

GROUSE of ALASKA

*Beautiful, tasty,
and great dancers*

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **GARY KRAMER**



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The Last Frontier is home to four species of grouse, and each ranges over other parts of North America. Grouse are revered by hunters for their sporting and culinary qualities, and popular with birders and other wildlife enthusiasts, particularly during the spring when they perform elaborate courtship rituals.

Grouse hunting seasons are variable by region but generally open August 10 and close March 31. The season in some units, however, extends into May. Limits are generally 5 to 15 birds per day, but in some units, the limit for ruffed grouse is only two birds daily. Be sure to check regulations by unit. >>



Ruffed Grouse

Ruffed grouse are found in the Interior woodlands wherever stands of aspen and birch break the uniformity of the northern-spruce forest. Ruffs have mottled gray, brown, buff, and black plumage, but gray and red color phases occur, and they are known for their unique drumming display. Beginning with two or three slow beats, males spread their wings forward then quickly backward. They increase the speed of the wing beats until the drumming is continuous. Males drum throughout the year, but it is a daily ritual from early April to early June.

Ruffed grouse occur throughout most of interior Alaska in aspen forests in the Yukon, Tanana, and Kuskokwim River valleys. There is a population in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley that has expanded down the Susitna River to Beluga Lake. They also occur in Southeast Alaska along the lower Stikine and Taku Rivers.



Sharp-tailed Grouse

Sharp-tailed grouse prefer recently burnt areas, open grass-shrub habitat, agricultural lands, sparse shrub-spruce areas, and muskegs. The coloration of both sexes is almost identical. In spring, sharp-tailed grouse gather on communal dancing grounds, called leks. During courtship, the males adopt a bent-forward posture, tails erect, and throat sacs inflated. They either rush forward or in circles while stamping their feet, rattling their tail feathers, and calling.

Sharptails can be found near Tanacross, Tok, Northway, and the agricultural area east of Delta Junction. The brush lands from Shaw Creek to Delta Junction then to Donnelly Dome support smaller populations. Birds are often seen in the open marshy ground near Fort Wainwright and North Pole, and they are also scattered along high, fairly open ridges west of Livengood, the road to Manley Hot Springs, on the Johnson Road south of Eielson Air Force Base, and along the Lake Louise Road west of Glennallen.



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Spruce Grouse

Spruce grouse are smaller than ruffed or sooty grouse. Males are heavily black or dark gray overall, with a dark throat, and breast edged in white. Females are various shades of brown, gray, and white. In spring, males advertise territories using flutter flights and strutting displays that include enlarged eye combs and fanned tails. Spruce grouse have earned the nickname “fool’s hen,” because they show little concern if approached, even within a few yards.

Nearly every good-size patch of boreal forest in Alaska has a population of spruce grouse. In fall, they are often seen along roadsides on the Parks Highway from Trapper Creek through Denali State Park and from Nenana to Ester, on the Steese Highway, along the Elliot Highway, along spruce-dominated sections of the Alaska and Taylor Highways, near Glennallen on the Glenn Highway, on many secondary roads on the Kenai Peninsula, and in the Matanuska and Susitna valleys. Near Anchorage, they can sometimes be seen in Kincaid Park.



Sooty Grouse

Sooty grouse were formerly known as blue grouse. In 2006, the American Ornithologists Union split blue grouse into two separate species—sooty grouse and dusky grouse. With males tipping the scales at about three pounds, they are Alaska's largest game bird. Males are predominantly slate gray mixed with white, whereas females are mostly grayish-brown mixed with white.

The wet, evergreen forests of Southeast Alaska from Haines to Ketchikan are home to sooty grouse. In the summer, they range into alpine meadows and lowland muskegs, and spend winters in habitat dominated by conifers. Males, with eye combs enlarged and neck sacs exposed and inflated, establish territories in spring with hooting sounds along with tail fanning, wing dragging, and strutting. A hoot from a sooty grouse can often be heard up to a half a mile distant. 🗣️

Gary Kramer is the author of Game Birds: A Celebration of North American Upland Birds, a 256-page, hard-cover coffee table book that offers 384 color photos and a comprehensive look all 34 game birds found in the U.S. and Canada. The book is available through his website (www.garykramer.net).



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