborhoods. One night, a nine-year-old woke me up. She had to go to the bathroom. We stepped outside of the tent and she looked up. She gasped and grabbed my leg. She had never seen the stars before." Dessecker underscored the imperative of making our federal public lands relevant to those who have never seen the stars if we

are to successfully meet the challenges sure to be posed in the future by an increasingly urban society.

RGS Ups the Ante to Promote Young Forest Management on Forest Service Lands

On April 30, 2015, the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) filed a Petition for Rulemaking with the United States Forest Service (Forest Service) due to the Agency's consistent failure to provide the young forest habitats required by the ruffed grouse, American woodcock, golden-winged warbler and other game and nongame wildlife on national forests throughout the eastern United States.

A Petition for Rulemaking is not a lawsuit. It is, however, a legal challenge to which the Forest Service is legally compelled to respond.

Each national forest operates under a forest plan that is developed with substantial public involvement. These forest plans are, in essence, contracts with the public.

Unfortunately, over the past several decades, individual national forests throughout the eastern United States have met, on average, only 24 percent of forest plan **minimum** acreage goals for these important young forest habitats. Not surprisingly, wildlife dependent upon young forest habitats are experiencing substantial population declines on many of our national forests.

Clearly, the Forest Service has broken its contract with the public.

The Forest Service and RGS met in November 2015, to try and find a path forward to resolve the issue raised in the Petition and to secure the future for wildlife of young forests on our national forests. To its credit, the Forest Service acknowledged that the picture painted by the data provided by RGS is indeed accurate. On our part, RGS recognized that the Forest Service faces multiple challenges that affect what the Agency can and can't accomplish on a daily basis. However, RGS reiterated that despite these challenges, the Forest Service has the personnel and financial resources to pay far more attention to the habitat needs of ruffed grouse, American woodcock and the many other game and nongame species that require young forest habitats.

The Forest Service and RGS met again in March 2016 at the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, to discuss steps that the Agency had taken to address the compelling need for additional emphasis on the conservation of wildlife of young forests since our Petition was filed. The Forest Service identified several recently proposed habitat management projects on national forests in the eastern United States that, if fully implemented, will help move the ball forward. In addition, the Forest Service set aside a big chunk of time during its regularly scheduled meeting at the Conference with wildlife conservation organizations from across the nation to specifically address the status and trends of wildlife of young forests. It was gratifying to note that these organizations were unanimous in their support for additional attention to the needs of these critters.

RGS will continue to be patient with what appear to be sincere efforts on the part of the Forest Service to substantively address the compelling needs of wildlife of young forests – after all, the Agency is a bit like a super tanker – it can't be turned on a dime. However, this patience is limited, and we will need to see consistent progress in turning around the ship.

One measure of progress will be the goal for young forest habitats that is set by the Nantahala/Pisgah National Forests in western North Carolina when it completes its ongoing forest plan revision. The public spoke up loud and clear at the numerous public forums sponsored by the Forest to identify issues of concern. A primary issue, if not THE primary issue, raised by the public was the need to dramatically increase

sustainable timber harvests to dramatically increase the availability of these habitats on the Forest. RGS hopes that the Nantahala/Pisgah is indeed listening to the public and will act accordingly.

It took decades of inaction by the Forest Service to place ruffed grouse, American woodcock and other wildlife of young forests in their current precarious positions on many of our national forests. RGS will be closely monitoring on-the-ground actions and regularly interacting with the Forest Service at local and national levels to ensure that the conservation imperatives outlined in our legal challenge are consistently and effectively addressed by the Agency. RGS sincerely desires to work collaboratively with the Forest Service, and we sense that this desire is mutual. However, should the need arise, RGS will take whatever steps are necessary to compel the Agency to meet its legal and principled obligations.

Research Corner: Young Forest Management Has Broad Biodiversity Benefits!

Conserving wildlife resources is a complicated and sometimes frustrating venture. Given the complexity inherent in nature, unraveling all of the factors that collectively determine the ebbs-and-flows in wildlife populations is very difficult, and identifying the root cause of population declines can be extremely challenging. Even documenting population declines in the first place requires that effective and well-thought-out monitoring programs be implemented. There are also many individual species of conservation concern to address, and each species may have distinct limiting factors and habitat needs. How to proceed? Where do we invest limited funding to maximize the value of our conservation dollars? One commonly-used approach involves selecting “umbrella” or “sentinel” species as the focus of our management.

Umbrella species normally have solid monitoring programs in place- bird surveys and the like- so that we can see if the population increases as a result of our management actions. Species are often selected as umbrella species because they are associated with a particular habitat type, and by conserving that habitat we assume that numbers of not only the sentinel species, but also other species of concern that require that habitat, will increase. For example, if we note declines in a number of wetland-associated species, we might select mallards as our sentinel species. By restoring wetland habitats, we may see an increase in mallard numbers, and infer that other wetland species of concern- say, black terns and yellow rails- also benefit. However, the assumption that umbrella species can be used to infer the health of other species has rarely been verified.



Young forest habitat created for American woodcock enhances overall diversity in our forest communities.

As RGS/AWS members, we understand that active forest management leads to healthier and more diverse forest communities, and assume that many wildlife species- beyond ruffed grouse and woodcock- will benefit from young forest habitat. A recent study (Masse et al., *Higher Bird Abundance and Diversity Where American Woodcock Sing: Fringe Benefits of Managing Forests for Woodcock*) conducted in Rhode Island made clear that American woodcock are extremely effective umbrella species for the young forest bird community. The scientists sampled bird communities at woodcock singing grounds (which of course included dense, young forest cover) with nearby forested areas without woodcock. Their results were illuminating and strongly support the importance of the habitat work RGS/AWS promotes. Across all 6 study sites, woodcock singing grounds had 60% more bird species

present than did sites elsewhere in the forest, and the total number of individual birds present was also twice as high at sites used by woodcock. These authors conclude that woodcock can indeed serve as an effective “umbrella” species for the entire young forest bird community; in other words, what’s good for woodcock is also good for golden-winged and chestnut-sided warblers, gray catbirds, eastern towhees, and many other species.

We have long recognized that the path to grouse and woodcock abundance is paved through active forest management that produces critical young forest habitat. We can be proud that our efforts clearly provide broad benefits for the full forest wildlife community. Share these ideas and information with others as you engage in discussions related to forest management. The “let nature be” philosophy that has eroded public support for active timber management erodes, rather than enhances, the communities we all know and enjoy.

If you would like a copy of the above-referenced paper, please let me know and I’ll be happy to e-mail one your way.

Have an enjoyable summer with friends and family, and I look forward to seeing you in the grouse woods soon. Please don’t hesitate to contact me with comments, questions, or to chat about young forest conservation.

Scott Walter

Western Great Lakes Regional Wildlife Biologist

16885 County Hwy U

Viola WI 54664

(608) 538-3840

ScottW@ruffedgrousesociety.org

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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