



Spruce (Franklin's) Grouse

Dendragapus canadensis

By John Fraley

Recently, a male spruce grouse blocked my way on a backcountry trail. I eventually had to move the brazen bird out of the way with a stick. I can't count how many of these unwary birds I've seen just sitting along a trail or on a low branch, apparently believing they were camouflaged. No wonder they're called "fool hens." Though they seem to occasionally avoid coyotes or lynx by flying up onto tree branches, I've often wondered how these mountain grouse can possibly maintain their populations.

Spruce grouse (also known as Franklin's grouse) are a bird of the northern mountains, common in backcountry lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests in all northern Rocky Mountain states, Alaska, and Canada. The grouse was named after the arctic explorer John Franklin, who led expeditions in the

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Northwest Territories in the 1820s. Meriwether Lewis described a subspecies of the spruce grouse that he observed in 1805 in the mountains of the Columbia Drainage.

APPEARANCE Male spruce grouse are dark gray above, with a black throat and breast patch, distinct white spots on the breast and belly, and scarlet eye combs. Females are generally brown above and white with brown bars below. The tail feathers of both sexes are unbarred and tipped with white. A spruce grouse is about 16 inches long and weighs just over 1 pound. It is slightly smaller than a ruffed grouse and about half the size of a blue grouse.

REPRODUCTION Male spruce grouse defend their territory during the spring breeding season by strutting and assuming blustery poses. To court the female, the male leaps from the ground, beating his wings behind his back to make loud clapping sounds.

Females emit a long series of songlike notes during courtship. After mating, females lay 8 to 14 spotted-brown eggs in nests on the ground in heavy brush. After the eggs hatch, females keep their chicks close by, partly by communicating with clucks and coos. Despite the wary mother's presence, however, most chicks end up in the stomachs of American martens, short-tailed weasels, raptors, and other predators. After the broods break up in the fall, spruce grouse spread out and become solitary.

FOOD Spring through fall, spruce grouse eat insects, berries, the leaves of many different plants, and conifer needles. During winter, they mainly eat fir, pine, and spruce needles. The crop can store up to 10 percent of the bird's body weight in needles, which the bird digests at night. And the gizzard nearly doubles in size to hold the large volume of conifer needles needed to supply enough calories for the bird to survive frigid temperatures.

STATUS AND MANAGEMENT IN MONTANA FWP does not monitor spruce grouse populations, but reports from hunters and anecdotal observations by biologists and hikers indicate stable populations. Rick Northrup, FWP's Upland Game Bird Program coordinator, says the department hopes to someday begin monitoring spruce, ruffed, and blue grouse populations. "We need a better feel for short-term and long-term trends for all mountain grouse," he says. "The information would allow us to look at the effects of habitat changes, as well as provide basic information on bird numbers."

During the fall upland bird-hunting season, spruce grouse are included in the daily bag limit of three mountain grouse. Many bird hunters don't pursue spruce grouse because the birds can be too easy to shoot and are reputed to taste of pine (due to their winter diet). However, spruce grouse offer great hunting opportunities for first-time hunters. These birds have been among the first game animals my children have taken as they learned to hunt. As for table fare, I've found that spruce grouse are excellent when simply baked with cream of chicken soup poured on top. 🐾