

The start of the hunt, the start of a tradition

DON'T WAIT TO GET STARTED GROUSE HUNTING.

Eric Verbeten

My first shot was a miss, but the second found its target. In that moment, I successfully hunted my first ruffed grouse in Wisconsin's Northwoods, transforming me from a shotgun-toting novice, dressed in blaze orange, into a true grouse hunter. That moment marked the beginning of a lifelong passion for me. To this day, I don't remember what was louder, the gunshot or the roaring cheer from my friend as he watched on — witnessing me make personal history.

Three years before that moment, I had never seen a grouse, heard a grouse or knew what one looked like. And now, I can't wait for the start of the season in September. What started as a hobby, quickly turned into a passion for the woods, the hunt and the tradition.

I owe my thanks to my friend Dan who dragged me along on grouse walks to introduce me to the sport. Despite my doubts, he taught me the fundamentals. His die-hard attitude got me out early and home late — walking more miles through difficult terrain than I ever thought possible. His passion for the sport was contagious and it drove me forward despite the difficulty of the early years. The first two were fruitless and sometimes frustrating. Missed shots were common and the feeling of being outwitted by a bird took its toll. But we kept on until I finally had my moment, something I will not forget.

I asked myself why it took so long for my first bird. Eventually, I found the answer, but it wasn't what I expected. I realized there was no set timeline for learning how to hunt, and success isn't defined by the number of birds you bag in a day. The hunting part is only a piece of the greater whole. The excitement, the adrenaline and the gunfire don't overshadow the many joys found



The author after hunting his first ruffed grouse in the northwoods of Wisconsin.

ERIC VERBETEN

DAN ROSENOW

in the walk, time spent with friends and the journey to improve skills. Even if you see nothing in a day, you connect with nature and you feel the satisfaction of well-earned exhaustion.

Early on, I found my time in the woods satisfying and relaxing, but that quickly turned into a need — a need that could only be quelled by more time spent on the trail.

Grouse season runs from mid-September until the end of January in Wisconsin. The season can be broken up into three sub-seasons: early, late and winter. Usually, opening weekend in the early season is a mixed bag of results, with rare moments of hunting success and many missed chances due to the birds escaping through a thicket of dense vegetation.

Opening weekend is more or less a ceremonial outing for Dan and me. We are less concerned about the hunting conditions or being successful, we're just glad to be back in the wild, doing what we love.

It isn't until late October when the hunting gets really good. The cool morning air mixed with warm sun has to be one of the best combinations for long walks with crunching leaves underfoot. The best days are the calm, cool and sunny days. The worst are windy ones, which put grouse on alert and make them prone to flush sooner, and often out of range. I have had luck hunting grouse in all types of weather, but the windy days remain the most difficult and unpredictable.

Winter brings its own set of challenges and joys. The stillness of a snow-covered forest is powerful, and is best enjoyed with frequent stops to take it all in. Trudging through the powder proves to be more work than expected, so aid-

GET TO KNOW RUFFED GROUSE

The ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) is a chicken-sized bird that is shy and wary, spending the majority of its life alone and hiding from predators, according to Gary Zimmer of the Ruffed Grouse Society. The ruffed grouse is the only grouse in North America from the genus *Bonasa* with its closest relatives being the Eurasian hazel grouse and the black-breasted hazel grouse of China. The ruffed grouse gets its name from the dark-colored neck ruff found on both males and females, though it is much more pronounced on the males. Three other members of the grouse family (but from a different genus) found in Wisconsin include the greater prairie chicken, sharp-tailed grouse and spruce grouse.



The ruffed grouse is the most common grouse species found in Wisconsin. It gets its name from the dark-colored neck ruff found on both males and females.

HERBERT LANGE

Zimmer explains that there are many challenges facing the grouse hunter, the biggest being a bird that is elusive and very good at avoiding you. When a ruffed grouse makes its escape, it has one goal, and that's putting as much distance and foliage between you and it. Grouse can reach speeds up to 50 mph and they do this with the help of a strong set of muscles to flap their wings at blinding speeds. Ruffed grouse use their wings for both flying and courtship. In courtship, the male bird rotates his wing forward, creating rapid air movements. Numerous small muscles of the wing and shoulder pull the wing forward or backward rotating the humerus, allowing the bird to raise or lower the leading edge of the wing. This ability is unique to ruffed grouse and aids in maneuverability during flight. Ruffed grouse however, do not have the stamina for sustained flight. Typical flights are only for relatively short distances, 300 to 500 feet once flushed.

The sound of a grouse flush is difficult to describe (and up for debate), but it could be likened to the sound of distant, rumbling thunder. Sometimes, you don't hear the bird, you feel it. As you walk, you learn to step in rhythm so you can hear a flush against the backdrop of synced footsteps. The roar of a flushing grouse can be startling. But through experience, you learn to channel that surprise into an automatic echolocating-instinct, honing in on the sound as it flees. All of this happens within a short moment, and if you are lucky, you see a glimpse of your

fleeting target for a second.


Despite the challenge, the good news is newcomers don't need a lot of equipment to get started. At its most basic, a good pair of hiking boots, a shotgun and some blaze orange are all you need. But like any sport, expenses can go up quickly with each item. There is a wide range of options for outdoor and upland apparel, but in the end it comes down to hunter preference.

Having a hunting dog is a great way to improve your chances of finding grouse. However, a dog is not necessary. Their noses are invaluable at sniffing out grouse that would otherwise sit still and let you walk by. Nature has equipped the ruffed grouse with superb camouflage, a pattern of feather coloration throughout its body that makes it nearly impossible to locate unless it moves. But a lurking dog pressures the bird to make a dash for safety, giving you the chance to see it.

ing me in my journey are a good pair of snowshoes, which help negotiate the jagged terrain below and provide a platform to step from.

As I crunch my way through unmarked pathways I keep watch on the pine trees, since they are the only real

tree cover left in the woods for grouse to hide. Another hiding place is surprisingly, in a snow roost. Grouse will burrow under the surface to stay warm and get out of the wind. I have never flushed a grouse out of a snow roost, but I have heard it's a spectacle to see and hear.

As I reflect back on my six years as a grouse hunter, I wonder why I hadn't started sooner? The sport has become an integral part of my life and has opened up doors to many other outdoor sports like fishing, hiking and other types of hunting. I eagerly await my seventh season because little-by-little, I improve with each year. Mastery is unachievable, but I prefer it that way. Ruffed grouse hunting will always be a challenging pursuit, but I can think of no better way to spend a fall day. 

Eric Verbeten writes for DNR's Office of Communications and the Bureau of Science Services.



BRITTANY WILLIAMS

The author and his dog, Carter, set out on one last winter hunt, ending the 2014-15 season.



ERIC VERBETEN

Dan Rosenow, who introduced the author to the sport, takes in an early season hunt in Forest County.

WHERE TO HUNT

Birds can be found in nearly every part of the state, but they tend to be more concentrated in the northern third of Wisconsin, according to the Ruffed Grouse Society. These birds spend nearly their entire life in dense, young forest cover so thick that it is tough for predators, like humans, to walk through let alone swing the barrel of a gun. Ruffed grouse are often found where trees like aspen or paper birch are regenerating as a result of a timber harvest, tornado or wildfire. Once these young trees are 4 to 5 years old, grouse will start using them for cover.

Ruffed grouse are territorial. Once a young male sets up a territory during the first fall of his life, he protects it rigorously, keeping all other males outside his chosen home. Male grouse will drum throughout the snowless season attracting females in the spring but also announcing to other males, especially in the fall, that this territory is taken. Any intruder that does not heed this message is met at the "property" line and a confrontation occurs. In most cases the intruder is forced away to find another vacant spot to set up his own territory.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON GROUSE HUNTING, WHERE TO HUNT AND THE SEASONS, VISIT:

dnr.wi.gov and search keyword "grouse"