

THE HOTTEST NEW ICE-FISHING GEAR! ►



New York GAME & FISH™

New York's
**DECEMBER
DEER HUNTS**

**STEELHEAD
HOTSPOTS!**
Our Best Streams

**NEW YORK'S
GROUSE PLAN**
How Is It Working?

**MANAGING
OUR URBAN
WHITETAILS**
Eastern New York

FIRST-ICE WALLEYES
Strategies That Catch Fish

NewYorkGameandFish.com

DECEMBER 2008

\$3.99

12



0 70992 32318 0

The Latest Super-Sized ATVs For Sportsmen

**PLUS ► TRICKS FOR TAKING WINTER DUCKS
BOWHUNTING DECEMBER WHITETAILS**

NEW YORK'S GROUSE HUNTING, THEN AND NOW!

WHEN WERE THE "GOOD OLD DAYS" FOR GROUSE HUNTING IN NEW YORK? CAN WE GET THEM BACK? HERE'S WHAT ONE EXPERT THINKS NEEDS TO BE DONE.

BY ROD COCHRAN



When New York's aging grouse hunters gather in twos and threes after a day afield, they can't help but reminisce about the "good old days" when the ruffed grouse was the king of game birds.

Or graying bird hunters taking a breather in a familiar grove of apple snags commiserate with an arthritic Brittany spaniel and discuss the wisdom of training a new pup, despite diminishing numbers of grouse.

With sleet clicking on the windowpanes in time with his computer keyboard, a wildlife manager studies a screen showing the results of a statewide survey indicating that the average New York hunter harvested fewer than two grouse last season.

Ruffed grouse populations in New York State — and in nearly all of New England, the Great Lake states and Mid-Atlantic region — have been in a slow decline for decades.

It's true that over the last 100 years, many periods of ruffed grouse scarcity and plenty have been recorded. However, within the lifetimes of many hunters still tramping the aspen groves and brushy borders, severe long-term changes in grouse habitat — and grouse populations — have taken place.

In fact, it's difficult for many of today's hunters to imagine the high numbers of grouse reached in the mid-1900s — a never-before-seen bonanza of upland gunning. Hunters of that era enjoyed a completely different landscape, one that provided perfect habitat for grouse and other small-game species.

WHERE DID THEY ALL GO?

Just how good were those "good old days?"

John Hathaway grew up in Harrisville, in traditional Adirondacks foothill country where the area farms were primarily small dairy operations, separated by vast stands of wooded forest — and the main after-school activities were hunting and fishing.

Hathaway started hunting grouse at age 11 with his father. Even as a

teenager, he was an expert shot.

"I'd go out every Saturday morning in October and expect to shoot a limit of grouse near town," he recalled.

"One spot was a former meadow about 25 acres in size that had some yellow transparent apple trees grown up with thorn apples, sumac, poplar, yellow birch and sugar maple. It was next to a hemlock grove and a cedar swamp with a little stream. It was a perfect scenario — and I nearly always limited out in a couple of hours every weekend.

"We also used to hunt the back roads for grouse dusting in the sandy margins," Hathaway remembered.

"Birds liked the same places year after year, where run-off left smooth, dry dusting areas. We'd sneak up on the birds using those areas. In fact, I shot my first grouse with my father at a dusting spot."

"I like to start at about 10 a.m. and hunt through the middle of the day," said the late Carl Parker. We were working around an ancient stone fence in one of his favorite grouse covers south of Albany, shortly before he died.

"If you go out too early," he said, "the birds will flush from their conifer roosts. You probably won't get a shot or even see which way they went for follow-up flushes."

Parker was a professional fisheries manager with the New York Department of Environmental Conservation and a walking encyclopedia of grouse habits and hunting information.

He started hunting grouse in 1961, around the peak of their population boom, and over 34 seasons, he bagged 681 birds.

If you find that statistic impressive, wait until you hear that he never owned a dog! He located grouse by recognizing the birds' habitat. Because he had no dog, he would literally run to downed birds to recover cripples. One season, he downed 63 grouse and retrieved 61 of them.

Parker admitted to being pretty good at finding birds, but consid-

ered himself only a fair shot. His records indicate that he shot at and missed 2,043 grouse. And of course, he'd flushed many thousands of others that offered no shots at all.

In scouting for grouse territory, Parker would look for marshy areas with alders, a small stream, young conifers, aspens and apple trees.

If he found such places with oaks and hickories on the ridges, so much the better.

"A patch of sumac near a cedar swamp is practically a sure thing during the late season," he advised.

Vinnie Guglielmo began hunting grouse in the early 1970s and so experienced some of the great days of hunting. And today he's a professional breeder and trainer of bird dogs, but he still spends as much time in grouse country as any hunter in the state.

He lives in the Chenango Valley north of Binghamton, but hunts various locations throughout New York State. Unlike most grouse hunters you'll meet today, Guglielmo says there are more birds out there than you'd think — and his diaries contain the flush rates and bagged grouse to prove it. He is even optimistic about the future of grouse hunting in the Empire State, even though populations do fluctuate considerably from year to year. His advice is to work harder searching for grouse habitat and to knock on farmers' doors to get acquainted with landowners.

"You have to keep looking for new places," Guglielmo advised. "Over the years, habitat changes. Be mobile and learn to jump from one prime cover to the next."

Today's grouse cover is in smaller pieces, which tends to concentrate birds. But every hunter needs as many as he can find, he explained.

"Most hunters today lead busy lives and don't have the time to find and get permission to hunt all the good grouse habitat that's out there," he said. "Take some time and scout out new cover every chance you get." (Continued)

Guglielmo began keeping precise records during the 1987-88 season when he hunted 86.5 hours, flushed 183 grouse (2.1 per hour) and bagged 21 birds.

His best season was 1994-95 when he flushed 619 (4.1 per hour) and killed 69. His leanest season was 1990-91 when his flush rate fell to 1.6 per hour and he bagged 9 birds.

For many hunters, Guglielmo's records for the last two seasons will be eye-openers. In 2006-07, his flush rate was 3.6 birds per hour, and he shot 57 grouse. Last season he bagged 39 birds while flushing 3.9 per hour and hastened to explain that he does not count re-flushes.

In the last 20 years, he's accounted for 592 grouse by changing his tactics to current habitat conditions. He's also obviously had the help of some very good setters and pointers!

Clearly, some great hunting still exists in New York for uplanders who know where to go and how to do it.

GROUSE FACTS

Historically, ruffed grouse couldn't have been too plentiful back when thick forest covered the state. These birds like openings, mixed stands of trees and shrubby borders.

The Ruffed Grouse Society's Web site summarizes the birds' needs:

"Grouse depend upon food and

cover resources produced by a group of short-lived trees and shrubs growing in full sunlight that develop following severe disturbances of forests. In the early days, fire and windstorms were ecological agents periodically renewing forests and creating habitat for grouse and many other species."

The basic facts of the birds' life history and the management practices necessary to improve grouse habitats have been on record since 1948, when the results of a monumental 20-year study were published in *The Ruffed Grouse*, a 915-page book.

The project was carried out at Cornell University by faculty and students and has since been recognized as the beginning of modern wildlife research and management in the U.S.

Findings that seemed surprising 60 years ago are now common knowledge among hunters.

For example, biologists learned that for grouse, cover conditions — from nesting sites to winter roosting — are more important than food. Also, these birds are sedentary. All the food and cover they require must be available to them in a relatively small area.

In order of importance, their food preferences are aspen, cherry, birch, blackberry and raspberry, hop hornbeam, thorn apple, strawberry, apple, beech, sumac, shadbush, sedge, vibur-

num, maple, dogwood and oak.

Many other plant species and insects contribute to each bird's diet.

Researchers noted that grouse habitat changes fairly rapidly because within a few short years, vegetation matures beyond the ideal stages.

About 39 percent of their nests are destroyed by predators, with foxes being the main culprit. It was also discovered that stocking grouse raised on game farms was not practical.

This pioneering research team could not find any regularity, such as a 7- or 10-year cycle, in the ebb and flow of grouse populations in New York State.

They documented that over a 12-year period, grouse numbers hit their highest point in 1932 with lesser peaks in 1934 and 1939. Low points occurred in 1933, 1937 and 1940.

Since then, other researchers and a lot of hunters have reached the same conclusion.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Various factors determine the jagged ups and downs of grouse populations in New York State and the Northeast. But one overriding development is responsible for the slow but steady decline in grouse numbers over the last four decades: At one time, all those woodlands and forests you can now see from every road and highway in the state were usually small cultivated crop fields.

A century ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture counted 218,000 farms in the state. Today, there are only about 34,000.

In 1950, the average farm was 125 acres in size, but by last year, that figure had increased to 219 acres.

During the years of the Great Depression, the number of farms shrank rapidly. A steep decline started in the decade of the 1940s, when the number of farms dropped 18.5 percent.

The plunge accelerated during the 1950s, with a 35-percent drop. More recently, the number of farms has been declining at the rate of about 500 a year.

Overall, the bottom line is that in the 20 years between 1940 and 1960, nearly half of the farms in the Empire State went out of business!

While some of those farms had consolidated with others, the net loss of land under cultivation was still more



Grouse experts know that good cover holds birds. All you need to do is find it!
Photo by Ron Sinfelt.

than 6.5 million acres.

This enormous shift in land use in just a few years set the stage for what we now call the “good old days” of upland gunning.

You don’t need a wildlife biologist to explain the importance of all those small parcels of land scattered across the state and left to grow into food and cover stages that precisely met the needs of grouse, woodcock and other small-game species.

Mike Murphy, a wildlife biologist and member of the DEC’s Upland Game Bird Program team, observed that pheasant populations hit their peaks at about the same time as grouse.

“Back then, small-game species were really doing great,” he affirmed. “Now it’s turkeys, deer and bears that are thriving, while grouse and pheasants are largely restricted to islands of prime habitat.”

Empire State hunters are fortunate that wildlife management areas cover more than 200,000 acres of state land where many projects are carried out to improve and maintain upland game habitat. Outside of the Adirondack and Catskill park preserves, there are another 760,000 acres of state forests where periodic timber cutting creates similar benefits for wildlife.

These properties are treasuries for the hunting public. But private landowners and their land-management decisions will ultimately determine future hunting conditions.

GROUSE HUNTING TODAY

The most complete index of grouse populations statewide is the DEC’s Small Game Hunting Survey, which has been conducted annually for at least 30 years. The survey’s aim is to provide population trends rather than actual numbers of grouse — and that trend has been spiraling downward since 1990.

In 1982, for example, an estimated 172,328 hunters took 562,208 birds for an average of 3.26 grouse per hunter. At press time, the most recent year available for compiled results was 2006, when an estimated 72,328 hunters took 131,637 grouse — or 1.8 birds apiece.

There have been a few years when the grouse harvest numbers increased. For example, 1987 and 1988 were “up”

years, as were 1995 and 1996.

A banner year was 1999 when 80,876 hunters harvested an average of 4.1 birds.

Five years ago, the DEC started its Cooperator Ruffed Grouse Hunting Log in an effort to gather more information on grouse populations. Participating hunters kept daily records of their hunting activity and success.

In 2006-07, 298 hunters reported 2,900 hunting trips across the state. They spent over 8,500 hours afield and flushed more than 10,000 grouse, or about 1.2 flushes per hour.

That marked an increase over the previous year, when the flush rate was only 1 bird per hour. On average, about one grouse was bagged for every 11 birds flushed.

*A century ago, the U.S.
Department of Agriculture
counted 218,000 farms in the
state. Today, there are
only about 34,000.*

On private land, the flush rate was 1.08 per hour, slightly higher than the 0.98 per hour flushed on public land.

About 70 per cent of hunters used dogs to find their birds and they flushed 1.11 grouse per hour. Meanwhile, hunters without dogs reported a mere 0.86 flushes per hour.

Nearly 80 per cent of the grouse hunting occurred in the southern grouse season zone, which provided 0.86 flushes per hour. Some 1.11 flushes per hour were logged in the northern zone.

Hunters interested in participating in the next hunting log survey can volunteer by calling (518) 402-8883.

In this era of diminished grouse habitat, management programs carried out on the ground are crucial. The Ruffed Grouse Society has a long history of projects that assist landowners — both private and public. For example, the society has financed projects on more than 20 of New York’s public hunting areas, benefiting more than 1,000 acres.

You can long on to the club’s Web site at www.ruffedgrousesociety.org, to find free resources that provide private forest owners with habitat information and specific plans for managing woodlots, aspen and oak forests,

among other programs.

As timber and other forest products become more valuable, it’s clear that more forest owners are beginning to manage their properties for income. That in turn will open up portions of mature hardwood stands for new growth.

For example, New York’s Master Forest Owner/COVERTS Program, run by Cornell University, is a statewide effort aimed at the non-industrial forest owners who hold 14 million acres of the state’s woodlands. Management practices that ensure ecologically sound forest productivity can generate financial returns as well as aesthetic values — and encourage the reproduction of grouse and other upland species.

This program has helped more than 1,000 forest owners via on-site visits, with encouraging results. About a third of these owners have implemented wildlife management practices. Some 21 percent have programs in place that are yet to be completed.

Forest owners interested in free on-site no-obligation visits can call (607) 255-2115.

New York State’s landscapes and grouse-hunting opportunities have changed drastically during the last half-century. Those “great old days” of plentiful birds and heavy game bags are long gone. But hunters who seriously work at locating pockets of grouse habitat can still enjoy some pretty good hunting.

On that special day when you manage to collect a limit of four birds, consider it a real achievement, one for the memory book. It’s akin to taking a 19-inch brown trout on a dry fly or hanging a heavy-beamed 10-pointer on the wall.

But it’s not something you’re going to do every day — at least not for a while! □

CHECK OUR WEB SITE!

Want hunting information? We have dozens of articles by local experts, plus great state and regional links, all at

NewYorkGameandFish.com

An online partner with

OUTDOORSBEST

