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Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is presently a staff member of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.



THE THUNDERER OF THE WOODS

Few game birds can challenge a hunter like the ruffed grouse. Even the most experienced marksman is put to the ultimate test as this bird darts and zig-zags through the woods. No other bird takes to the air making a thundering sound as it flaps its wings while it maneuvers through the brush and around the trees baffling all who pursue it. The ruffed grouse's ability to delude its hunters is one of key characteristics insuring its survival.

Optimum habitat of the grouse must fulfill several basic needs: protection and cover from weather, predators, and hunters; sufficient food with adequate nutrients for good growth and winter survival; and proper nesting sites to enable successful reproduction. Young brushy forests with newly sprouting trees, like young poplar and alder, are ideal. Grouse are often found along streams and lakes providing there is plenty of high ground for nesting and roosting. In the summer and fall the grouse eats clover, green leaves, berries and acorns while in the winter it is limited to buds. Its ability to feed on buds is an important survival factor here in the North where winters are long. Storms covering the trees and buds with ice sometimes take a large toll of grouse in the winter

months. Damp and rainy springs may also hamper incubation and survival of young birds.

During cold winter nights the grouse dives into the deep snow and "roosts" covered with snow which protects it against severe below zero temperatures and freezing winds. Other times of the year it roosts in trees, or several birds in a circle each facing outward keeping watch for predators. Its feather coloration blends into the background very well (called cryptic coloration), and is especially beneficial in protecting a nesting grouse from predators. If the predator approaches the nest the female goes into her "broken wing" act to distract the predator from the eggs or young.

The home range of the grouse may have a radius of less than 1/4 mile which is small compared to other birds. Here the male courts females by flapping his wings on a log or stump, making a drumming sound. One male may mate with several females each spring. Up to 18 pale brown eggs are laid and the young hatch about 22 days later. The covey remains together till the next spring if unmolested.

The full grown grouse weighs about 2-1/2 pounds and makes a delicious dinner. This fall you may try to bag a grouse and test your marksmanship skill while enjoying a walk in the woods on a brisk fall day.



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