



Get to know the dusky grouse

Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I had a neighbor for many years, who spent as much time as he could get away with, in the high country. He knew the Uncompahgre Plateau as well as any person I have ever met. He hunted elk and deer, traveled every ATV trail he could find, and hiked to corners previously undiscovered.

His real passion came in the fall. He would load up a shotgun and pack, and head up into the high country timber in search of the dusky grouse. He very seldom brought one home and I always thought his “grouse hunt” was an excuse to enjoy the fall colors. Whatever the reason, it was ok with me. I have used weaker excuses than that to get out in the woods.

The blue grouse was what I always knew this bird as. As a kid, hunting deer in the fall, we always ran into a blue during the day. Biologist recently split the classification of the blue grouse into 2 species. First is the sooty grouse, which inhabits the Pacific Northwest. Closer to home we now have the dusky grouse, which lives in the Rocky Mountains.

The sooty and dusky are the second largest grouse in North America, topping the scales at up to 3 pounds (sage grouse being the largest). Dusky males are a blue-gray color, while the females look more like a mottled brown. Both sexes have a gray band on their fan shaped tail., but it is more distinct on the males.

Dusky grouse are considered the forest grouse because they are found roosting and feeding in the deep cover of the spruce trees, Douglas fir and the lodge pole pines during the long winter months. In the spring-time, grouse live on insects, seeds, fruit, buds and conifer needles.



A dusky grouse that showed no fear in allowing me to snap his picture. Notice how his colors blend so well with the surrounding vegetation and ground. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

These birds feed in the trees when the ground has a heavy snow cover.

The dusky grouse is usually a loner, except for hens with young. The sounds these birds make are very unique. It consists of a series five, soft and very low-pitched hoots. The sound of the call rarely travels more than 100 feet.

Males usually make their sounds from the ground, or from a low perch. They become more vocal during the mating season. Mating season will have the boys showing off their stuff by strutting with their tails raised up and fanned out, like a bunch of boys at the school bus stop. That fanned out tail can have as many as 22 feathers in it. The neck feathers will spread revealing patches of very bright colored skin.

Nesting occurs mostly in a variety of areas, sometimes in an area of a recent burn. The nest is always on the ground, in a small depression, and covered with dead undergrowth and feathers.

Once the female mates with the male, she departs. The females will lay up to 12 eggs, pale white with brown speckling. The female incubates these eggs for 25 to 28 days. She will defend her nest fearlessly, refusing to leave even when approached by an intruder.

The young will leave the nest within a day after hatching. Mom will care for the young but not feed them. The young have to fend for themselves in the food department. The young make short flights after eight or nine days, and reach full maturity at 13 weeks.

Lewis and Clark first identified the blue grouse as 2 different species, back in the 1800's. They were later merged into single specie again during the 1900's. They remained single specie of the blue grouse until 2006.

In 2006, the American Ornithologist's Union decided, once again, to split the species into the dusky and sooty grouse. By quick glance, the 2 species appear nearly identical. They are even suspected of interbreeding, which complicates the matter even more. DNA research offered enough difference to cause the 2 species to be split, once and for all. Seems like a lot of back and forth when it does not appear to make much difference to the grouse.

The dusky grouse is another specie that could be impacted by climate change. Since this species makes seasonal attitude migrations, a warming climate could affect how far they have to migrate, which could stress the birds.

In some areas, logging is beginning to play a role in the habits of the grouse. Logging activities may reduce summer nesting habitat, as well as the coniferous winter grounds in some areas. Because these birds are generally remote, human influence is usually not likely to play a roll in their mortality.

Overall, the dusky grouse population seems pretty secure in North America. The population estimate for all of North America shows about 3 million birds, roughly split 50/50 with Canada.

I am not sure if I buy into all this climate change. Science can't even agree about it. This is the same science that told me another ice age was coming when I was in grade school. Either way, be it climate change, rural/urban sprawl, or just plain loss of habitat, we can't afford to lose more animal species, so care must be given.

We lost my neighbor who loved to hunt grouse a few years ago. Sometimes, my wife and I head up in the mountains during the fall to chase the dusky grouse around. Like my late neighbor, we seldom bring home a grouse. It must be something about just being in the mountains.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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