

GROUSE OF THE FOREST

It takes some hiking and brush busting to reach mountain grouse. But the effort pays off with the fastest wingshooting and tastiest game birds around.

BY DAVE CARTY

Back in my younger days, I'd ponder with my like-minded buddies the apparent lack of interest in mountain grouse among other Montana hunters. Ruffed and dusky (blue) grouse offered everything we could ask for: wide-open public access in beautiful country, behavior seemingly designed for pointing dogs and flushing dogs alike, and a delicate, exquisite taste. (A third mountain grouse species, Franklin's or spruce grouse, is not included here because most hunters don't find them edible.)

That was two decades ago, when I was two decades younger. And while I may have grown wiser and my hair grayer, the mountains haven't become any less steep, a fact I'm reminded of on every trip. After a few days of busting my hump in the mountains, even a long day hunting the flat pheasant country of eastern Montana feels like a leisurely stroll. Still, even with all the legwork that's required, I can't figure out why more bird hunters don't get as excited about mountain grouse as I do.

Of course, the way my friends and I hunt dusky and ruffed grouse isn't the norm. Most hunters shoot the birds incidentally on the ground or on a branch while hunting deer or elk. The grouse make a welcome addition to the monotony of base-camp chow. But my buddies and I only hunt these grouse over pointing dogs, and we won't shoot birds unless they are flying.

I can somewhat understand why someone would ground-sluice these game birds or pot one from a tree: In the West, mountain grouse are called fool's hens. If they won't fly, the thinking goes, then it's okay to shoot 'em where they sit. ▶▶

OPEN SHOT A dusky (blue) grouse flushes in a high mountain park, presenting an ideal target. Dusky and ruffed grouse usually aren't so accommodating, preferring to weave their way through shot-blocking trees as they make their escape.

JOHN JURACEK

The thing is, western mountain grouse seem dimwitted only because they don't get hunted much. I've pursued ruffed grouse extensively in the upper Midwest, where hunting pressure is intense. Believe me, there's nothing foolish about those birds. You can hunt all week, flushing 20 ruffs a day, before running across one that sits in a tree and gawks at you.

Mountain grouse in Montana are far less likely to offer wingshooters a sporting shot by flushing and then flying fast and far, but it happens enough to keep me happy. During the 20-plus seasons I've hunted both ruffed and dusky grouse here, my unscientific estimate is that roughly 50 percent of ruffs and 25 percent of duskies choose to fly to the nearest tree and sit on a branch rather than offer a hard, sporting flush. For those who like to shoot flying grouse over pointing dogs, that's a frustrating number of birds to pass up. Still, because Montana offers so many places to hunt mountain grouse—duskies and ruffs range west of a line roughly

or from Glacier National Park to Ashland in southeastern Montana—we find enough flying birds to give us plenty of shooting.

RUFFED GROUSE

As a boy, I was addicted to the classic New England ruffed grouse literature of the early 20th century. The thing is, no grouse lived within 200 miles of where I grew up in southern Iowa. What appealed to me most was the style of hunting in those bygone days: English setters, side-by-side shotguns, fedoras, leather gloves. I also loved the settings where ruffed grouse hunting took place—ancient stone walls, abandoned farms, overgrown apple orchards, and, most important, stands of aspen—or, as the locals called them, “popples” (from poplars, of which aspen are a type).

Though Montana's conifer-dominated, stone-wall-free, high-mountain grouse country hardly resembles New England, it contains many stands of aspen that attract ruffs. Almost every time I find a ruffed

Grouse and dogs belong together, like leather boots and Carhartts.



grouse here, it's among aspens. And because moisture is needed to grow water-loving aspen trees, you'll usually find ruffed grouse in the arid West along stream and creek bottoms, what biologists call riparian areas. These moist soils also grow the snowberries, hawthorn fruit, and forbs such as clover that grouse love.

Finding aspen is easy, especially in the fall. Early in the season, drive around national forests looking for drainages with a lighter shade of green than the surrounding conifers. Those are aspen stands. And in early October, aspen are nearly impossible to miss, as they glow a bright yellow from their changing leaves. The best stands for grouse hunting contain a mix of aspen ages. Look for a combination of the younger, dog-hair-thick stands that grouse use to avoid avian predators, mixed with some older, taller trees, where grouse feed on male aspen buds during winter.

Aspen stands and other damp places where ruffed grouse lurk are almost always in thick cover, which means they are tough to hunt without a dog. It's possible, especially with two hunters—one wades into the jungle while the other stays outside hoping for a shot at flushed birds—but it's not for me. I think grouse and dogs belong together, like leather boots and Carhartts.

As to the type of dog best for grouse, that's open to debate. I'm partial to pointers, but I've hunted over enough breeds to know that any of them will work if they're trained well and the hunter allows them to do their job. Thousands of Montana ruffs are shot every season over Labs, the most popular dogs in the known universe. A few hunters, and I used to be one of them, hunt over springer spaniels. Spaniels work well on grouse because they thrash around in the brush so their hunters don't have to.

One spaniel fan is my friend John Wright,

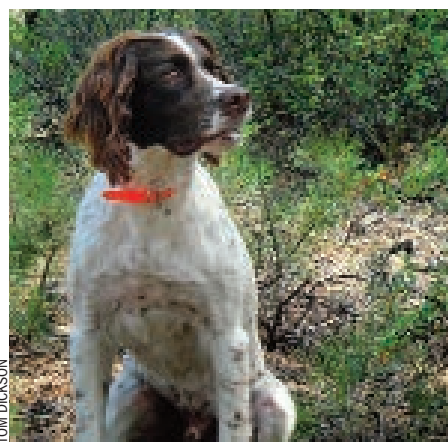


JOHN JURACEK



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HUNT 'EM UP A dog isn't essential for hunting mountain grouse, but it sure helps. And two are even better. Pointing breeds, like the English setters above, find grouse on the ground and keep the birds from flushing until the shooter gives a command. Labs and springer spaniels work best for flushing grouse out of thick cover and then finding and retrieving downed birds. Hunters without dogs usually must make do with shooting grouse in trees or on trails because the birds are much easier to see than ones hiding in brush.



TOM DICKSON



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REGAL BIRD A male ruffed grouse shows off his gorgeous multi-hued feathers while resting on a drumming log in spring. In fall, hunters find these explosive game birds mainly in mixed-age aspen groves along mountain streams.

who, among other things, is a first-rate trainer of these little dogs. Wright's spaniels are world-class gun dogs that have won dozens of field trials. He trains them on grouse on a friend's ranch behind his Galatin Valley home. It's fairly typical Montana ruffed grouse habitat: thick and nasty, with plenty of hawthorns and popple thickets. The birds love it.

"I look at dogs as tools in a toolbox," Wright says. "If you're hunting waterfowl, then a Labrador is a great dog. If you're hunting mostly quail and Hungarian partridge, then a pointer or setter is a great dog. And if you're a jack of all trades like I am, then a springer is a great choice."

Wright has proved his point to me on several occasions. A few years ago, the two of us set off from his house, my setter and Brittany coursing before us, two of his young spaniels at heel. When my young setter, Hanna,

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PAT MUNDAY

FIND THE FOOD, FIND THE BIRDS Dusky grouse change their diet throughout the hunting season. Before the first frost, they hang out along mountain meadow edges feeding mainly on grasshoppers and other insects, along with wild strawberry leaves, clover, and other moist vegetation. By early October, they switch to fruits and berries as well as leaves. Whortleberries (above right) are favorites, as are snowberries (right). Find these fruits in a high-elevation forest opening and you'll likely start flushing dusky grouse.



STEVEN ANGRE

pointed a bird in a clump of hawthorns, one of his pups got its chance. At Wright's command, the little spaniel darted into the brush ahead of Hanna, thrashed around for a few seconds, then promptly put the grouse into the air above my head. Wright folded it neatly when it was safely away from me. "With springers, you can stand on top above the dogs and shoot everything that comes out, just like we did in that hawthorn thicket," Wright says.

DUSKY GROUSE

In 2006 the Ornithological Union decided that what people along the Pacific Coast have been calling blue grouse for more than a century should be named sooty grouse—and that blue grouse in Montana and elsewhere in the Interior West are a different species, to be known as dusky grouse. Though you won't catch me using the term with my hunting buddies, as a nod to scientific correctness, I've employed it here.

While ruffed grouse and dusky grouse

No matter where you find dusky grouse, getting there won't be easy.



both live in mountains, the places where you actually find the two birds couldn't be more different. Reaching ruffed grouse habitat is usually easy walking, but the habitat itself is thick and thorny. Dusky grouse hunting is just the opposite. The habitat itself is grassy meadows and open hillsides. But reaching those places can be murder.

Dusky grouse live at high elevations, which means hunters wear out plenty of boot leather getting there. Invariably, where you end up finding these grouse is farther uphill than wherever you start hunting. Even from a trailhead seemingly above the clouds, you'll almost certainly have to climb another several hundred additional heart-pounding, chest-searing feet in elevation before you find birds.

Experienced hunters eventually discover a few hot spots within easy walking distance of a road. Those places are treasures earned by years of hard work, so don't expect anyone to share the locations with you. To find your own dusky grouse habitat, you'll have to do it the same way the rest of us do: Drive up into the mountains, park your truck, and hike straight uphill until you cut feathers.

My GPS has been invaluable in helping locate dusky grouse. I've found that almost all the grouse I flush in southwestern Montana are at 6,500 to 8,000 feet. Most are on south- or west-facing slopes. Unlike ruffs, which hunker down in thickets, dusky grouse prefer open parks broken up with old-growth Douglas and alpine fir.

Except for the wild turkey, no upland game bird consumes a wider variety of foods than the dusky grouse. Knowing what they eat, and when, is key to finding them. My friend Chuck Schwartz, a wildlife biologist and bird hunter, has been analyzing the dusky's stomping grounds, behavior, and eating habits for decades—usually on the business end of a pointing dog's



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IN THE THICK OF IT Ruffed grouse generally live deep in moist mountain thickets, requiring hunters and dogs to navigate dense wooded labyrinths.

nose. "Early in the season, when it opens in September, the birds feed on grasshoppers," he says. "I look for sunny open areas with a mixture of grass and sage next to forested habitat." Schwartz says dusky grouse hang along meadow edges "close enough to the grass to find hoppers, but also close enough to trees for escape cover. I try to hunt south-facing slopes and try to avoid north-facing slopes."

After the first hard frost kills most grasshoppers, Schwartz explains, dusky grouse begin eating more fruits, berries, and forbs. Like almost every other game bird in the state, dusky grouse love snowberries. I don't know what it is about these little white berries that the birds crave, because I nibbled on a few once and immediately spat them out. But if you can find snowberries

bordering a grassy, open glade, dusky grouse are probably close by.

Once snow covers their ground foods, dusky grouse head to higher elevations and feed exclusively on conifer needles. By then most bird hunters have moved on to pheasants in the prairies and left the mountains to elk and deer hunters.

Schwartz says he enjoys hunting behind his two Brittanias and setter because he likes watching them point and prefers the leisurely pace that pointing dogs afford. "I want to walk up behind my dog, as opposed to running behind a [non-pointing] dog worrying about when the bird is going to flush. It's a little more casual," he says.

Like wild turkeys, dusks rarely remain in the same spot from one day to the next. Schwartz suspects that the grouse range

widely in their daily search for food.

The dusky grouse is a large bird that weighs between 2 and 3 pounds, about 50 percent more than a ruffed grouse. That doesn't mean they're always easy to shoot. In the woods, an airborne dusky grouse seems to be just as tough to hit as a ruffed grouse, even with its slower takeoff speed.

Yet sometimes dusky and ruffed grouse offer such easy shots that a sporting upland hunter won't pull the trigger. I'm talking about tree sitters. In those cases, your only option is to scare the bird off its perch and take it on the wing. That's a lot harder than it sounds, especially if you're hunting alone. I've found it nearly impossible to throw a stick at the bird and then get my gun up in time to touch off a shot before it flies out of range. A tree flush is easier with two hunters: One throws while the other shoots. Keep in mind that grouse spooked from a branch invariably drop a few feet before leveling out in flight. Also, a grouse almost always flies downhill from its perch; shooters should position themselves accordingly.

I don't recall reading anything in the traditional New England sporting literature about upland hunters having to throw sticks at grouse. But in the Rockies, you hunt birds by a different set of rules.

Those rules may even become the new traditions of the future. Grouse hunting back East has declined with the aging of the region's deciduous forests. It's not entirely far-fetched to think that someday a boy or girl in Vermont or New Hampshire, or even southern Iowa, will read this article and dream of hunting grouse here, Montana-style. 🐾

Foolish Franklin's

Spruce (Franklin's) are Montana's third species of mountain grouse. They are common in backcountry lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests. Usually the deeper into timber you go, the more likely you'll find these handsome birds. They range from the Purcell Mountains north of Libby southeast to the Beaverhead and Tobacco Root Mountains.

Male spruce grouse have dark gray feathers, many of them tipped in white. Females, tan with many white spots, resemble sharptails. Both sexes weigh slightly over a pound, making them about half the size of a dusky grouse.

Because spruce grouse live far from humans and are rarely hunted, they appear downright tame. The birds often stand on trails watching curiously as hikers pass by within just a few feet.

The bird's diet of conifer buds and needles makes the meat unpalatable to many hunters, which is one reason spruce grouse are less popular than dusks and ruffs. But some hunters swear the breast meat is edible if soaked overnight in buttermilk or cooked in a casserole with cream of mushroom soup. A few even go so far as to say they enjoy the red meat of spruce grouse simply sautéed in butter.



TONY BRUNUM