



UI Extension Forestry Information Series

Improving Ruffed Grouse Habitat

Chris Schnepf

Idaho has several grouse species, but the most common on private woodlands is the ruffed grouse. Many of us enjoy hunting, photographing or even just having ruffed grouse “around”. Although grouse populations vary from year to year, you can increase the average numbers of grouse by providing better habitat on your property.

Much of the ruffed grouse habitat research was developed in the eastern states; however, basic principles should apply to Idaho birds as well. Ruffed grouse are omnivorous, and have been known to eat over 600 different food items, including buds, leaves, berries, nuts, grain and insects. Buds, especially those of shrubs and trees that are above the snow, are particularly vital. Winter cover (pockets of heavy conifers) are also important for grouse, but only if there isn’t cold, dry snow in the winter - if there is, the grouse will bury themselves in it, relying on the snow to insulate them.

Quality grouse habitat requires variety. Grouse thrive in the habitat provided in a very young forest - a complex variety in the species, size and distribution of trees and shrubs. Generally, the more diverse your woodland’s vegetation, the better for ruffed grouse. To increase shrub variety, landowners can:

- Create small openings throughout the forest (1/4 to 1 acre and at least 600 feet apart).
- Widen areas along forest roads to 30 feet or more.
- Create shrub borders between woodland and fields.
- Thin trees to increase shrubs under stands.
- Consider planting additional trees and shrubs.

Individual grouse range over relatively small areas (10-40 acres) so variety is necessary across small tracts. Increased “edge” (areas between timber and brush or grass) on your property, is good for grouse and many other species of wildlife as well.

You can also help grouse reproduction. Many of us have heard male grouse “drumming” from fallen logs or stumps in the spring to advertise their availability to females. If there are not any large diameter logs lying around, consider leaving butt logs from defective trees for drumming and dusting places if you harvest timber.

Before making improvements, it is important to understand the habitat currently available. This may be done by simply walking through the place, or through a more formal wildlife habitat inventory. Try to map out the locations of various kinds of wildlife habitat, and set priorities for improvement.

Once you understand the current status of the property’s habitat, try to integrate development of grouse habitat with development for other woodland benefits through your forest management plan. Wildlife can usually be accommodated with management for other values, such as timber. If you harvest timber from your property, consider how you can improve ruffed grouse habitat at the same time. For example, leave fewer stems per acre when you thin, to favor brush development.

Ruffed grouse are just one of the many benefits from an actively managed forest property. If you have further questions on how to improve grouse or other wildlife habitat, contact the Idaho Department of Fish and Game or your local University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System office.

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About the Author: *Chris Schnepf* is an Area Extension Educator - Forestry and Professor at the University of Idaho.