



Ruff Country News & Timberdoodle Times



Wisconsin, Iowa, & Illinois
Volume 16, Issue 3, October 3, 2016

Wisconsin Season Dates

Ruffed Grouse:

Zone A: 27 Sept – 31 Jan

Zone B: 15 Oct – 8 Dec

American Woodcock

24 Sept – 7 Nov



Iowa Season Dates

Ruffed Grouse:

1 Oct – 31 Jan

American Woodcock

1 Oct – 14 Nov

Illinois Season Dates

American Woodcock

15 Oct – 28 Nov

Greetings Fellow Young Forest Enthusiasts! I hope this fall brings you many outdoor adventures, such as the recent grouse hunt depicted above, shared by my brothers and I in Rusk County. Treasured time with family, friends, and our enthusiastic canine companions create treasured memories and help reinforce our shared passion for healthy forests and abundant young forest wildlife populations.

2016 appears to be the year we've all been waiting for, as spring drum survey data suggest that ruffed grouse populations across the north are headed back upward. Though brood counts revealed average to below-average production, we can expect flush rates to increase in our favorite coverts over the coming 4 to 5 years. It's a great time to start a young dog, or to take your aging companion out for some great fall days afield. Federal singing-ground surveys show that American woodcock populations in Wisconsin are similar to last year, though still well below historic levels. Greater detail regarding these surveys is below, but all-in-all, things are shaping up for a great fall to get out in the woods!

RGS/AWS has been very active in recent months, advocating for active forest management and healthy grouse, woodcock, and other young forest wildlife populations in many venues. This edition of Ruff Country News summarizes a few of these efforts, but as always please feel free to drop me a line or give me a call to discuss issues or work in your neck of the woods.

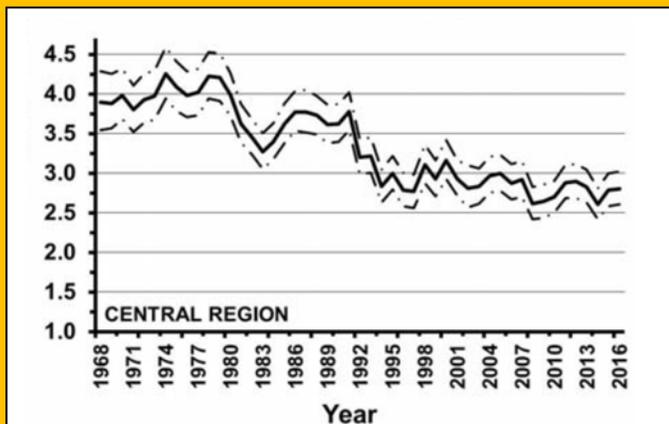
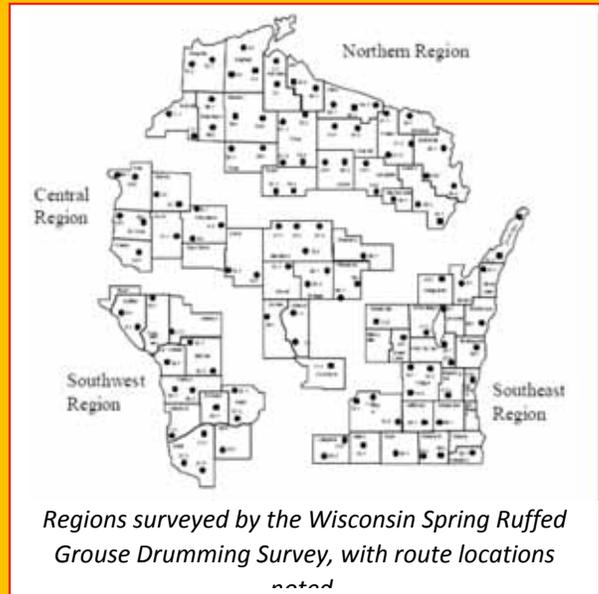
I hope to see you out there!

Scott

We Are Headed Back Toward the Peak!!!

As reported in the last Ruff Country News, the 2016 spring drumming survey indicated slight increases in central (8% increase) and northern (4% increase) Wisconsin. This was a critical year, as given the timing of past cycles, we could have either continued to dip toward the cyclic low or begun our climb back toward the next population peak. Given the modest increases observed, and the timing of historic cycles, it's clear that we are headed back upward, and hunters can expect that our grouse population will continue to increase over the coming 4 or 5 years. Enjoy!

More recently, however, the Wisconsin DNR has released the results of the 2016 Game Bird Brood Survey. WDNR staff compile observations of female upland game birds for 10 weeks, from June – August, noting the presence/absence of juveniles and the size of the brood, if present. Observers reported seeing 11% and 14% fewer grouse broods during the 2016 survey in the central and northern regions, respectively, than in 2015, and average brood size was also slightly smaller. This dip in production will not affect the population climb back toward peak numbers long-term, but may reduce the number of juvenile birds, and hence flush rates, this fall. Exactly why grouse production declined isn't clear, but very wet weather across much of the state, beginning in mid-June, may have played a role, although temperatures were relatively mild. Heavy and prolonged rain events, especially when associated with cool weather, can cause chick mortality among upland game birds, and reduce production levels. The combined picture for grouse hunters is a grouse population that's on the upswing, though production this spring may have been a bit down leading to fewer juveniles in the bag.



American woodcock population trend, 1968 – 2016. Though woodcock numbers remain well below 1970s levels, population declines have shallowed in recent years.

The report on the annual American woodcock singing ground survey, conducted by volunteers and compiled by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, also provided some good news. Although long-term trends for woodcock in Wisconsin and across the Central Region remain downward, the decline has shallowed in recent years. Slightly more singing male woodcock were heard in 2016 compared to 2015, both in Wisconsin and across the Central Region. Addressing the long-term woodcock population decline and returning populations to their 1970 level of abundance (the goal of the American

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Photo: Matt Soberg

Woodcock Conservation Plan) will require continued coordination with federal, state, county, and private partners to increase the amount of young forest habitat available throughout the breeding, migratory, and wintering range. RGS/AWS remains a committed partner in efforts to achieve our young forest management objectives.

For more details regarding the Wisconsin ruffed grouse drumming and brood surveys, please go to <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/reports.html>. For greater detail on the spring woodcock survey, please see the full report at <https://www.fws.gov/birds/surveys-and-data/population-surveys.php>.

2016 Brings Changes to Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law Program

The foundation of sustainable forest management is the development of forest management plans that provide site assessment and long-term goals that enhance the timber, wildlife, aesthetic, and recreational value of our forests, while addressing threats such as invasive species. Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law (MFL) has, for decades, been a boon for sustainable forests management in our private forests and has greatly expanded opportunities for outdoor recreation on private lands in the state. With 62% of all forested acres in Wisconsin being privately-held, MFL has provided an excellent vehicle for implementing sound forestry practices and ensuring the long-term productivity and health of our forests. Today, about ¼ of timber harvested in Wisconsin comes from MFL-enrolled land. In exchange for enrolling their forested acres in MFL, landowners are required to develop and implement a forest management plan, and receive a tax break for doing so. Today, over 3.3 million acres are enrolled in MFL, and 1.2 million of those acres are open to hunting.

In February, Governor Walker signed Act 358 into law, which introduced some changes to the MFL program that RGS members and landowners should be cognizant of:

- 1) **Public Access:** Formerly, landowners could enroll only 160 acres under the "closed" MFL designation (prohibiting public access) in any one municipality. Act 358 increases this to 320 acres. The original draft bill, however, set no limit on the number of acres that could be closed to public access by a landowner. RGS submitted comments touting the great benefit of "open" MFL lands for hunters and others, and we are gratified that our voice and that of our conservation allies was heard, and that public access remains a vital MFL component. Act 358 also mandates that all MFL lands be accessible by public road, or via adjacent lands that are open to the public. This is an improvement over the original legislation, which allowed some MFL lands to be landlocked with no public access possible.

- 2) **Leasing:** Act 358 allows MFL lands to be leased for hunting or other recreational activities; such leases were prohibited under the former legislation.
- 3) **Redistribution of Closed Acreage Fees.** Prior to Act 358, fees paid by MFL landowners with closed acreage were deposited in the Wisconsin DNR Forestry Conservation Fund, and used to support forest management efforts in the state. Act 358 transfers much of this revenue to local counties and townships, as reimbursement for tax income sacrificed through MFL enrollment. The former 5% yield tax on wood harvested from MFL lands has been discontinued.

4) **Cutting notices.**

Prior to harvesting timber from MFL lands, a cutting notice must be approved and submitted to the DNR. Act 358 relaxes the credentials required of the person signing the cutting notice, so that anyone with a 2-year



62% of Wisconsin's forest is in private ownership. The Managed Forest Law program, administered by the Wisconsin DNR, ensures that enrolled lands are managed properly. Wisconsin's citizens enjoy a more robust timber industry and greater access to outdoor recreation due to this excellent program.

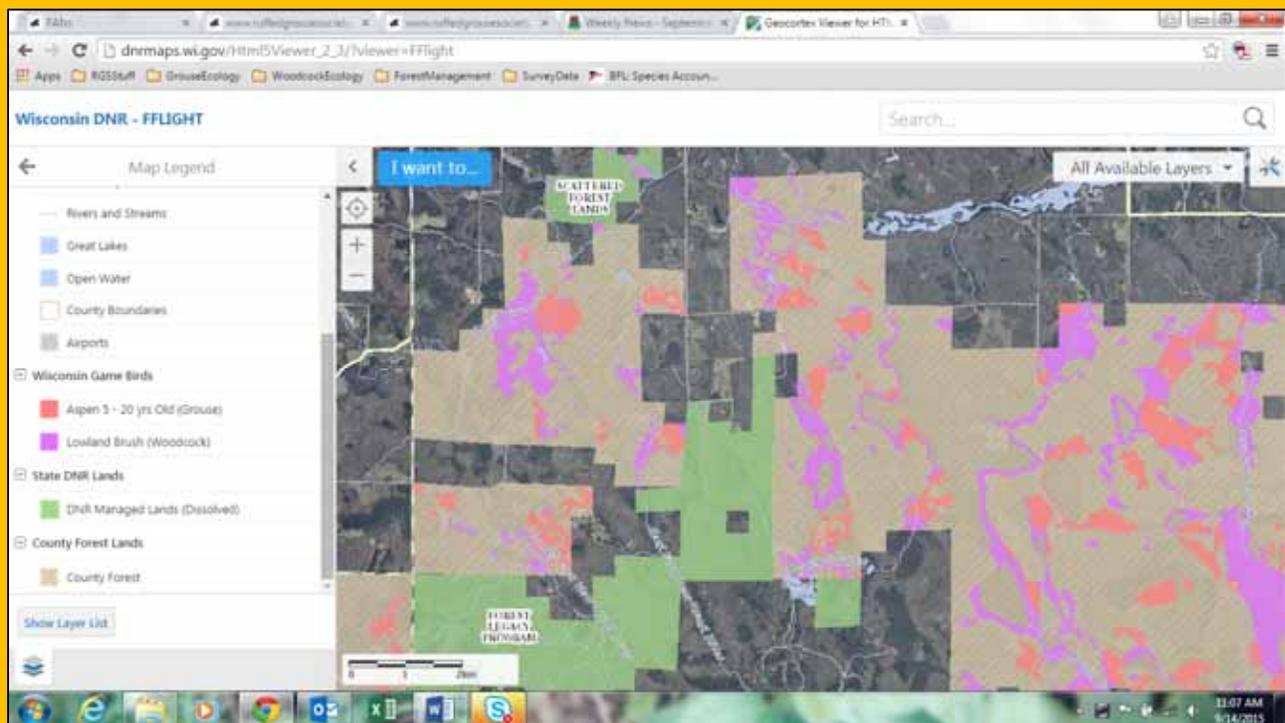
degree in forestry and 5 years of experience can sign the cutting notice. However, cutting notices will still be reviewed and approved by WDNR Foresters to ensure the proposed harvest is within the criteria established in the landowner's forest management plan.

- 5) **Threatened/Endangered Species.** Act 358 precludes denying a harvest on MFL lands based on standards supplied by the WDNR Natural Heritage Inventory process. Thus, planned harvests on MFL lands cannot be questioned based on the occurrence or likely presence of species listed in the state's natural heritage inventory (NHI) database.
- 6) **Withdrawal.** Act 358 allows MFL landowners to withdraw, without penalty, from 1-5 acres in order to sell the property or develop a building site. This may only be done once during the MFL contract period.
- 7) **Minimum acreage.** Previously, landowners could enroll any forested parcel greater than 10 acres in size in the MFL program. This minimum acreage has been increased to 20 acres for future enrollments.

The MFL program remains a vital and important component of healthy forest management in Wisconsin. RGS staff will continue to monitor policy as it affects this, and other, relevant forest management programs, providing guidance and comments as appropriate to ensure the needs of young forest wildlife, and upland bird hunters, are addressed. For more information on Act 358, please see <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2015/related/lcactmemo/act358>.

Take FFLIGHT!!! Use WDNR Tool to Find New Hunting Areas

Many Wisconsin hunters are well aware of a new tool that can make grouse and woodcock hunting far more productive and enjoyable. 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.

RGS Leads Forest Management Effort in the Driftless Region of WI/IA/MN/IL

RGS Media Release, 16 August 2016

Today, the Ruffed Grouse Society brought together agency professionals from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois to focus on landscape-scale goals to enhance future young forest habitat in the Driftless Region.



Today (August 16, 2016) the Ruffed Grouse Society launched the Driftless Young Forest Symposium in La Crosse, Wisconsin to bring together agency professionals from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois to focus on landscape-scale goals to enhance young forest habitat in the Driftless Region. Symposium goals include providing a clear understanding of the area forest use trends and wildlife impacts, to recognize challenges of forest management in this region and to identify and embrace opportunities for potential landscape-scale benefits to young forest habitat in the future.

Partners providing resources for the Driftless Young Forest Symposium include the Ruffed Grouse Society, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Cabela's Outdoor Fund, National Wild Turkey Federation, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.



The Driftless Region encompasses southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, northeastern Iowa and northwestern Illinois and is noted for its deeply carved valleys and streams that were a result of this area escaping glaciation. *Photo from NRCS.*

The welcome address was presented by Kurt Thiede, deputy secretary for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources who discussed the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership



Wisconsin DNR Deputy Secretary Kurt Thiede welcomes the 80 attendees from Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota to the Driftless Young Forest Symposium.

and the importance of agencies working together for the benefit of young forest initiatives. RGS Regional Wildlife Biologist for Wisconsin Scott Walter gave the opening remarks and moderated all presentations while Tricia Gorby-Knoot, research sociologist and economist for the Wisconsin DNR, discussed trends in the composition of the forests of the Driftless Region and urged professionals to take action in the region to make a difference.

The keynote speaker was RGS Director of Conservation Policy Dan Dessecker who provided wildlife impacts of long-term forest trends in the Driftless Region. He stated that wildlife conservation need not be complicated by stating, "To sustain the full array of forest wildlife, we must sustain the full array of wildlife habitats."

He urged that public perception is the only reality when it comes to the view of forest management, and that a major challenge for the Driftless area is that the landscape is 90 percent privately owned. Because of that, he stated, "Wildlife is the window through which the public views our forests," and stressed that it is necessary to help private landowners understand that if they want wildlife on their property, forest management is the key. Healthy forests = healthy wildlife populations.

The Symposium continues through tomorrow (August 17, 2016) with state reports (Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin), small group discussions, open group discussions for future plans, and a presentation on a model for landscape-scale management of the Driftless Region by Brad Hutnik and Greg Edge, forest ecologists for the WI DNR.

For more information about habitat management in the Driftless Region, contact RGS Regional Wildlife Biologist Scott Walter, ScottW@RuffedGrouseSociety.Org, or RGS Regional Wildlife Biologist Meadow Kouffeld-Hansen, MeadowK@RuffedGrouseSociety.Org.



RGS Director of Conservation Policy Dan Dessecker speaks to Symposium attendees.

Research Corner: New Study Sheds Light on Woodcock Populations

Many hunters use their time in the field to learn about wildlife and to gain insight into the ecology and natural history of their quarry. Those who pursue ruffed grouse and woodcock are no exception, often taking note of seasonal shifts in habitat use, noting the status of favored grouse food items, or opening crops to see what the birds are feeding on. Much of wildlife science is similarly focused on quantifying the behavior, survival, or habitat use of individual birds or local populations. It's much more difficult, however, to understand how wildlife populations behave across broader areas, and to answer questions related to landscape-scale conservation issues, such as the genetic or demographic links between different population segments, for example. While this information can improve our ability to target management efforts, it's just plain difficult to come by, and often requires special tools or techniques.

A recent study by Sullivan, et al. in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, entitled *American Woodcock Migratory Connectivity as Indicated by Hydrogen Isotopes* (2016), utilized emerging technologies to better understand the dispersion and movement of woodcock throughout their range, and connections between breeding, migratory, and wintering areas. Since the chemical makeup of bird feathers reflects the chemical composition of foods eaten during the period when the feather was formed, these scientists were able to determine where woodcock harvested in different locations across the eastern United States were hatched (their natal origin). Their analyses revealed some interesting information regarding woodcock in North America:

- 1) 64% of woodcock were hatched north of 44° latitude (roughly, north of a line running from Minneapolis through Green Bay, to Toronto). This indicates the importance of young forest habitats across the northern states and Canada to healthy woodcock populations. Fully 74% of the woodcock harvested in Louisiana came from Minnesota and Wisconsin.
- 2) For the first time, this study provided an estimate of the proportion of North America's woodcock population that breeds outside of the current area covered by the annual Singing Ground Survey (SGS). The results suggested that only 48% of woodcock hatched within the areas adequately surveyed during the annual SGS. This indicates the need to re-visit where spring surveys are conducted, to ensure results provide accurate representation of woodcock population trends. Most woodcock outside of the survey area were derived from more northerly areas, in the boreal forests of Canada, indicating that increased survey effort in this region may be warranted. Relatively few woodcock apparently breed south of the current survey area.
- 3) Some of the most northerly-breeding woodcock were harvested along the furthest-south edge of the wintering range. This finding suggests that woodcock possess a range of migratory behaviors. Some head south using numerous, short-distance flights, whereas others migrate in fewer long-distance movements. The study also provided some evidence for the existence of "leap-frog" migrations among woodcock, whereas more northerly-breeding woodcock not only migrate sooner, but "leap frog" over, woodcock breeding in southerly areas. While we all recognize that weather can push the "northern flight" of woodcock into our area, these northern birds may actually depart southward before our local birds do. Take a look at the woodcock migration maps that track GPS-equipped woodcock at <http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/woodcockmigration> to see if you can uncover such interesting aspects of woodcock migratory behavior.

Such research allows biologists to steer limited conservation resources toward goals that will maximize benefits for American woodcock, and of course makes the critters we care about all the more fascinating! For a copy of the above-referenced paper, please drop me an e-mail and I'll attach a digital copy in response.

Wlodek Selected as New Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership Coordinator

Healthy forests provide Wisconsin citizens a robust timber industry, vibrant and diverse populations of both game and nongame wildlife, scenic beauty, and ample opportunities for outdoor recreation. Established in 2011, The Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership has brought 15 conservation and industry organizations together to ensure that both public land managers and private landowners have the knowledge and tools they need to sustain the health and diversity of those forests. “Our goal is to ensure that land managers understand the critical role of disturbance in maintaining a diverse and functional forest ecosystem,” noted WYFP Facilitator Jeremy Holtz. “We have seen major declines among many species of wildlife- from American woodcock to golden-winged warblers- that are adapted to dense, young forest habitats due to a lack of disturbance. Our partners work diligently to promote active forest management that addresses this critical conservation issue.” The WYFP provides outreach, education, and advice for landowners interested in enhancing their forest wildlife habitat. Over the past 5 years, hundreds of northern Wisconsin landowners have benefited from WYFP efforts, and habitat on thousands of forested acres has been improved.

Randee Wlodek has been hired as the new WYFP Coordinator, and assumed her duties in August of this year. Wlodek has a B.S. degree in Biological Science from Michigan Technological University, and has previously worked on numerous conservation and research projects, including a study of golden-winged warbler genetics in Michigan and a reforestation project in the rainforests of Australia. “Randee brings a wealth of experience in forest wildlife management, and has a driving passion for forest management and wildlife conservation. She will help lead our WYFP team and ensure that northern Wisconsin landowners receive outstanding



Randee Wlodek, Coordinator of the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership, with male golden-winged warbler.

service as they engage in management of their forested acres. We are thrilled to have her on board,” noted Holtz. The position is being supported by a partnership between the Ruffed Grouse Society, Wildlife Management Institute, and Wisconsin DNR.

“I’m excited to become a part of the WYFP team,” said Wlodek. “I’ve had a life-long association with the wildlife of our northern forests, and being able to work with the WYFP and landowners across northern Wisconsin to enhance their habitat is a dream come true. Young forest conservation is a critical and pressing issue, and we absolutely need landowners to understand how they can contribute to our conservation efforts. I look forward to seeing what we can accomplish together.”

For more information on the WYFP contact:

Randee Wlodek, WYFP Coordinator
Office: (715) 369-1180
dnryoungforest@wisconsin.gov

Or visit the WYFP website at www.youngforest.org/wi

Have a safe and enjoyable fall 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.

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