



I've enjoyed tramping around the woods of my family farm in western Wisconsin for over a half century. Funny how it doesn't seem that long, but as I run through my memories of the land, the years add up quickly. I have seen literally hundreds of ruffed grouse there over the years while hunting, walking the dogs, cutting firewood, and just kicking around. One spring I was able to sneak up to within 25 yards of a drumming male. He was preoccupied with showing off on his red oak log stage. I will never forget the two that landed on a branch a mere two feet from my head while I sat camouflaged to the hilt waiting for an unsuspecting deer to come by. Perhaps the most spectacular image burned into my mind's eye is of three red-phase ruffies blasting out of their snow holes, backlit by the morning sun, sending a shower of sparkling snowflakes over me. But one thing I can't recall is a year gone by without seeing a ruffed grouse in our woods. That is, until last year.

Throughout pre-season scouting last September, putting up stands in October, and hours spent in blaze orange this November either sitting quietly on stand or still-hunting through the woods, I never saw a grouse there in 2016. The annual ruffed grouse cycles indicated that we were in the depths of a trough last year, but spring drumming counts were reported to be up a whopping 0.2%. Hardly anything to get excited about, but it still made the news. Grouse cycles never seemed as obvious in the Coulee Country as in the aspen stands of northern Wisconsin. We always had a few grouse in the woods.

Imagine my excitement a few weeks ago, when Jan and I cut the track of a lone grouse while snowshoeing up one of our old logging roads. The track was recent with clear edges in the powdery snow. It meandered around in an open, mixed stand of oak, maple, and black cherry. I had to follow. We turned the snowshoes uphill and followed the track no more than 30 yards when we came to the end of the line. Grouse feathers scattered across the snow. A drop of red here and there. A deep impression bracketed by marks of wingtips in the snow. Perhaps a red-tailed hawk. "Oh no" I moaned, for I felt a sense of loss for the one and only grouse in the woods. I really was cheering for this one to make it through the winter, to find a mate, and fill the woods with grouse again. Hawks may be involved in the grouse cycle, but as with the weasel, bobcat, stem density, rabbits, phyto-chemical responses, and maybe even sunspots, they are only a part of the puzzle.

I don't blame the hawk. It had to eat, too. In part, I blame myself, because the maples and black cherries have been taking over our woods, shading out the once dense understory, and leaving a park-like place where no grouse can go unnoticed to the predator's eye. So this spring I will be cruising the timber, taking inventory, and planning a harvest. Next winter chain saws will sing and skidders will growl. Our pocketbook will swell and the woodstove will radiate its welcoming warmth. In time, the blackberry, aspen stems, and thick understory will return, providing a more secure home for my friend the ruffed grouse. My dogs love their sweet smell and I enjoy the challenge they provide in the fall... almost as much as the thump, thump, thump I hear in the woods as the spring drummers compete for the attention of young hens that help push their numbers back up the slope of the ruffed grouse cycle.

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