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RUFFED GROUSE AND AMERICAN WOODCOCK STATUS IN MICHIGAN, 2019



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ABSTRACT

Hunter cooperator surveys, spring breeding surveys, and mail harvest surveys are conducted each year to monitor Ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) and American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) populations. Annual data comparisons are described for hunter cooperator survey (2017–2018), American woodcock spring breeding surveys (2017-2018), and mail harvest survey (2013-2015). Ruffed grouse cooperators hunting the first 4 days of ruffed grouse season reported an average 1.5 grouse per hour in 2018 compared to 1.83 grouse per hour in 2017. The usual spring drumming grouse surveys were not conducted this year because of concerns over past open records requests from a hunter whose activities jeopardized the validity of the survey. There was an increase detected in Michigan’s woodcock index based on the singing-ground survey from 2018-2019, however, there was a decrease during the ten-year trend from 2009-2019. Significant long-term (1969-2019) declines were detected regionally and statewide, respectively. Woodcock banders in Michigan spent 2,052 hours afield in 2019 and banded 1,110 chicks. There were about 70 chicks observed and 52 chicks banded per 100 hours of search time, compared to 45 chicks observed and 34 banded in 2018. There were 112 ruffed grouse drumming routes surveyed in 2015 and 105 in 2014. An estimated 217,942 grouse were harvested in Michigan during the 2015 season which was not significantly different then the number harvested in 2013 (196,245) or from 2011 (260,741). However, 2013 was significantly lower than 2011.



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Introduction

Ruffed grouse and American woodcock are forested game birds that are pursued and appreciated from many people. In 2015, about 83,175 hunters pursued grouse and 36,466 pursued woodcock in the State of Michigan (Frawley 2018). In 2019, about 29,300 hunters pursued woodcock (Seamans & Rau 2019).

In addition, the federal Harvest Information Program indicates that Michigan leads the nation in the number of active woodcock hunters and harvest (Seamans & Rau 2019). Non-hunters also value ruffed grouse and American woodcock. Bird watchers, hikers, bikers, campers, and others familiar with Michigan's woods know ruffed grouse well for the soft beat of a drumming male and the surprising start of an explosive grouse flush. Bird watchers explore open areas on spring mornings and evenings to observe the woodcock's unique and entertaining courtship display. For these and many other reasons, ruffed grouse and American woodcock are valuable Michigan wildlife resources.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) uses several surveys to monitor ruffed grouse and woodcock populations. Hunter cooperator surveys, spring breeding surveys, and harvest surveys contribute valuable management information each year. Ruffed grouse and woodcock spring surveys are conducted by DNR staff, biologists from other agencies, and volunteers. The hunter cooperator survey is made possible through data collected by volunteer hunters and shared with the DNR. Harvest information is collected from a random sample of license buyers after the end of each hunting season. The results from the most current hunting seasons and breeding seasons are described in this report.

Methods

2013 – 2015

Harvest Survey

Questionnaires are sent to a randomly selected set of people who had purchased a small game hunting license during the previous hunting seasons. Detailed methods and results from the 2015 small game harvest survey are compiled in a separate report (Frawley 2018). Findings pertaining to ruffed grouse and woodcock have been summarized in the results section of this report.

2017 – 2018 Comparisons

Hunter Cooperator Surveys

Hunter Cooperator surveys rely on volunteer hunters that record numbers of hours hunted and ruffed grouse and woodcock flushed each day of hunting. Data obtained from cooperating hunters are summarized by county and by two-week intervals as the average number of grouse or woodcock flushed per hour of hunting. Hunting data were excluded from analyses when effort was <20 hours. Flush rates reported by cooperators provide an early indicator of harvest, but the final estimates of hunting effort and harvest come from a post-season mail survey of randomly selected hunters (Frawley 2018). Full season data from 2017 and 2018 were available for analyses. If you are interested in becoming a cooperator or would like a blank data sheet please visit

https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_79147_80218-75235--,00.html

2017 – 2018 Comparisons

Spring Breeding Surveys

Department of Natural Resources personnel and volunteers conduct spring breeding surveys of ruffed grouse and woodcock along roadside routes. Each route has ten listening stops that are consistent from year to year. The number of ruffed grouse drums or woodcock heard during a fixed time interval (four and two minutes, respectively) is recorded at each stop. Because timing of breeding and habitat preferences differ for the two species, separate surveys are conducted. The woodcock singing-ground survey is coordinated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in cooperation with the DNR. The grouse drumming survey is coordinated by the DNR. Ruffed grouse survey routes were established in locations of known grouse populations. Similarly, before 1968, woodcock routes were established in locations of known woodcock populations. However, beginning in 1968, the USFWS established woodcock routes within randomly-chosen 10-minute blocks (Seamans and Rau 2019). Data for both surveys are summarized as the number of woodcock or grouse heard per survey route.

In addition, volunteers band woodcock each spring to monitor recruitment and trends in survival. The data are summarized as the number of woodcock chicks observed and banded per 100 hours of effort.

Results

2013 – 2015 Comparisons

Harvest Surveys

An estimated 196,245 grouse were harvested in Michigan during 2013 which was not significantly different than 217,942 harvested in 2015 (Frawley 2018) (Figure 6). Approximately 85,175 grouse hunters spent nearly 575,131 days afield hunting grouse in Michigan during 2015 hunting season (Figure 6).

Approximately 36,466 hunters harvested about 93,127 woodcock and spent 212,584 days afield in 2015 (Frawley 2018). The number of woodcock hunters in 2013 was not statistically significant from 2015. The 2015 harvest was approximately 76% lower than the record harvest of 390,000 woodcock in 1976. However, there also were more hunters (126,000) spending more days afield (908,000) in 1976 than in 2015 (Figure 1). The average number of woodcock harvested per hunter day was higher in 2015 than in 1976, respectively (Figure 2).

2017 – 2018 Comparisons

Hunter Cooperator Surveys

Hunter records were available from 116 cooperators who spent 4,002 hours afield in 2018 and 121 cooperators who spent 1,445 hours afield in 2017. The average number of ruffed grouse flushed per hour by cooperators in 2018 (1.34) was slightly lower than the number of ruffed grouse flushed per hour in 2017 (1.35). Ruffed grouse flush rates were the highest in Zone 1 (Upper Peninsula; 1.60), followed by Zone 2 (Northern Lower Peninsula; 1.27) and Zone 3 (Southern Lower Peninsula; 0.39) (Figure 3 and appendix A). The highest average flush rate was during November 1st-14th in Zone 1 (table 1).

The average number of American woodcock flushed per hour statewide by cooperators was significantly lower in 2018 (1.17) than 2017 (1.51). American woodcock flush rates were highest in

Zone 2 (1.22), followed by Zone 1 (0.95) and Zone 3 (0.83) (Figure 4 and appendix B). Average flush rates peaked during October 1st – 15th in Zone 1 and Zone 2.

2016 – 2017 Comparisons

Spring Breeding Surveys

Ruffed Grouse Drumming Survey

Due to unforeseen external affairs, the 2019 grouse drumming survey was not conducted. Currently, the division is evaluating the future of conducting the survey annually. Therefore, previous year's survey results are provided within this report.

Ruffed grouse drumming counts were conducted statewide from 112 survey routes during April and May 2015. There was an average of 14.21 drums heard per routes statewide, a 14% increase from 2014 (12.43) average (Figure 8). Highest drumming counts were in Zone 1 (Upper Peninsula; 16.59), following Zone 2 (Northern Lower Peninsula; 13.42) and Zone 3 (Southern Lower Peninsula; 7.78) (Figure 7).

In 2014, 110 survey routes were conducted statewide and paired t-test were performed to statistically compare data from 103 identical routes run in both 2014 and 2015. Statewide there was a 14% increase (n=103; t=-1.68, P=0.09) in the average number of drums heard per route between 2014 (12.52) and 2015 (14.24). Analysis at the regional scale indicated there was no significant difference (n=42; t=-1.13, P=0.27) in the number of drums heard per route in Zone 1 (Upper Peninsula) between 2014 (14.51) and 2015 (16.33). There was no significant difference in the average number of drums heard per route in Zone 2 (Northern Lower Peninsula) between 2014 (12.02) and 2015 (13.58; n=53; t=-1.05, P=0.30). In Zone 3, there were 6 routes conducted in both 2013 and 2014. Due to the low sample size, statistical analysis at the Zone 3 regional scale is not appropriate.

2018 – 2019 Comparisons

Woodcock Singing-ground Survey

Results of Michigan Woodcock Singing-ground survey were based on analysis of preliminary data from 114 routes (Seamans and Rau 2019). There were no significant changes detected in the woodcock index for Michigan in 2018 and 2019. An average of 3.94 and 4.42 singing males were heard per route in 2018 and 2019, respectively. The 2019 central region index, consisting of information from Illinois, Indiana, Manitoba, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Ontario and Wisconsin, was not significantly different from 2018 (n=481, P>0.05). In Central Region, there was an average of 2.39 and 2.47 singing males heard per route in 2018 and 2019, respectively (Seamans and Rau 2019). Michigan and the Central Region have experienced an average long-term decline of 1.01% and 0.89% per year, respectively, since 1969 (P<0.05; Seamans and Rau 2019).

Woodcock Banding Program

For 2019, 74 woodcock banders spent 2,052 hours afield, located and banded 1,110 birds. Average brood size for 2019 was 3.0 chicks. The number of chicks banded per 100 hours afield was 51.6 and the number of chicks observed per 100 hours afield was 69.8. In 2018, 69 woodcock banders spent 1,669 hours afield, located 421 broods and banded 589 birds. Average brood size for 2018 was 3.0. The number of chicks banded per 100 hours afield was 33.6 and the number of chicks observed per 100 hours afield was 45.1 in 2018.

Discussion

2019 Grouse Population Status

Ruffed grouse are early successional forest specialists that thrive in landscapes with even distribution of habitat types and interspersed among even-aged habitats. Even in areas with quality habitat, ruffed grouse populations exhibit ten-year cycles in abundance over much of Canada, Alaska and the Great Lake States of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan (Rusch et al. 1999). This cycle is evident throughout the Midwestern states such as Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin (Figure 5). Over the years, many theories have been proposed to explain these cycles including diseases, weather, forest fires, sunspots, starvation, crowding, predators, genetic changes, and chance (Rusch 1989). Another possible contributing factor of population fluctuations may involve food options. Quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) is an important food source for grouse, especially during the winter and early spring (Svoboda and Gullion 1972). Aspen trees produce a compound called coniferyl benzoate (CB) that acts as a natural feeding deterrent for grouse and other birds, and this level can vary between years and between trees (Jakubas and Gullion 1991). Grouse have tendencies to use specific clones of aspen due to their history of having low concentrations of the deterrent (Jakubas and Mason 1991). Lack of suitable aspen in the winter may cause grouse to expend more energy and to be more susceptible to predation when feeding on other food sources (Jakubas and Gullion 1991). With the snowshoe hare and ruffed grouse having synchronized cycles, Donald Rusch found predation mortality on ruffed grouse climbed when large fluxes of raptors migrate south into the northern United States during a decline in snowshoe hares in their Canadian home range (Rusch et al. 1972).

The most recent high in grouse abundance occurred during 2010 for most of Michigan (Figure 3 and 7). Historically, the predicted low in grouse abundance occurred in 2015. For 2019, it is anticipated that rates will be higher or about the same as last year. Spring weather conditions may have impacted grouse production again this year. In Wisconsin, statewide ruffed grouse drumming activity increased 41% between 2018 and 2019, based on the roadside survey to monitor breeding grouse activity. In Minnesota, mean ruffed grouse drums per stop were 1.5 statewide which is similar to the previous year. An increase is expected given that the ruffed grouse population is in the increasing phase of the 10-year cycle.

The recent winter weather showed relatively average conditions throughout the state with isolated pockets of prolonged winter conditions. Spring began at about the normal time, with temperatures rising to normal to slightly warmer conditions all throughout. Precipitation was wetter than usual all around the state though out the entirety of spring. Many locales received more rain or snow for longer periods of time. This extra precipitation could have adversely affected grouse reproduction. Summer is expected to be fairly normal. Based on current survey data and conditions, hunters may expect a hunting season similar or slightly up following the low in the ten-year cycle. Hunters should note, that the abundance at the regional scale does not reflect the same trend locally. The ruffed grouse season begins on September 15, statewide. Areas of good habitat will continue to provide the best grouse hunting opportunities. Grouse are most abundant in areas where dense young forest habitats (5-15 years old) are common (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Resident Game Bird Working Group 2006). The best grouse cover is usually provided by dense aspen stands 6 to 15 years old or older stands with dense understories of alder or hazel (Thompson and Dessecker 1997).

With the help from hunters and partners, the Department of Natural Resources continues to expand a series of intensively managed, walk-in access ruffed grouse hunting areas across the Northern Lower and Upper Peninsulas. These Grouse Enhanced Management Sites (GEMS) provide an amazing and adventurous opportunity for a variety of hunter types – youth, adults new to the sport and seniors all have the capability of being more comfortable with easily marked trails and maps currently at 19

GEMS. With 19 locations and still growing throughout Michigan, this new management system promotes hunter recruitment and retention while expanding local economies and timber harvest opportunities. Efforts to expand publicly accessible lands by developing GEMs provides significant economic and recreational impacts towards Michigan's communities. An estimated annual economic benefit from publicly accessible hunting land from the average ruffed grouse hunter is \$235.74, which is 285% and 265% greater than the annual economic benefits from the average firearm deer hunter and archery hunter, respectively (Knoche and Lupi 2013). The three types of publicly accessible hunting lands (state, federal and commercial) in Michigan together generate about \$20.8 million in economic benefits annually for ruffed grouse hunters (Knoche and Lupi 2013). Michigan is one of the top three states in the country for ruffed grouse hunting and we are a destination state for out-of-state hunters, especially in the Upper Peninsula. To learn about GEMS please visit, www.michigan.gov/gems.

We encourage Michigan hunters to use the DNR's online mapping application, MI-Hunt, to search for habitat types on public hunting lands. There are multiple layers of information that can be turned on or off, depending on your needs. For example, you can view the different forest types, topography, satellite imagery, and road layers to help plan your trip. See www.michigan.gov/mihunt for more details about this interactive mapping application. It is suggested that first-time users utilize the tutorial before starting the program.

2019 Woodcock Population Status

The long-term decline in the woodcock population index raises questions and concerns about available habitat and the effects of hunting. The declining availability of quality habitat is believed to be a primary cause for the decline in the population (Dessecker and Pursglove 2000). Also, the declines in young forest habitats and the isolation of these habitats in some landscapes may be limiting ruffed grouse and woodcock recruitment and therefore population densities (Dessecker & McAuley 2001). Game population surveys have indicated woodcock populations are currently among their lowest recorded levels since the 1960s. Although many game species are not as abundant today as during previous decades, the mean number of animals taken per hunting effort has not paralleled changes in the populations in Michigan, respectively (Frawley 2014). Federal surveys show that Michigan is still the number one state in the country for American woodcock harvest and one of the top production state (Seamans & Rau 2019).

A North American Woodcock Conservation Plan was written to help guide woodcock management in each region of the continent within woodcock range. The document is available online at www.michigan.gov/dnr or www.timberdoodle.org. Professionals are also working on developing habitat initiatives where the plan will be used to guide the creation of quality habitat that will benefit woodcock as well as other species that have similar habitat requirements.

More woodcock are banded in Michigan than in any other state or Canada. In fact, since 1981, Michigan banders have banded almost 40,000 woodcock more than the next largest banding state, Louisiana (USGS Bird Banding Lab 2019). Woodcock survival estimates based on Michigan woodcock banding data analyses are reported by Kremetz et al. (2003) and Mayhew and Luukkonen (2010). Hunters can promote sound woodcock management by promptly reporting all banded birds harvested, including date and location taken. To report bands, visit www.reportband.gov, call 800-327-BAND or write USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Bird Banding Laboratory, 12100 Beach Forest Road, Laurel, MD 20708-4037.

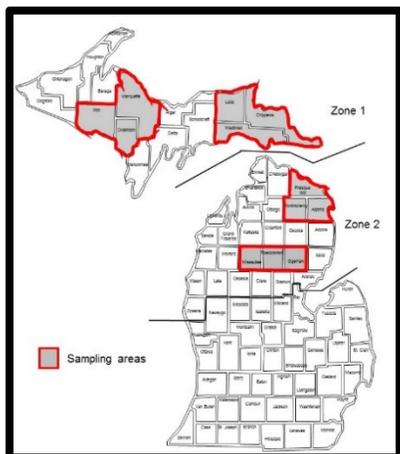
The USFWS has adjusted woodcock hunting season dates and reduced bag limits four times since 1968 in response to the general status of woodcock. In 2019, the opening date for woodcock hunting will be September 21st. The USFWS framework for Michigan allows for the woodcock hunting season

to open no earlier than the Saturday closest to September 22nd and to run for no more than 45 days. American woodcock data shows last year's harvest down from the previous year. Based on current survey data and weather conditions, woodcock hunters may expect a season similar to better than last year. Actual spring production this year will be indicated by the fall harvest outcome.

In 2013, a research project outfitted solar powered satellite transmitters (PTTs) on the back of individual woodcock to track the migration data and then can be used to identify priority areas to focus habitat management and conservation efforts for woodcock along migration routes. Hunters should note, if you harvest a woodcock with a PTTs attached, please follow the instructions located on the transmitter to return or contact Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Division's Upland Game Bird Specialist and Program Leader, Al Stewart at (517) 284-6221. Michigan biologists were directly involved with this study. This research was reported in the Journal of Wildlife Management, <https://wildlife.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jwmq.21741>.

During 2018-2020, we will be participating in a tri-state (MN, WI and MI) survey to evaluate West Nile Virus (WNV) in grouse. WNV was first detected in the USA in 1999 in New York and quickly spread across the country. WNV is a virus transmitted by mosquitoes. The virus has been documented in over 250 species of birds with species like crows and blue jays most impacted. The virus has been present in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin for about 18 years. It was first identified in Michigan ruffed grouse in 2002 (1bird). Since then, 13 grouse were found positive in 2017 and 6 birds were diagnosed with WNV in 2018. Minnesota identified 1 positive grouse in the early 2000s and Wisconsin found 3 positives in 2018.

In 2018, with the help of our grouse hunters, we collected 209 samples. Our goal is to collect 400 samples from four regions in the Northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula during the September 15-November 14th grouse season. If you can hunt ruffed grouse in one of the counties listed below, please consider helping this fall.



- Upper Peninsula:
 - Dickinson, Iron, Marquette
 - Chippewa, Luce, Mackinac
- Lower Peninsula
 - Alpena, Montmorency, Presque Isle
 - Missaukee, Ogemaw, Roscommon

More information about collecting samples will follow. Hunters that would like to help with this study should contact Julie Melotti at Melottij@michigan.gov or 517-336-5042.

For more information on West Nile virus or other diseases, please visit www.mi.gov/wdm or https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/west_nile_virus_grouse_faqs_630086_7.pdf

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Table 1. Average ruffed grouse and American woodcock flushes per hour^a, by two-week intervals, as reported by cooperating hunters in 2018.

Species and Dates	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Ruffed Grouse September 15-30	1.13	1.51	0.39
Ruffed Grouse October 1-15	1.45	1.18	0.00
Ruffed Grouse October 16-31	1.87	1.17	0.14
Ruffed Grouse November 1-14	2.06	1.33	0.45
Ruffed Grouse December 1-15	0.76	1.10	0.71
Ruffed Grouse December 16-January 1	1.33	1.03	0.73
Woodcock September 15-30	1.16	1.66	0.81
Woodcock October 1-15	1.47	1.77	0.89
Woodcock October 16-31	0.71	1.06	1.62
Woodcock November 1-14	0.03	0.22	0.94
Woodcock December 1-15	NA	NA	NA
Woodcock December 16-January 1	NA	NA	NA

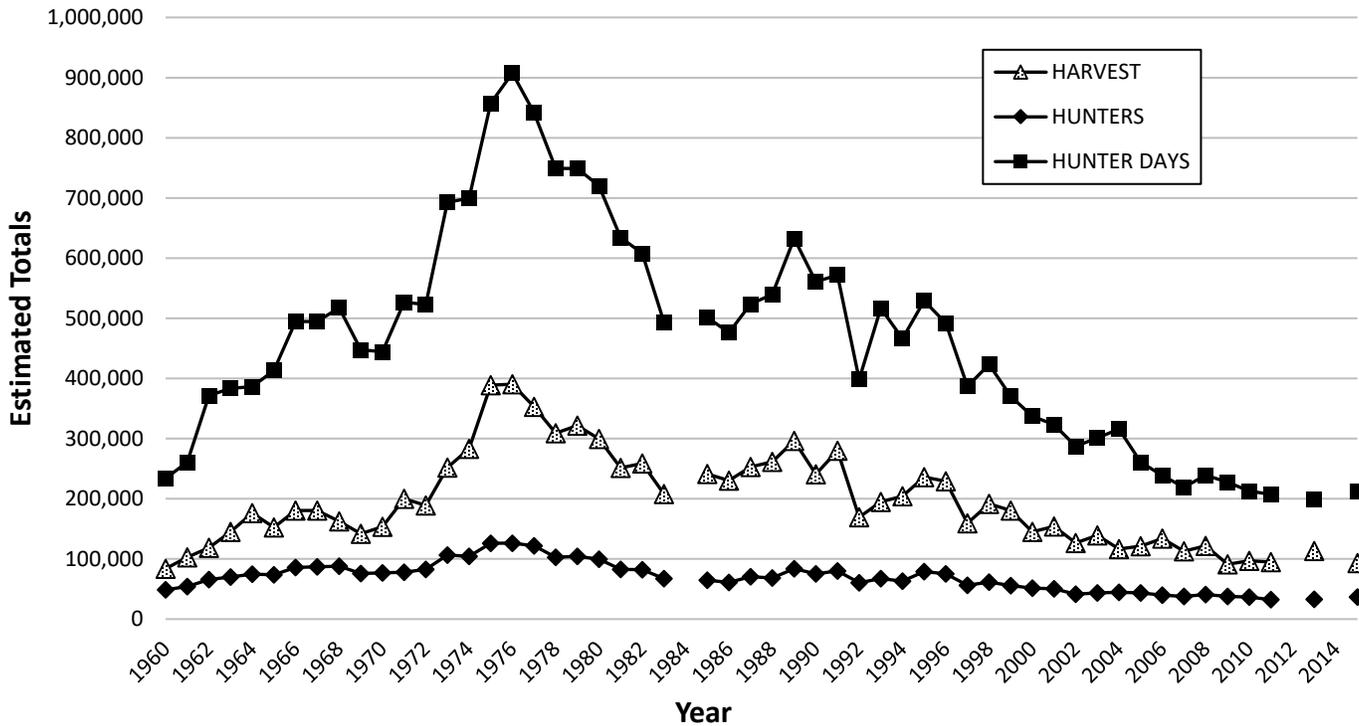


Figure 1. Mail survey estimates of the number of American woodcock hunters, hunter days, and harvest in Michigan, 1960-2015 (estimates not available for 1984, 2012, 2014).

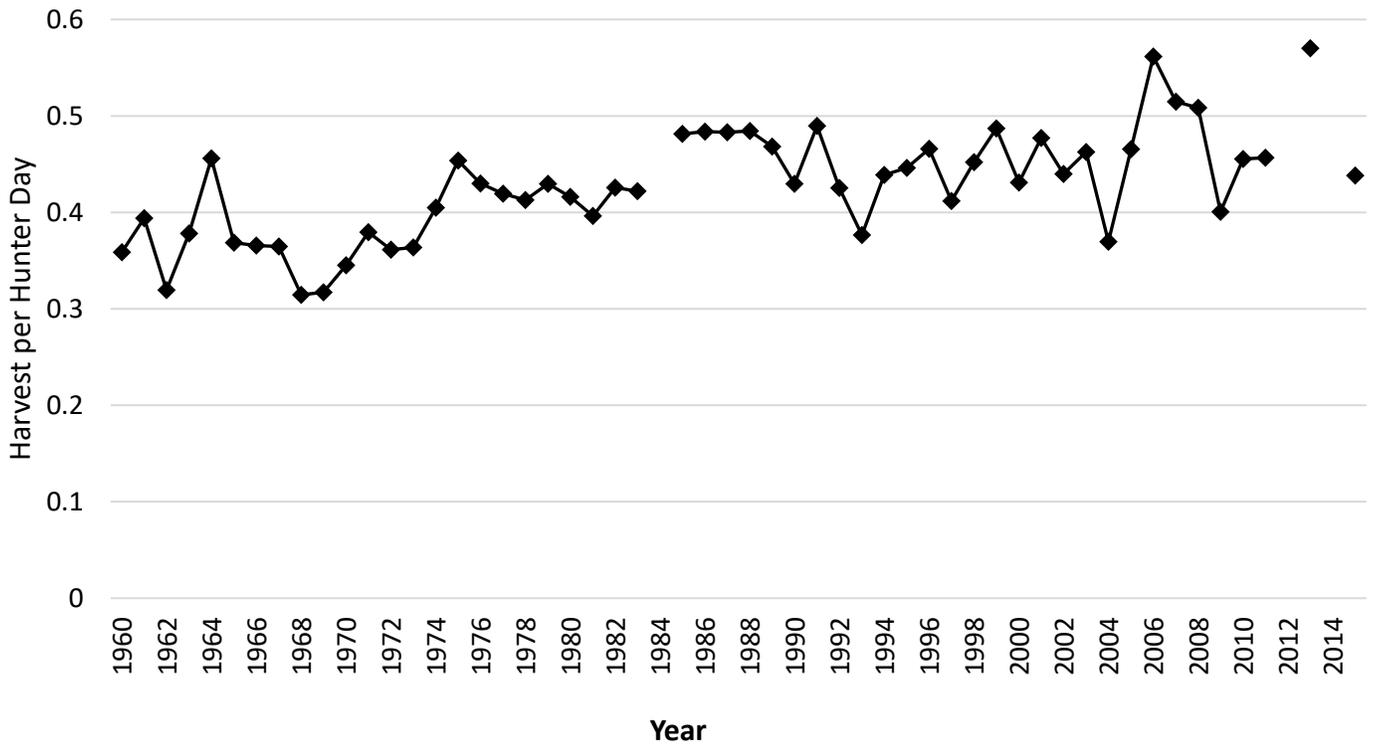


Figure 2. Mail survey estimates of woodcock harvest per hunter day in Michigan, 1960-2015 (estimates are not available for 1984, 2012, 2014).

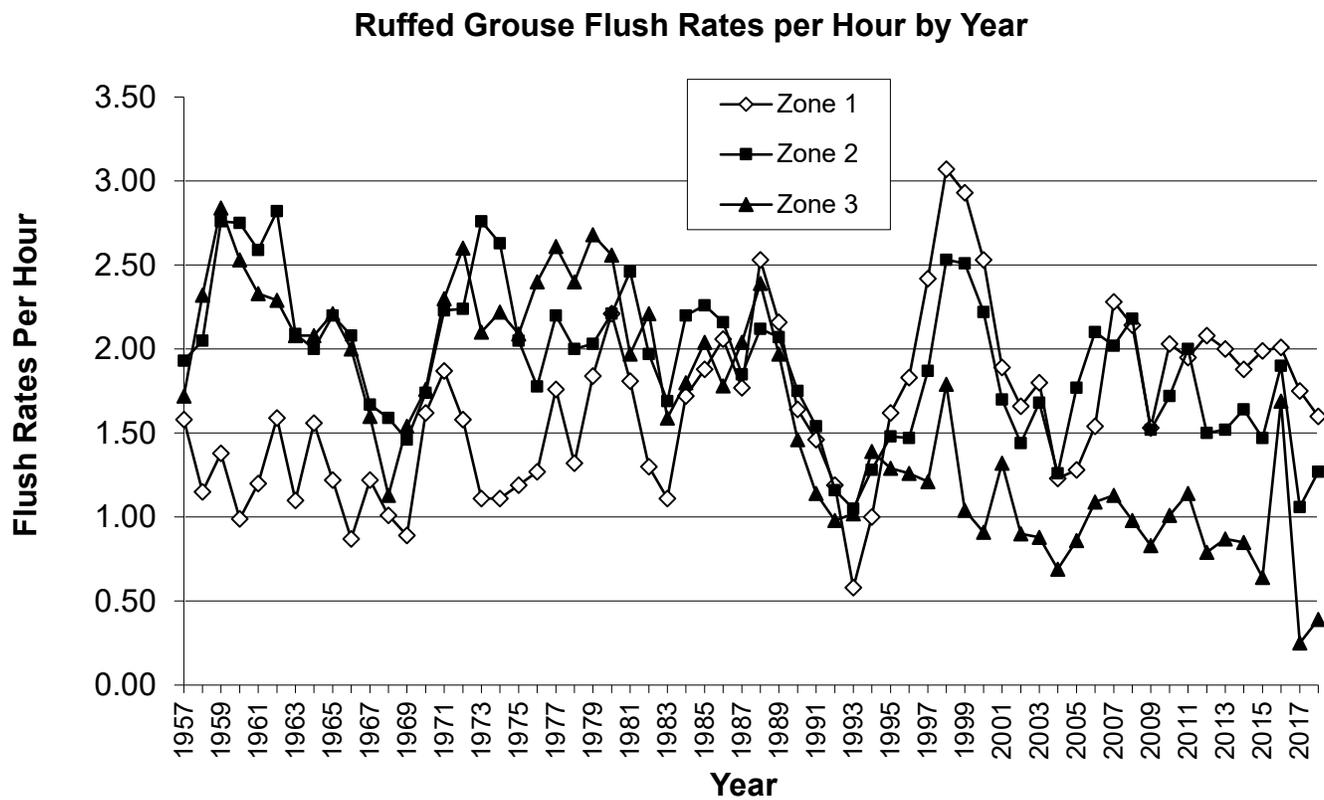


Figure 3. Ruffed grouse flush rates reported by cooperating hunters, 1957-2018.

Woodcock Flush Rates per Hour by Year

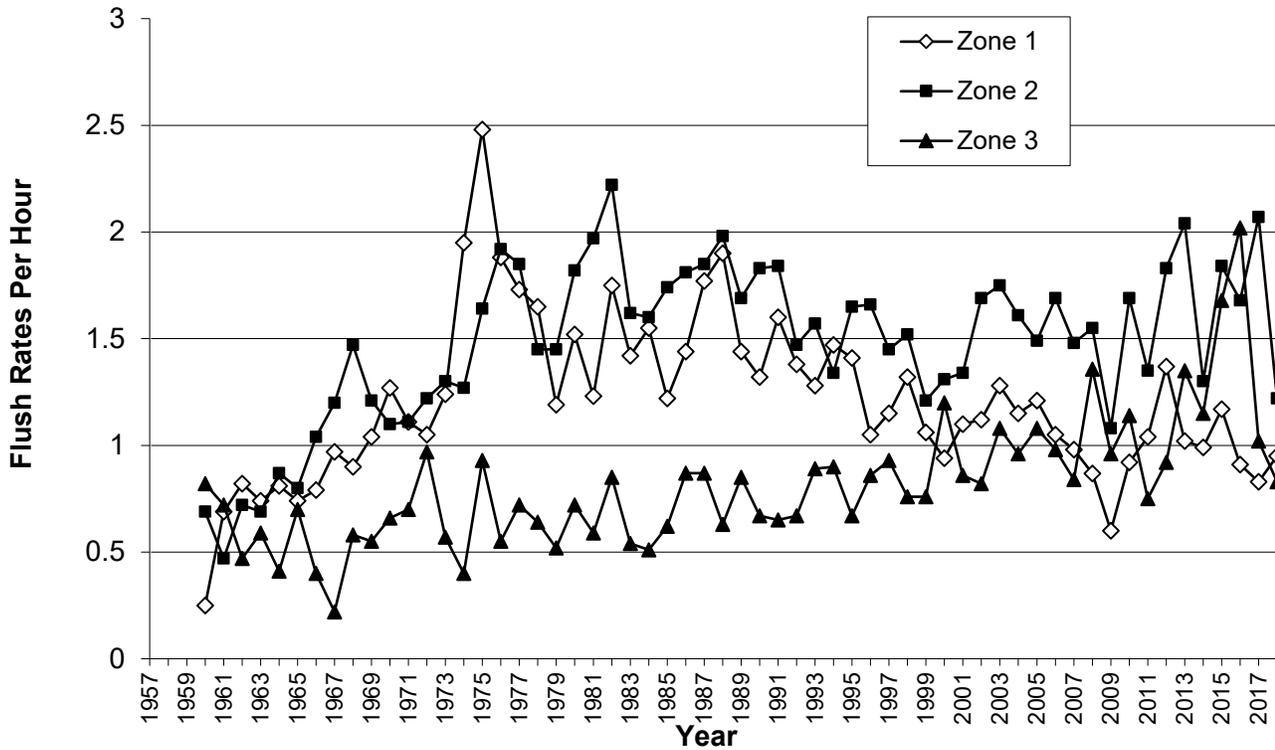


Figure 4. American Woodcock flush rates reported by cooperating hunters, 1957-2018.

State Comparisons

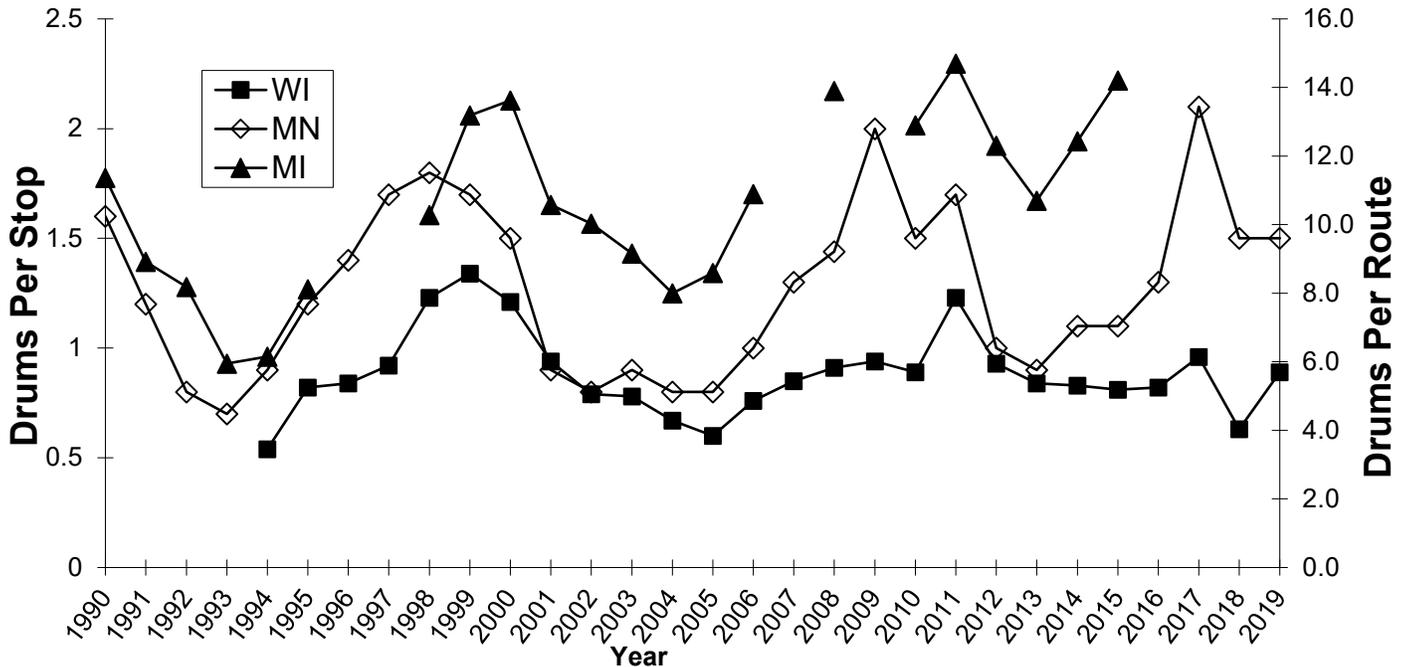


Figure 5. Ruffed grouse breeding population indices from Michigan (drums per route), Minnesota and Wisconsin (drums per stop), 1990-2019. Michigan statewide data is not available for 1996, 1997, 2007, 2009, and since 2016.

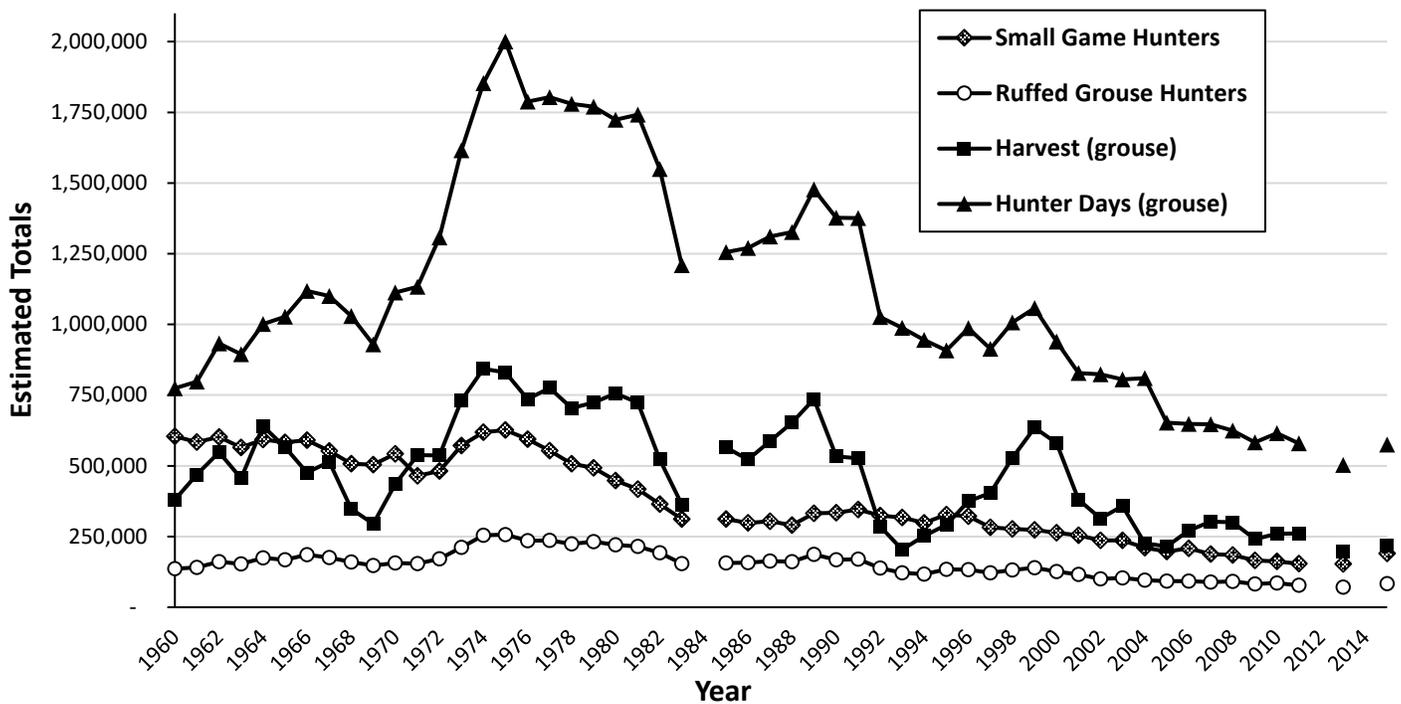


Figure 6. Mail Survey estimates of the number of small game hunters and estimates of ruffed grouse hunters, harvest, and hunter days in Michigan, 1960-2011 (estimates are not available for 1984).

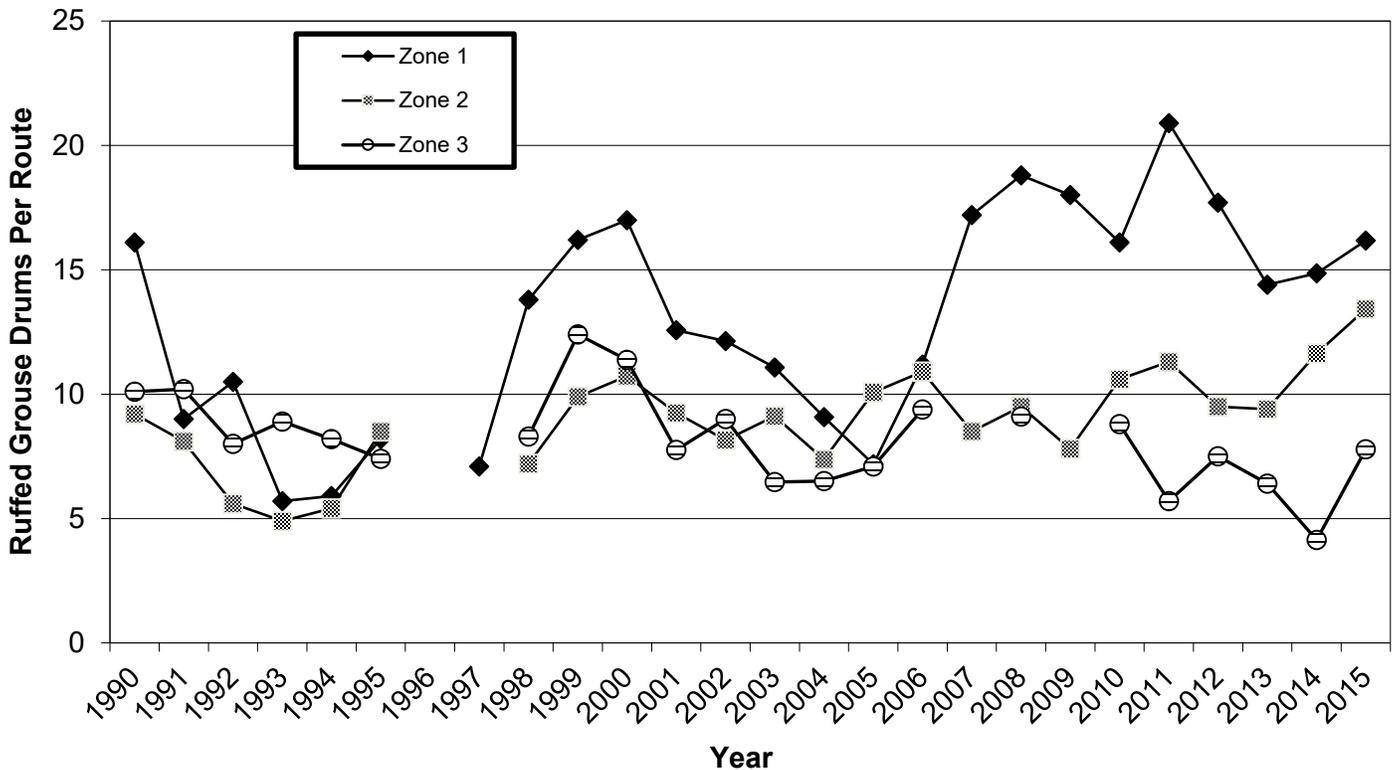


Figure 7. Ruffed grouse breeding population index (average number of drums per route by Zone) in Michigan, 1990-2015. Drumming surveys were not conducted statewide in 1996, 1997 (Zone 2 & 3), 2007 and 2009 (Zone 1), and since 2016.

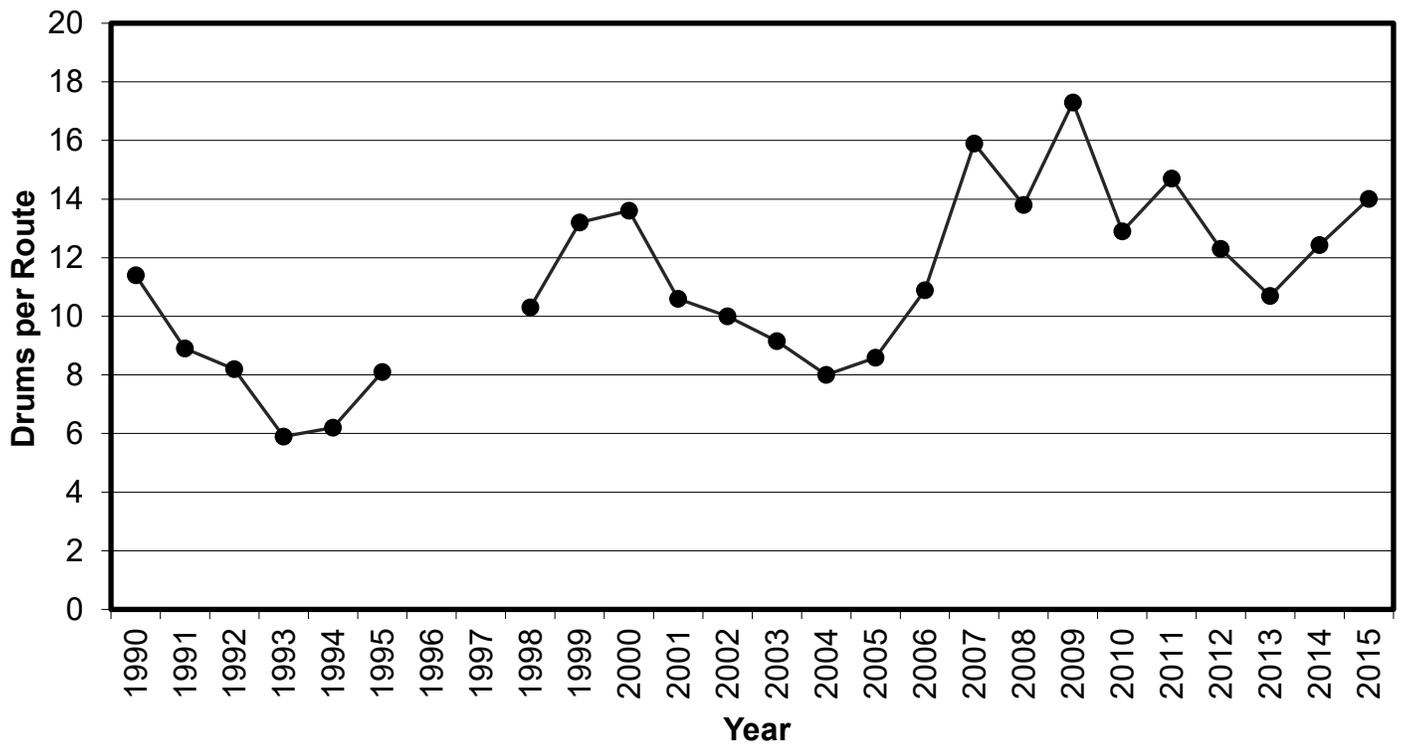
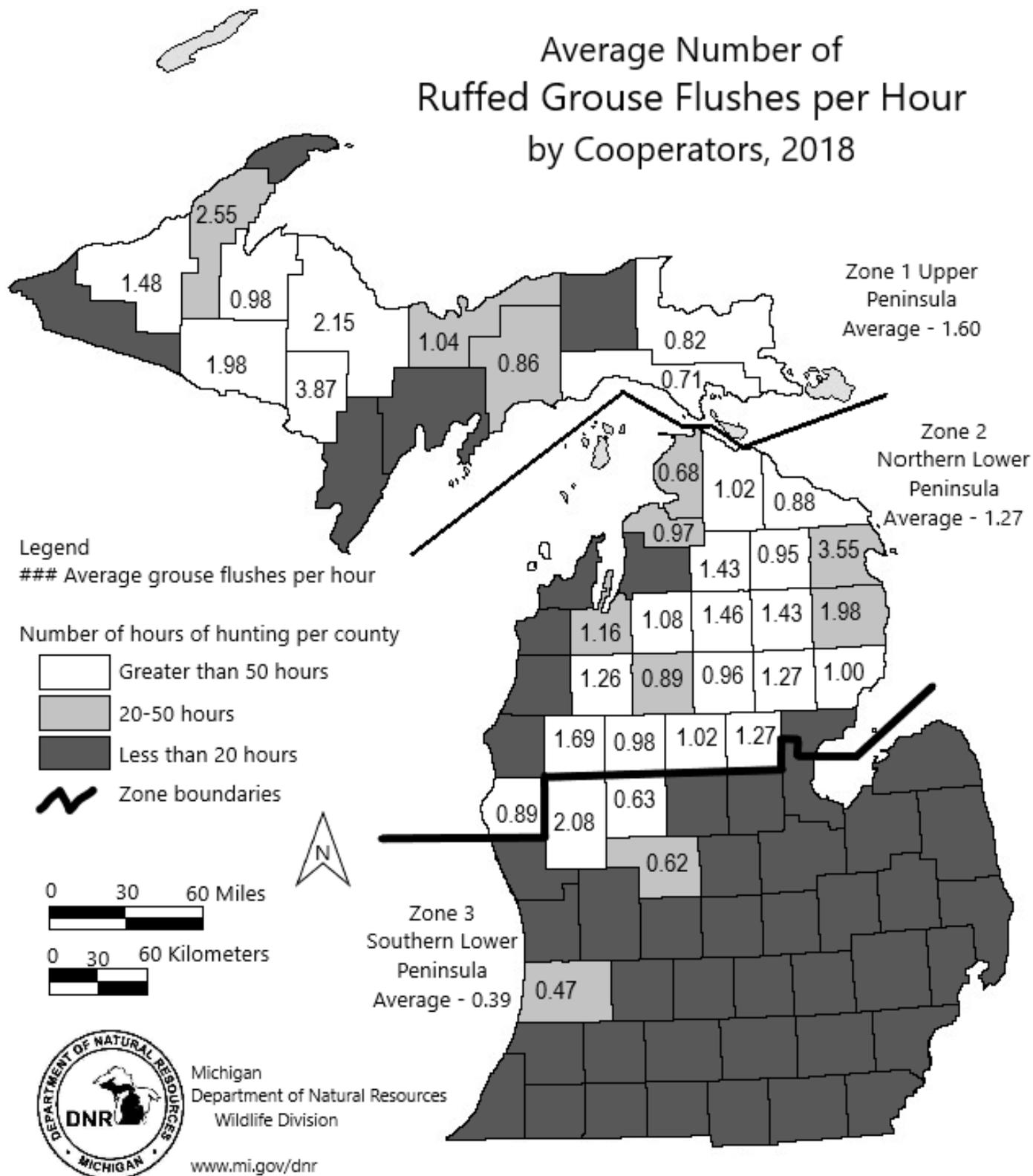


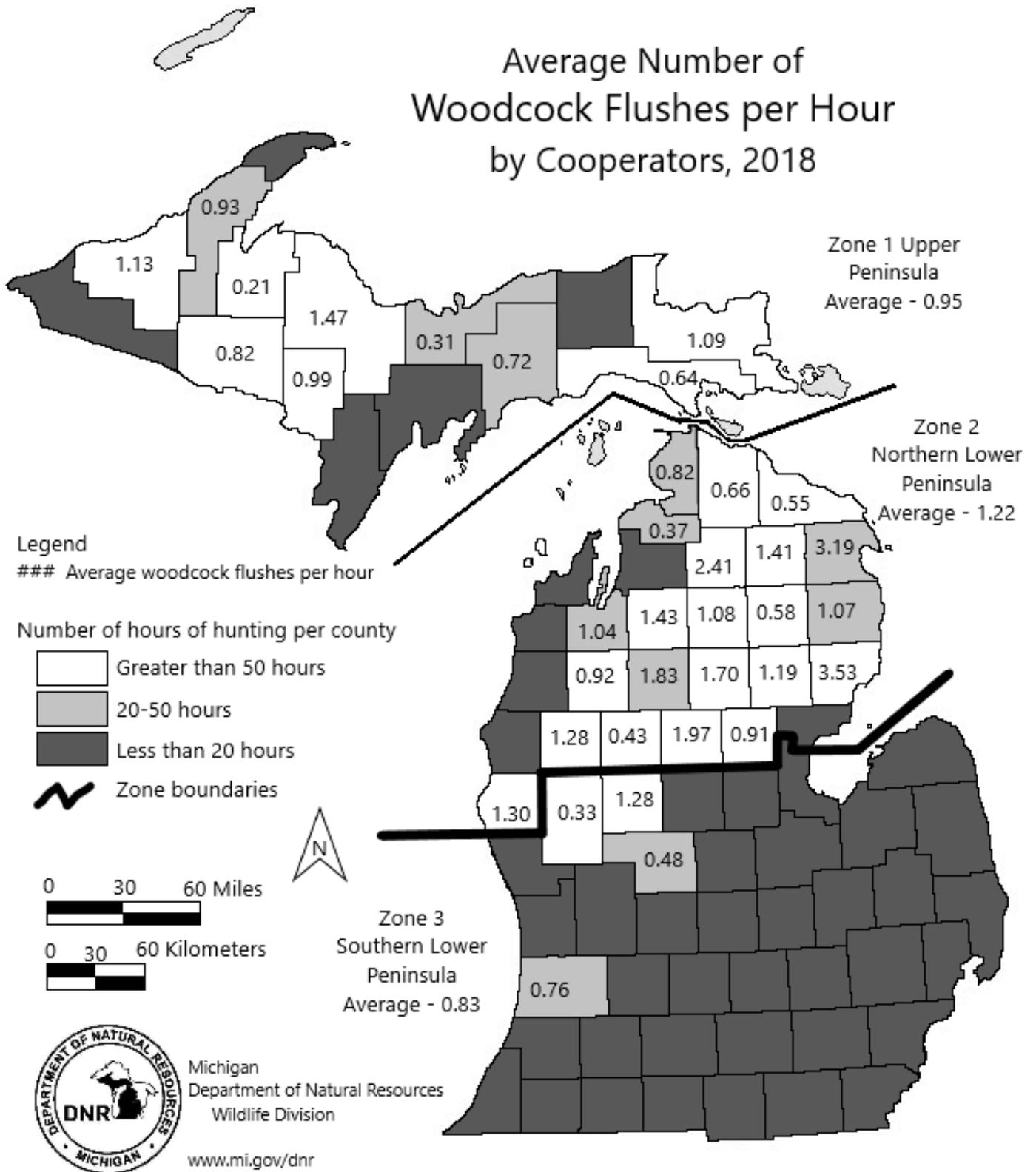
Figure 8. Ruffed grouse breeding index (average number of drums per route statewide) in Michigan, 1990-2015. Drumming survey were not conducted statewide in 1996, 1997 and since 2016. Only Zone 1 & 2 in 2007 and 2009 were conducted.

Average Number of Ruffed Grouse Flushes per Hour by Cooperators, 2018



Appendix A. Average number of ruffed grouse flushed per hour by cooperators in 2018.

Average Number of Woodcock Flushes per Hour by Cooperators, 2018



Appendix B. Average number of American woodcock flushed per hour by cooperators in 2018.