

Forage Extension Program

Ruffed Grouse

Habitat Management Suggestions for Selected Wildlife Species

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Ruffed grouse inhabit dense cover of mixed conifer and deciduous trees and shrubs and are often found along stream bottoms. They remain within a smaller home range and a habitat of more dense cover than the far-ranging blue or spruce grouse. Adult ruffed grouse may spend most of their lives in less than two square miles of habitat.

Food

Ruffed grouse feed extensively on a wide variety of seeds, nuts, fruits, buds, leaves, flowers, and insects. During winter and early spring there seldom is a scarcity of food for ruffed grouse since they subsist on buds of deciduous trees and shrubs, including aspen, willow, and dogwood. In spring, aspen catkins are often the mainstay of incubating hens. Animal foods comprise less than 5 percent of the summer diet of adult birds. The food of chicks is 70 percent or more insects--chiefly ants, spiders, beetles, caterpillars, and grasshoppers--through the first few weeks following hatching. As the season progresses, it changes to plant foods as they become available. The following are preferred foods utilized by ruffed grouse:

Green leaves, blades, flower heads, or seeds of clover, bluegrass, dandelion, burnet and sedges.

Fruits of bearberry, birch, bitter and chokecherry, redosier dogwood, elderberry, hawthorn, huckleberry, blueberry, mountain ash, raspberry, serviceberry, Oregon grape, currant, rose and snowberry.

Buds and/or flowers of willow, aspen, cottonwood, birch and maple.

Habitat occupied by grouse depends greatly upon the stages of forest growth and effects of logging, grazing, and fires. Since the control of fires, the amount and quality of habitat is determined chiefly by forest management practices. The quality of ruffed grouse habitat may vary with the intensity of grazing in stream bottom areas. Forest grouse generally benefit from improvement in range conditions in mountain and foothill areas.

Habitat Management Suggestions

Grazing

Deferred or moderate grazing preserves nesting, feeding, and brood cover. Fenced exclosures, particularly around water sources, protect vegetative cover and food.

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In mountain and foothill areas, prohibiting livestock overgrazing of stream bottom vegetation, especially in winter and during the spring nesting season, is beneficial to maintaining quality grouse habitat.

Overall, logging may be considered beneficial to ruffed grouse since it results in the establishment of a mosaic of subclimax vegetation formerly provided only by fire. This is especially true in western Montana where forest vegetation is frequently very dense. Cooperation between forest and wildlife managers is more likely to insure that ruffed grouse and other forest-dwelling grouse will remain abundant in the forests of Montana.