

# Ruffed Grouse Endangered Listing

The message came at a time when we are normally thankful and celebrating our natural world – the change of seasons, the flush of wild wings, time with friends. But in early November, we were asked to comment on a decision to list ruffed grouse as an endangered species in a state where they once were common.

I had a knot in my stomach. An endangered listing, the last ditch effort to save a species on the road to extinction. For our very own, beloved ruffed grouse? Certainly not good news and an issue deserving of undivided attention. Our team combed through information but it didn't take long to reach a conclusion. The state's endangered listing for ruffed grouse was warranted.

Some of the evidence:

- Number of ruffed grouse is less than 1% of the population from just 40 years ago,
- Breeding populations have declined steadily over 25 years,
- Historically, ruffed grouse inhabited all 92 counties, but persist in only a few in 2018,
- Ruffed grouse are completely gone (extirpated) in at least 15 counties.

The problem isn't isolated to Indiana. Eighteen states list ruffed grouse as a species of concern across a wide geographic area (New England, the upper Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, Appalachians).

One could wishfully accredit the slide to typical 10-year grouse cycles. But a 99% decline over forty years isn't a cycle, it's a downward spiral.

So why are populations plummeting?

Habitat. Ruffed grouse are the bellwether of forest health. Poor forest health has been documented in lock step with ruffed grouse disappearance over several decades. In healthy forests, grouse and the forest wildlife community are resilient to many burdens. In unhealthy forests, they succumb to disease and predation.

The greatest disappointment is that the listing comes as no surprise. Concerned wildlife biologists gave the siren call some twenty years ago. But actions were not taken. And now, at the tipping point, there's no time to spare.

On the path of inaction, ruffed grouse will be completely gone from Indiana. In the 18 states on the bubble, they will be listed as endangered soon (it may be warranted already). With further inaction, they will be gone from these states as well. All this occurring in less than a lifetime.

To say this is a conservation crossroad is an understatement. For the Ruffed Grouse Society and the emblem of our forest conservation mission, this is a defining moment. The knot in my stomach has turned to a feeling of firm resolve.

We are ramping up a major campaign. I hesitate to call it an initiative, as they can be of limited scope and contrived duration. Rather, we are setting forth on a long-term mission to improve forest health. Habitat management, land conservation, partnerships, communications, research – all on the docket.

Securing major funding is the first step, so we are kicking off a challenge campaign on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving (Giving Tuesday). We are working now to secure matching funds with less than a week to go. We hope you'll join us. More to come...

Ben

Benjamin C. Jones  
President and CEO, Ruffed Grouse Society  
American Woodcock Society