



Moon Featured Stories

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Moon's Ruffed Grouse Society Looks to the Future for Game and Members

BY CAROLYN MORRISON

In a sunlit clearing, a thick bodied, chicken-sized bird with gleaming plumage and harmoniously blended colors of russet, copper, and dark chocolate, steps up to his log, stone, or dirt pile podium. He spreads his black-banded fantail and shining ruffed throat collar before beginning a "drumming" performance used to either woo a mate or defend his territory from other males. Wings whip vertically in front of his puffed chest, gaining momentum as he creates a vacuum against the air. It's the same mechanism that causes a boom of thunder after a lightning strike. This small, yet mighty bird is none other than the state bird of Pennsylvania and king of all game birds: the ruffed grouse.

Despite being North America's widest ranging game bird inhabiting all of Canada and 38 of the 50 U.S. states, the ruffed grouse remains scattered and elusive, with populations decreasing in Pennsylvania and throughout the Northeastern United States. The Ruffed Grouse Society, a national conservation and sporting organization headquartered in Moon since the 1970s, remains dedicated to fostering prime habitat and hunting opportunities for both this species and the American woodcock.

Made up of a diverse group of regional directors, wildlife biologists, and passionate members, RGS celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2011. Pennsylvania has 26 chapters, 17 of which are currently active. Lisa Rossi, who began her career with RGS 24 years ago, is the organization's regional director for western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Georgia. Lisa organizes committee members and volunteers to host fundraising banquets, raffles, shoots, hunts, and habitat field days, which benefit the organization locally. The Pittsburgh chapter - which encompasses Allegheny and Beaver counties - has existed for 36 years, and is one of the state's largest, averaging 500 participants per event and contributing the most revenue of any other chapter in Pennsylvania.

A lifelong resident of southwestern Pennsylvania who grew up in Bridgeville and has lived in Oakdale for more than 20 years, Lisa wishes that the ruffed grouse and those who cherish it were even more prevalent in her part of the state. Lisa recognizes that while RGS is certainly well established and respected as a seasoned conservation organization, with many 35-year veteran volunteers, members, and "friends for life," a major focus now is the recruitment of entire family units to become active members. That includes younger generations within the 15-25-age bracket, and women.

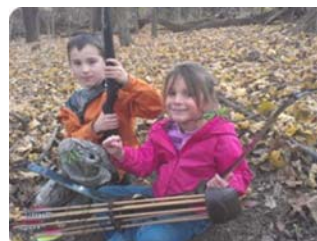
Lisa stresses that RGS is made up of members who share a common interest and passion for the ruffed grouse, American woodcock, and other wildlife, and hopes to include more women and youth members in the very near future. RGS offers special items at their fund-raising events, including jewelry raffles, housewares, wine tours, and youth shooting instruction, all in an attempt to appeal to a wider membership base. A hunter from a young age, Lisa remembers the proud moment she bagged her first game bird, and strongly believes that women cannot only be excellent shooters, but also effective fundraisers and conservationists.

Mathew Soberg, RGS Director of Communications and editor of its publication, *Ruffed Grouse Society* magazine, believes that new visuals, videos, articles, and photos that reach beyond the standard print publications will be vital to attracting new members in the digital media age. A current contest giveaway RGS is running includes a GoPro video camera. The camera will be awarded to an exceptional video entry by a member who records his or her first-hand experience in the field while hunting or habitat building, and posts it on YouTube.

Hunting the native ruffed grouse presents challenges unique among Pennsylvania game birds. They are small, can remain easily hidden, and are well adapted to their surroundings. They also fly rapidly when disturbed from their cover, as compared to heavy bodied birds such as stocked pheasants and the reintroduced wild turkey. Ruffed grouse are very scarce compared to the ubiquitous turkey, which most people in western Pennsylvania have encountered at some point.

The primary challenge to ruffed grouse populations is habitat loss. As a year-round resident and ground-nesting bird, the species has very specific habitat requirements, known as early-successional forest. Otherwise, it cannot survive and breed successfully.

Adhering to the philosophy of American naturalist, avid grouse hunter, and wildlife enthusiast Aldo Leopold, RGS promotes the active management of grouse habitat through select timber cutting in areas of mature forest. RGS claims that this ecosystem was once regenerated by naturally occurring wildfires and controlled burns. Thinning of mature trees allows sunlight to reach the forest floor, aiding to the growth of bushy plant cover and food sources necessary for grouse. According to RGS publications, many other songbird species such as the yellow-breasted chat, golden-winged warbler, eastern towhee, and field sparrow also need early successional habitats to breed successfully. RGS stresses that a balance



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between young and old forest growth is vital for wildlife diversity. Lisa emphasizes that there is no "one type management" for all forests, and that conservation groups must work together to benefit all species.

Donny Zarra is a lifelong hunter of upland game birds. His first memories of the sport are intensely familial; riding in a pick-up truck with his father, brother, and dog, hot chocolate and bologna sandwiches in tow. Donny is keeping that tradition alive with his own young family. He hunts with his wife, Jamie, son, Donato, and daughter, Nelina. At ages 6 and 5, Donato and Nelina are skilled with BB guns and the bow and arrow. The other two members of the family, Duke and Fawn, play a vital role in the family's hunting adventures. Donny takes the sporting roles of these two German wirehaired pointers, otherwise known as Deutsch Drahthaar, very seriously. He has been a registered breeder of the world class hunting dog breed for years.

A native Pittsburgher and general manager of Zarra's Restaurant in Oakland, Donny has provided his services as a hunting guide in order to raise funds for conservation organizations, including Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and RGS. He strongly believes that "hunters are the ones giving back," due to their hands-on appreciation of wild resources. He says that the thoughtful clear-cutting of successional habitat is "one of the most valuable assets to wildlife."

Donny is also not averse to using technology to aid in the evolving world of grouse hunting, such as using Google Earth to reveal difficult-to-discover habitat.

He says he understands everyone's introduction to the sport is different, whether it comes as a birthright, or much later in life. Perhaps someone accepts an invite to go on a hunting venture instead of a golf outing. Either way, Donny concludes that, "it's one more man or woman to help contribute to the habitat and game we love so much".

The Covered Bridge Chapter of Washington, Greene, and Fayette counties plan to continue habitat improvements in January and February 2014 at State Game Lands 223, along Interstate 79 South, in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Planting new Aspen trees, managing existing ones, litter clean up, edge cutting, and brush pile building are the main objectives on this 5-acre, designated grouse area. The Western Allegheny Chapter in Greensburg is working with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the American Chestnut Foundation, and the Boy Scouts of America to plant seedlings and a clover mix within a designated area of Laughlinton.

Another major development for the organization came in 2010, when RGS signed an agreement with Consol Energy to develop and implement forest management plans on some of Consol Energy's land holdings in Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

"This program has recently been expanded to include Consol property in several other states," says Matthew.

He says the two groups share the proceeds, and that RGS's share is used to fund several of the habitat programs and services they provide.

"These programs include working with private forest owners and government agencies to increase the production of early succession habitat, operating habitat management equipment, funding habitat restoration projects, and training consulting foresters on techniques for incorporating wildlife management objectives into forest management plans," he says.

Lisa Rossi attributes RGS' long history of accomplishments to its dedicated and "fabulous" volunteer members. She hopes that new, youthful members will foster the patience necessary to see habitat remediation through to the five-year peak for most projects. She also hopes that they will understand the generational benefits that RGS strives toward, to promote conservation for the next 50 years and beyond.

If you are interested in becoming a member of the Ruffed Grouse Society, please contact Lisa Rossi at lisar@ruffedgrousesociety.org or (724) 693-9032. For general information about the society, visit <http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org>.

To inquire about a guided hunting expedition with Donny Zarra, or the Deutsch Drahthaar dog breed, please visit his website <http://www.vomgrimmhaus.com>. See <http://www.zarraspgh.com> for more information on Zarra's.

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