



How to Find a Grouse Covert

By TOM KEER

*A*sk someone to define the perfect grouse covert and you're likely to get a wide variety of responses. A grouse covert in the rolling hills of New England is different from the relatively flat terrain in the Midwest which is drastically different from the six to eight degree hillside slopes in West Virginia. And we haven't even headed west of the Continental Divide. Ruffed grouse are found in 38 of our 50 United States, and with the topography, flora and fauna varying to such a degree it's a challenge to write a piece about finding grouse cover.



But for me, part of what makes grouse hunting so addictive is the terrain itself. What a grouse eats in Minnesota is different from what they eat in Montana and in Pennsylvania. There is a rule, though, and the one constant is that they inhabit dense, woody terrain. In some areas we talk about getting shredded by thornapples while in other areas we talk about walking along slopes like the Side-Hill Hooper. In any case, our chats by the fire-pit, on the porch of a hunting camp or in a comfortable chair by the roaring fire in the winter are animated beyond belief.

Yes, we discuss the terrain that is a mixture of the orange and red maples, the brown oaks, the golden yellow aspen and white birch. We remember the snags found in a raspberry patch or in the nails of a thornapple. When we walk along an edge of a grouse's preferred brushy, mixed-age forest we know why the birds are in here. Food, yes, but also for cover. A bird's exposure is

minimized in the thick stuff, and the small passages close to the earth lets them keep their feet on the ground rather than up in the air.

Grouse inhabit different areas at different times of the year. In the spring we'll find them in breeding, nesting and rearing grounds. As they mature they'll pack their bags and move away. In their paths they'll plan for the future by finding ideal fall and winter feeding and roosting terrain. Because our hunting season is during that latter time we typically focus on their fall and winter feeding spots. I like to think of the grouse's pattern as a wheel. There is a hub at the center with lots of spokes going out along a 360-degree range. To my mind, the search for a grousy spot begins at the center. Instead of heading to where the birds will be in the fall let's begin our search at the hub: the drumming log.

Drumming Logs: Drumming logs, those elevated vantage points that males use during spring courtship, are the hub of wheel. The ideal log is about a foot off the ground and has adjoining brushy areas nearby. The accompanying brush can be fruit vines, bull briars, goldenrod fields, dogwood thickets, crabapple patches and young oaks. It shouldn't be so thick that it's impenetrable. Logs in damp, dark places near seeps are great places because of the greens and mushrooms that grow readily, and the water satisfies the birds' thirst. A friend once reported that a grouse used to drum on an old milk can that he found in the woods near an old dairy, and in many of my New England coverts I've found grouse will drum on the remnants of piled stone walls. These stone walls are the marks of abandoned farms, and a survey of the grounds oftentimes reveals prime grouse terrain. But if the farm hasn't been worked in a while then some of the land may be too mature.

An important point is that drumming logs are used all year long. The reason most drumming is heard in the spring is attributed to the increased frequency associated with the courtship process. If you're in the woods in the spring (hunting turkey or running dogs on returning woodcock) you'll easily find drumming logs. They give hunters an idea of not only where breeding occurred but also where there was a general nesting area. The significance here is that all hatched birds will disperse from this area. As this is the hub, the patterns they follow when they disperse become the spokes of the wheel.

Take Away: Look for drumming areas pockmarked with fallen trees. Look for areas where there are stumps or near stone walls with moderate brush and a nearby seep or feeder stream. Fallen logs may be softwoods like pines or hardwoods like hickory, beech or oak.

Nesting Areas: After mating, the females typically build nests within a half-mile range of the drumming log. The nests are in old deadfall or in leaves, and hardwood stands are a favorite. As with all ground birds a degree of stealth is key to escape, and so really dense areas aren't favored.

The birds will all stay put provided they have the right ingredi-



Photos by Tom Keer

ents nearby. If there is food, protection, a buffer from significant weather (like heavy rains or snow) and low-to-medium levels of predation, the grouse won't move very far. If the drumming and nesting area is lacking in any of those four categories then the birds will move far beyond their nesting site into a rearing terrain. They'll cover distances of two, three or more miles, and while you can walk it all, it's more effective to study the terrain for clues. Young birds need protein and they mostly find it in insects. While many are found around seeps and water, you'll find far more insects in the fields (fallow are as good if not better than those managed for crops). The birds also forage in primary and secondary growth saplings, particularly ones that offer buds, mushrooms and catkins.

Take Away: The pattern that began with the drumming log now repeats with a drumming log. The young males leave the nest first, and as they move into a new territory, they'll look to establish their own drumming logs. Once they find that log, they'll spend their remaining life within a quarter mile of that log. The females follow later and remain inside a one to three-mile radius. Knowing that distance helps establish a circle around the original drumming log which automatically narrows the search.

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Fall and Winter Feeding and Roosting Zones: When you look at a wooded area within the radius of the drumming log, consider its age. Younger is better, with about 20 years of age being the turning point. Primary and secondary growth doesn't have a big leaf canopy, and after 20 years the tree limbs grow close together and prohibit the sunlight from reaching the ground. Sunlight is critical for growth in trees like aspen, yellow poplar, black cherry and black locust. Soft mast (grasses, fern, and mushrooms) thrive as well.

In the fall you'll find grouse thriving in the young forest feasting on fruits and nuts. Fruits could be blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, high bush cranberries, apples, and Hawthorn berries. During good hard mast years, they'll key in on acorns and beech. Later in the season, and in particular when the snow

starts to fly, you'll find them in the ferns, alder catkins and buds. Birch, cherry and serviceberry buds are important winter foods for grouse.

Take Away: Ideally the area will have stands of aspen which are different from white birch. Both trees like moist, nutrient-rich soil and regrow easily after a forest fire. The white birch has a spear-shaped leaf with a double-serrated edge. The bark is white and parts of it peel back until it hangs from the tree. The fruit of a white birch is a two or three-inch long catkin. The aspen is heart-shaped with blunted edges, and its bark is slightly green and tight to the tree. Aspen fruit is a seed that comes in a capsule. Find an aspen near a drumming area and you'll find grouse - probably a lot of them.

The Processes: There are two important parts to finding grouse. The first comes from learning the terrain. The

ideal way to learn about flora and fauna is to have someone show you the different types of plants, trees and shrubs. In the event that you're self-taught, there are tremendous resources at your disposal. Peterson's guides are wonderful pocket companions that help identify what is in your woods. Attending a Ruffed Grouse Society event is a great way to learn. And reading magazines such as this one is helpful. The second part comes from time in the woods. It's ok to cover ground on each outing, true, but adding some thought to the process makes a tremendous difference. It'll help you move from drumming log to productive coverts in no time. Finding good grouse coverts is a lifetime pursuit, and with so much to learn there is no reason we can take to the woods too often. ♦