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The ruffed grouse is an upland game

bird that we often see along back roads through the woods. Resembling a small chicken in shape and stature, the “partridge” is beautifully turned out, with speckled plumage ranging in colour from gray to russet to a rich red. It has a brown-black ruffle around the neck -- more evident in male birds -- and a rounded, fan-like tail edged with a dark band. Its legs are feathered, right down to the toes. Optimal habitat is brushy, mix-aged woodlands with poplars, birch, alders and beech. There, the grouse feeds on buds, catkins, berries, and occasionally small reptiles. Predominantly a ground dwelling bird, it is,

nevertheless, an impressively agile short-distance flier, and can navigate the forest at high speeds.

The ruffed grouse spends its life in a small area, generally under 40 acres. When the snow starts to melt in early spring, the male bird establishes a 6-10 acre territory and begins the business of attracting a mate. He does so by exhibiting a fascinating behaviour called “drumming.” Perching upon a log, large rock or other staging place, he begins to slowly beat his wings, gradually building up speed to a dramatic, whirring finale. This action creates a low-pitched thumping, reminiscent of an old, one-cylinder engine turning over. When the bird’s wings are drawn outward, a vacuum is created. As air rushes in to fill this void, it produces a distinctive “thump!” While the cool physics likely escape her, the female grouse is, nevertheless, attracted to the percussive talents of the male and drawn into his territory to mate. The far-reaching drum solo also helps alert other male grouse to his presence, helping to defend his territory. (If you’ve never experienced the sight or sound of a male grouse drumming, please check out Lang Elliott’s exquisite video online at <https://youtu.be/MVfilp3QG4>. It is awesome!)

The female grouse, called a hen, will nest under dense canopy in the woods to provide more protection against hawks and owls. In addition, she seeks an open forest floor to better detect other approaching predators, like fishers and foxes. Her clutch of 8-14 eggs hatch in about 24 days. The tiny thumb-sized chicks are able to feed themselves almost immediately. The offspring remain with her until autumn, when they disperse in search of their own territory. This is known as the “fall shuffle,” and the youngsters may travel up to 10 miles away from their birthplace.

Exceptionally well-camouflaged, a ruffed grouse can startle the living daylights out of an unsuspecting hiker when it explodes into the air from underfoot. As the bird makes its swift exit on whistling wings, careening expertly through the trees, the hiker stands frozen in place, clutching at a pounding heart. The grouse is especially well-concealed in the fall when amber and brown leaves are piling up on the ground.

The ruffed grouse does not migrate. By winter, it has grown rows of tiny, scaly extensions on the toes that function as snowshoes, a special adaptation that helps it to survive the season. The grouse also has a neat winter behaviour called “snow roosting,” where it dive-bombs head first into fluffy snow. There it nestles down in a temperature-controlled igloo of sorts, able to keep warm through harsh weather conditions, while avoiding the eyes of predators. Snow roosting comes with a risk, however, when an icy crust forms on the snow, essentially entombing the bird underneath.