



# FLUSH WITH BIRDS

A look at Montana's remarkably diverse  
upland bird populations

BY DAVE CARTY

**T**here's a ranch west of Big Timber that I've hunted for nearly 15 years. I can usually count on my dogs finding one or two coveys of Hungarian partridge there during an afternoon hunt, but it's not what I'd call a hotspot. Then, two years ago, something unexpected happened.

My buddy John and I arrived late in the day. After donning our hunting vests, we set out downhill toward a spot where a stream and two corners of a fence converge. For some reason, it was filled with Huns. For the next two hours, we put up one covey after another, maybe 80 or more birds in all. Never before had the hunting at that spot been so fantastic, and never since have I had a hunt there like it. My astonishment at finding so many birds in a place that I thought I knew stays with me still. >>

Maybe nonresident hunters feel the same surprise when they discover the diversity of upland bird hunting in Montana. We can't lay claim to the pheasant numbers of Iowa and the Dakotas, but we offer some great rooster hunting here, as well as a mix of other upland species unavailable in those Midwestern states. Upland hunters can pursue blue (dusky), ruffed, and spruce grouse in almost every mountain range of western Montana. Though we don't have bobwhite quail like Texas and Kansas, we've got the Hungarian partridge, as fine a bird to hunt over a pointing dog as you could ever want. Montana also supports healthy populations of native sharp-tailed grouse and a healthy and huntable population of sage-grouse. We've even got a growing and expanding population of wild turkeys.

Big game will probably always be a bigger draw here, but bird hunting is growing in popularity. Nonresidents are learning about the millions of acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) grasslands and the private uplands available through the Block Management Program. And more Montana big game hunters are discovering the joys of hunting birds with dogs and the easygoing pace of walking across a prairie with a buddy or two.

### RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Talk to a Montana bird hunter, and chances are the reason he or she owns a shotgun is to hunt these gaudy non-natives (they originally came from Asia). Pheasants inhabit nearly every farmed valley in the state, with the highest concentrations in the north-central and northeastern regions. The birds are especially abundant near rivers, streams, and



**SOARING POPULARITY** Pheasants are the most prized upland bird today, but hunters in the 1960s shot just as many sage-grouse as they did roosters. In parts of the state, the large, sage-eating birds still exist in huntable numbers (far right), though harvests have dropped to just a fraction of those for the increasingly popular pheasant.

marshes, particularly next to crop fields and nesting grasses. In thick bottomlands or cattails, Labrador retrievers and springer spaniels are the most effective breeds for rousting roosters from dense vegetation and into the air.

Pheasant numbers have fluctuated since the 1960s depending on nesting season weather and changes in federal crop set-aside programs. Since the Conservation Reserve Program began in the late 1980s, the annual harvest has steadily increased, from 42,000 in 1986 to roughly 150,000 in recent years.

The pheasant's growing popularity in Montana over the past 15 years has created public access problems, as more and more landowners lease their property for exclusive use of paying hunters. Offering relief to the

public hunter is the state's Block Management Program, a private land hunting access program that enrolls more than 8 million acres each year, some of it in Montana's prime pheasant country. A few years ago, while hunting with a friend in a mix of Block Management and other private land in eastern Montana, we flushed five or six dozen roosters and hens in a single day.

### SAGE-GROUSE

It's hard to imagine, but in the 1950s and '60s, sage-grouse (also known as sage hens) were as popular with Montana bird hunters as pheasants. Annual harvests, even as late as the 1970s, were roughly 50,000 birds, about the same as the pheasant tally. In recent

years, upland hunters have switched their focus to pheasants and other species, causing the annual sage-grouse harvest to fall to fewer than 5,000 birds.

Montana still retains many viable—and huntable—sage-grouse populations. But because populations and distribution have declined over much of their range elsewhere in the West, the species has repeatedly been considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act. As a result, Fish, Wildlife & Parks keeps close tabs on Montana populations. Rick Northrup, the agency's game bird coordinator, says biologists pay particular attention to habitat changes that affect the sage-grouse's long-term viability. Conversion of sagebrush grasslands to crops and the



#### Ring-necked pheasant

**Weight:** Males: 3 lbs., females: 2 lbs.

**Habitat:** Open grasslands and croplands with brushy cover, especially along watercourses.

**Wingshooting appeal:** Large birds that make fairly easy targets. Great eating. Males, called roosters, have beautiful plumage.



Non-native species



General year-round range

#### Sage-grouse

**Weight:** Males: 4–7 lbs., females: 3–5 lbs.

**Habitat:** Sage shrublands.

**Wingshooting appeal:** The largest grouse in North America. A remnant of earlier times when the species was far more abundant in the West. Montana has some of the nation's largest huntable populations.



Native species of concern



General year-round range

#### Sharp-tailed grouse

**Weight:** 2–2.5 lbs.

**Habitat:** Grasslands mixed with coulees filled with shrubs and brush.

**Wingshooting appeal:** Hold well for pointing dogs. A native grassland species. Found in many parts of Montana, often on large tracts of accessible public land.



Native species



General year-round range

#### Hungarian (gray) partridge

**Weight:** 14 oz.

**Habitat:** Grasslands interspersed with wheat fields, weed patches, and brushy cover.

**Wingshooting appeal:** Hold well for pointing dogs. Great eating. Flush wildly in coveys of 10 to 15 birds that fly in all directions.



Non-native species



General year-round range

#### Blue (dusky) grouse

**Weight:** 2.5–3 lbs.

**Habitat:** Conifer stands at high elevations. In early summer, the birds descend to lower elevations around forest edges and openings.

**Wingshooting appeal:** Hold well for pointing dogs. Great eating. Explosive flush can make them a challenge.



Native species



General year-round range

#### Ruffed grouse

**Weight:** 1.5–2 lbs.

**Habitat:** Dense brushy mix of conifer and deciduous trees, especially aspen. Often found along stream bottoms.

**Wingshooting appeal:** Hold well for pointing dogs. Great eating. Explosive flush and erratic flight pattern can make them a challenging target.



Native species



General year-round range

potential effects of growing oil and gas development in sage-grouse range are particular concerns. FWP and other partners also work with landowners to help conserve grouse habitat on private land.

Sage-grouse are widely, although sparsely, distributed in eastern Montana. In the state's southwestern region, a small but productive swath of sage-grouse habitat runs through Madison and Beaverhead counties.

Finding the birds is a matter of walking until they turn up, which is often in seeps and other wet spots within sage brushlands. Dogs are a big help, though they need to remain steady. One of my pointers, a pint-sized Brittany named Fancy, pointed her first sage-grouse in a vast expanse of sagebrush in Meagher County. The bird—almost as big as the dog—flushed from under her nose. As it struggled to gain altitude, she chased the grouse over a hill, nipping at its feet. I never got a shot.

#### SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Like sage-grouse, sharptails gather each spring on historic dancing grounds, called leks. FWP biologists monitor populations of both species by counting lek attendance each spring as well as hunter harvest each fall. Northrup says the annual sharptail harvest peaked in the mid-1970s at roughly 100,000 birds; more recently it has averaged around 55,000. As with other grouse, sharpies fare poorly in drought, especially in areas where native habitat has been lost.

Sharptails have long been a staple of Montana bird hunters. They are fairly easy to hit compared to the lightning-fast Huns, and young grouse hold well for pointing

**Huns have everything I'm looking for in a game bird: They hold well for a pointing dog, offer fast and challenging shooting, taste great, and, to my way of thinking, are Montana's handsomest birds.**

dogs. That changes late in the season, when the birds "flush wild" in large flocks while you (and your frustrated dog) are still hundreds of yards away. I find sharptails by hunting coulees filled with chokecherries, snowberries, and buffalo berries, where the birds like to roost in the heat of the day.

Many BLM acres, state trust lands, and Block Management areas contain great sharptail cover, which means the birds are easily accessible. In Montana, sharptails are distributed in most shrub-grassland habitats east of the Continental Divide. The largest concentrations are found in central and far-eastern Montana.

#### HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Like the ring-necked pheasant, the imported Hungarian partridge has so successfully adapted to the Montana landscape that many hunters are surprised to learn it is not native.

The first coveys of what are also called gray partridge were transplanted into Montana and Alberta in the early 1900s.

Huns are my favorite Montana game bird. And my favorite place to hunt them is around Great Falls and on agricultural lands near Lewistown. Other localized spots can be just as good. Look for the birds around vacant farmsteads, weedy fencelines, field corners, and irrigation ditches. I know of at least one covey that lives on a mountain in the Absaroka Range, 1,500 feet above the Paradise Valley floor.

Hun populations are nearly impossible to estimate. FWP uses hunter harvests as an index to compare how populations fare from year to year. Northrup says annual harvests for the last couple of decades have ranged from 30,000 to 60,000 birds, adding that Hun populations often increase substantially after mild winters or other favorable conditions. "We've begun an analysis that compares weather factors to 30 years of harvest data to better understand what affects Hun and other game bird abundance," he says.

Even during peak years, experienced hunters know they might walk for miles before moving a covey. That doesn't deter us one bit. Huns have everything I'm looking for in a game bird: They hold well for a pointing dog, offer fast and challenging shooting, taste great, and, to my way of thinking, are the state's handsomest birds.

#### BLUE (DUSKY), RUFFED, AND SPRUCE GROUSE

You don't hear a lot about these three species, which FWP groups together in a category called "mountain grouse." That's a

pity, because the birds offer some exceptional hunting opportunities. What biologists are now calling the dusky grouse, commonly known as the blue grouse, is a chicken-sized bird that weighs about 3 pounds. It looks like an extra-large ruffed grouse but is gray-

blue. The spruce grouse is darker and closer in size to a ruffed grouse. Ruffed grouse are well known to hunters of the Eastern Seaboard, Appalachia, and the Upper Midwest. These handsome black-and-brown grouse are considered the premier game birds

among wingshooters of the North Woods. In Montana, ruffed and blue grouse live in most mountain ranges, but each species occupies different habitat. Ruffs are found primarily along stream bottoms, especially those with aspen. Blue grouse are found



## GIVING GAME BIRDS A BOOST

Rick Northrup wants hunters to know about Montana's Upland Gamebird Enhancement Program (UGEP). "They're the ones paying for it, and it's a great program doing great things for birds, landowners, and hunters," he says.

The program began in 1987 to fund pheasant releases. The following legislative session, lawmakers adjusted the program so that leftover funds not used for pheasant releases could go to habitat improvement projects. Two years later, legislators changed the program again, putting the primary emphasis on habitat enhancement and conservation while also providing funds that compensate landowners who raise and release pheasants on their property.

Pheasant releases provide opportunities for good pheasant hunting on private land. Habitat enhancements promote long-term population increases for pheasants, other upland birds, and songbirds. A typical project pays to plant winter shelterbelts, often in cooperation with local Pheasants Forever chapters. Or it revitalizes

stands of Conservation Reserve Program grasses that have deteriorated and no longer produce enough insects for young birds. The UGEP also establishes food plots within habitat improvement areas, helps landowners manage cattle grazing to benefit upland birds, and, increasingly, pays for conservation easements that secure habitat and provide access for hunters and wildlife watchers. Funds have also been used to regenerate aspen on the Beartooth Front to boost ruffed grouse populations.

UGEP projects are only done on at least 100 contiguous acres, and landowners must be willing to allow a reasonable amount of public hunting access. Negotiated between FWP and landowners, the access level is included in a standard contract. Projects also take place on public lands and on private property enrolled in Block Management. The funds—roughly \$650,000 annually—come from hunting license dollars (\$2 and \$23 dedicated from, respectively, each resident and nonresident upland bird hunting license). In late August, FWP puts signs up at project sites and produces an access guide with maps to help hunters find and acquire permission for hunting project areas.

For more information on the UGEP, visit the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov). Click on "Wild Things," then look for "Upland Birds" under "Birds." ■

#### Spruce grouse

Weight: 1 lb.

Habitat: Dense fir, spruce, and pine forests, primarily in mountains west of the Continental Divide.

Wingshooting appeal: Hold well for pointing dogs. Explosive flush can make them a challenging target.



Native species



General year-round range

#### Mourning dove

Weight: 5 oz.

Habitat: Grain fields and grass fields, especially those near rivers, streams, and lakes.

Wingshooting appeal: Great eating. Extremely fast, making them a challenging target.



Native species



Winter range Summer range

#### Wild turkey

Weight: Males: 16 lbs., females: 9 lbs.

Habitat: Open ponderosa pine forest in rugged terrain, interspersed with grasslands and brushy draws.

Hunting appeal: Extremely wary. In spring, toms (males) must be called into range by a well-concealed hunter.



Non-native species



General year-round range



Hungarian partridge



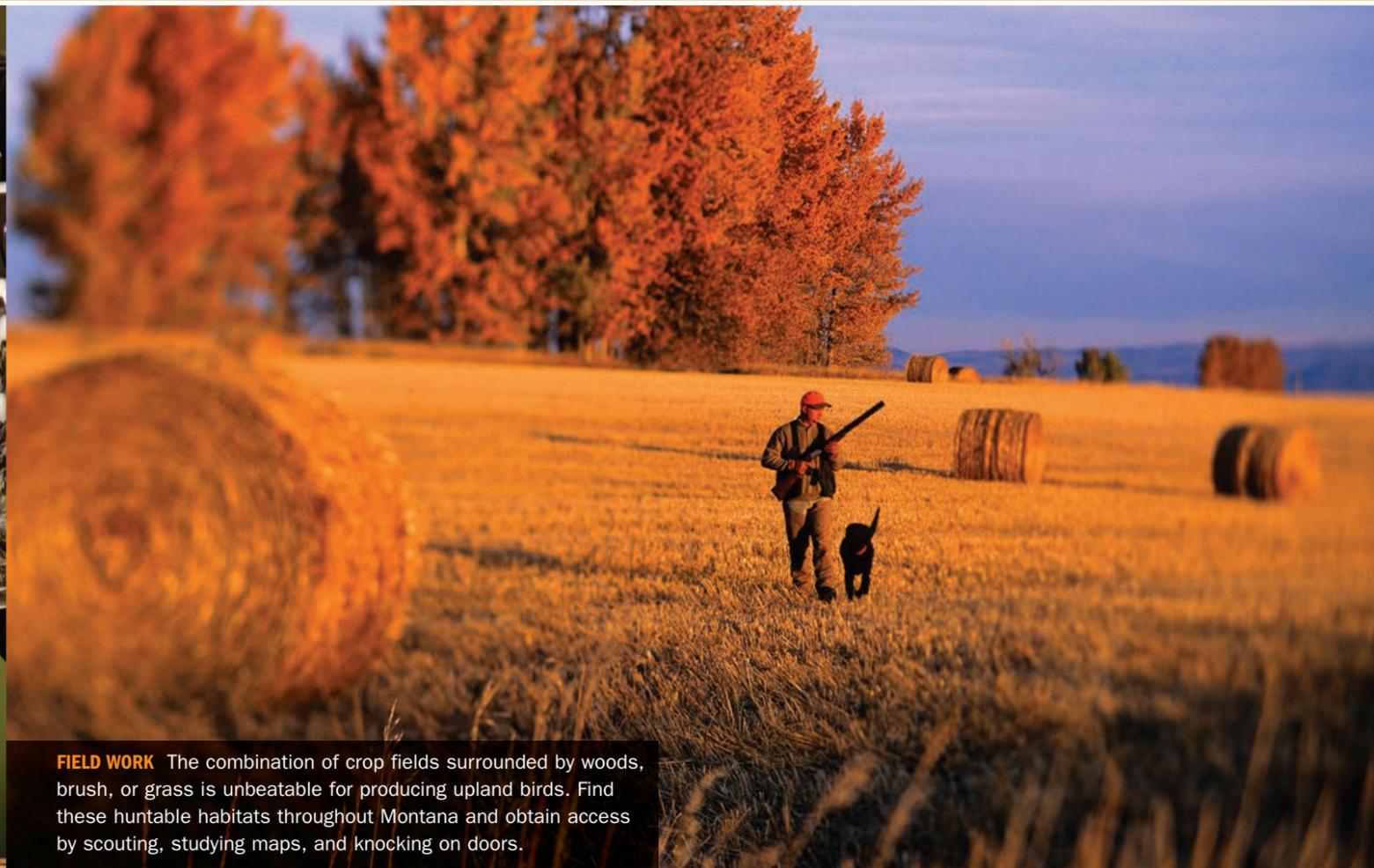
Spruce grouse



Mourning dove



Ruffed grouse



**FIELD WORK** The combination of crop fields surrounded by woods, brush, or grass is unbeatable for producing upland birds. Find these huntable habitats throughout Montana and obtain access by scouting, studying maps, and knocking on doors.

higher in elevation. In September, look for them along open glades, meadows, and clearcuts surrounded by conifer stands. As winter approaches, they move even higher and often show up near rocky outcroppings. Spruce grouse live deep in the forests of western Montana mountains.

Like Huns, mountain grouse are difficult to monitor. Biologists look closely at annual harvests to estimate population trends. After a high in the late 1970s and early '80s, Montana's mountain grouse harvest plummeted. Northrup thinks the drop was not due to declining grouse populations but rather the U.S. Forest Service closing logging roads that provided easy access for hunters to drive into grouse country.

**MOURNING DOVES**

Mourning doves live and nest everywhere in Montana, including forests and grasslands, but that's small consolation to the hunter

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hoping for a dove shoot. By September 1, when the season opens, most of these warm-weather birds have migrated south. Sometimes a prolonged heat spell in late summer keeps doves around until mid-September. But for the most part, this hunting opportunity usually lasts only a few days.

Scout pre-season to find the best pass-shooting spots. Look for fields where doves feed, then wait at dusk between feeding areas and trees where they roost at night. Doves are small, but they make great table fare.

**WILD TURKEYS**

In my two-plus decades of living in Montana, wild turkey numbers have increased dramatically. For example, this spring I saw a wild turkey walking up the bed of the Gallatin River, an area where 15 years ago the species did not exist.

Northrup says wild turkeys have been expanding from their core habitats and are also in new territory thanks to FWP transplant programs conducted with the National Wild Turkey Federation.

New flocks have been added to the west end of the Bears Paw Mountains, along the Missouri River from the Ulm area downstream to Fergus and Petroleum counties, along the Milk River, and in the Chinook area. Previous transplants are beginning to provide hunting elsewhere in the state. Northrup says that before an area is considered for turkey releases, it must be open to public hunting and contain adequate nesting and winter habitat. Many turkey transplants over the past decade have been helped by recent mild winters.

Spring wild turkey hunting is more like elk bowhunting than traditional upland bird hunting. It's all about stealth, calling, and concealment. Woodticks and frequent spring storms keep many hunters from the woods that time of year. But wild turkey fans find the hunt to be challenging and exciting. 🐾

*For more information on upland birds, visit the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov). Click on "Wild Things," then look for "Upland Birds" under "Birds."*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DONALD M. JONES; ROBERT MCKEAN; DUŠAN SNETIK; LINDA FRESHWATERS; JAROD; MICHAEL H. FRANCIS