MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
Game Division

Report No. 2322
January 25, 1961

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 1960 GROUSE SEASON

General Summary

Preseason forecasts indicated a drop in the 1960 fall ruffed grouse population in the Upper Peninsula--and indeed there was. Apparently it was the poorest grouse season (in the Upper Peninsula) in the past 6 or 7 years. The rest of the state showed little change from the relatively good hunting of the 1959 season.

Following is a summary of hunting records from 157 grouse cooperators (totaling 5,528 hours) turned in so far, compared with the two previous years' records:

	Ruffed Grouse Flushed Per Gun Hour		
	Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	Southern Lower Peninsula
1958	1.15	2.05	2.32
1959	1.37	2.79	2.68
1960	.89	2.76	2.61

Woodcock, it appears, were as abundant as usual but sharptails were scarcer, especially in the western part of the Upper Peninsula.

A perusal of the cooperators' hunting reports reveals many excellent and some exceptional records. Flushes of 20, 30 and 40 grouse per day are not uncommon, and there are several reports of around 50. The highest in one day is 78. Totals for the entire season included a dozen or more hunters who flushed from 200 to 300 grouse each, while one hunter far outdid everyone else by flushing 609. The highest number of woodcock flushed per day by one man was 50; for the season, 167.

In terms of grouse flushed per gun hour, there was great variation in the Upper Peninsula--a few areas indicating excellent hunting while the majority showed very poor success. In the northern Lower Peninsula, a few hunters reported as many as 10 grouse flushed per hour consistently through the season. Although the records are not yet summarized by counties, my impression is that the best hunting again was in the same areas that showed best hunting in 1959--chiefly along the western and southern portions of the northern Lower Peninsula, and in the southern Lower Peninsula.

Hunting Conditions

Since weather conditions generally were favorable for grouse hunting--much more so than in 1959--the kill was probably relatively high. Leaf fall

was delayed in the northern two-thirds of the state, while in the southern third it occurred somewhat earlier than usual. There was an excellent wild fruit and mast crop in nearly all sections of the state--one of the best in many years.

What Happened in the Upper Peninsula?

Since spring drumming counts indicated a drop from the previous spring in the Upper Peninsula, there probably was an unusual over-winter loss of potential breeders. On top of this, the birds apparently had a relatively poor nesting season, as indicated by the fact that in the Upper Peninsula the ratio of young to old birds shot was only 2.3 to 1. Normally we can expect a ratio of at least 3 to 1; in the northern Lower Peninsula it was 6.5 to 1 last fall, indicating exceptionally good reproduction. These ratios were obtained from 662 wings of grouse obtained from hunters, admittedly not a very large sample.

Circumstantial evidence points to unusual weather conditions as being responsible for the poor nesting season in the Upper Peninsula. According to the May, 1960 U. S. Weather Bureau report, there was an exceptional amount of precipitation in late April and early May, causing record floods. "For the 18-day period, April 23-May 10, total rainfall in the Upper Peninsula exceeded 10 inches at some points and was generally above 7 inches. Much of the early May precipitation was in the form of wet, slushy snow and snow totals in the western part of the Upper Peninsula were up to 16 inches for some new May records.

"Precipitation was also considerably above normal in the northern third of the Lower Peninsula but with less flooding and damage."

It's interesting to note that the period of heaviest rainfall just about coincides with the peak of egg laying, suggesting that the adverse weather probably discouraged an abnormal number of hens from starting to lay, or from completing their clutches if they had already started laying. This supposition agrees with findings from last summer's brood reports, for the frequency of broods observed in the Upper Peninsula was down considerably from that of the previous year. However, the number of chicks per brood did not differ much, so chick survival evidently was about normal for those clutches that hatched.

But what about renesting? Most birds, when their nests are broken up during the laying period, will build another nest and start another clutch, after a short interval. Ruffed grouse, however, aren't strong renesters. Perhaps severe weather conditions and excessive surface water lasted long enough to discourage a large proportion of the hens from starting anew.

Curiously enough, there doesn't seem to have been a drop in grouse abundance in the northern one-third of the Lower Peninsula in spite of excessive rainfall during the laying season. Possibly conditions were not severe enough or extended over a long enough period to cause an appreciable number of hens to abandon their eggs. Obviously, we have a lot to learn about reproductive success of grouse.

Grouse Hunting in the Snow

For 5 days, Walter Palmer and I hunted up and down the "hills" of western Pennsylvania in snow varying from 15 to 20 inches deep. We were guests of the Pennsylvania Game Commission and of Roger Latham, outdoor editor of the Pittsburgh Press and formerly in charge of research for the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Pennsylvania was experimenting with a special season on grouse, from December 26 to January 2, in addition to their regular 1960 season (October 29 to December 3). We were interested in how it was working out and whether it might be practical to have such a season in Michigan.

It was difficult hunting for man and dog alike. Often they flushed wild from the tops of tall hemlocks, when we were lucky to even get a glimpse of the birds before they were out of range. In slashings and hardwoods we at least saw most of the birds that flushed, and occasionally they even held close in thick tangles, and offered us some decent shots. The dogs' range and speed were restricted by the snow, of course, and they seemed to have difficulty in scenting birds, so we got relatively little dog work. They were able to follow only the freshest of tracks on the snow.

We most often found these grouse in or near wild grape tangles. There had been an excellent crop of this fruit and it seemed to be a highly preferred food item. There were immense tangles of grape vines often reaching 50 feet or more up in the hardwood trees.

During the five days we hunted about 18 hours and put up 82 grouse for an average of 3.2 birds per hour.* This isn't bad, especially in view of the difficulty our dogs had locating birds, and compares quite favorably with the better Michigan grouse coverts. Our success bagging birds was not very good, as one might expect under these conditions--seven birds were shot altogether with the daily parties varying between 3 and 4 hunters.

We saw no grouse hunters other than those in our own party. We assumed that only the most ardent pat hunters would be out. Under similar conditions, the same would be true in Michigan, no doubt. But often, like this winter in much of Michigan, there is little or no snow and it would have been quite practical to hunt pats in December.

Why Not a Longer Season in Michigan?

Game biologists agree that hunting has no appreciable effect on ruffed grouse population trends. This conclusion is the result of many years of field observations and investigations in many states. It is reflected in the fact that some of the leading grouse states (notably Wisconsin, Minnesota,

---

*Palmer and I each recorded the number of birds we saw or heard flush, for we were not always close together. The above record is an average of each of our flush counts.

Pennsylvania as well as Michigan) which formerly had closed grouse seasons for one or more years during population lows now keep them open. Not only this, but many states have lengthened their open seasons appreciably in recent years (see Game Division Report #2321).

Michigan's season, as a matter of fact, is shorter than that of any of the leading grouse states having hunting conditions and hunting pressure at least roughly comparable. It seems about time to take a new look at ourselves and realize what we're missing. We could surely harvest many more grouse during the next several years in some parts of the state where they are expected to reach a cyclic peak.

GAA:jt