

The Ruffed Grouse

By Charles Hildebrandt

Whenever I go to the back of my property these cloudy

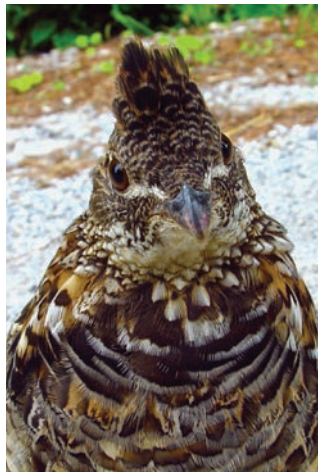
November days to cut up fallen Elm trees for firewood (for I like the idea of self-sufficiency and I heat my wood with wood), I am joined by a Ruffed Grouse.

The Ruffed Grouse, to explain to the uninitiated, is a chicken-like bird, a little larger than a Crow, that has its habitat in open woods all over Canada. It is fairly common in this part of the country but rarely seen until it jumps from the ground with a startling rush as it beats the air with its wings. But when I am out there the Grouse

does not do this, because it is not frightened of me.

We are friends, the Grouse and I. Since I could never find the camouflaged bird in the undergrowth of the forest, it comes to me. It keeps me company as long as I am out there. It follows me around and I think it even wants to talk to me. But then I can't be sure whether the clucking sounds the Grouse produces without opening the beak are really meant for me. It is an enticing thought, though, because habitually these sounds are uttered only by female birds during the breeding season. My friend is a female, but the breeding season is long gone. I have tried to feed her. I put grains of millet, a delicacy for

all seed-eating birds, where she could clearly see them, but she runs over the food without touching it. The next day, to be sure, the millet is gone. Nature has many mysteries.



▲ Many people have experienced “tame” Ruffed Grouse, although they are likely to be males displaying territorial dominance. PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS.

Ruffed Grouse belong to the family of gallinaceous birds. Turkeys, Quails, Partridges and Pheasants are relatives. In the coniferous forests of northern Ontario one finds the Spruce Grouse, more colourful than the Ruffed and farther west, in the prairies, the Sharp-Tailed is at home. In the mountains of Alberta and British Columbia are abodes of the Blue Grouse and there is a Sage Grouse common in the sagebrush country of the western United States.

These closely related birds have one behaviour in common: during the mating season the males go through an elaborate courtship display, but each species does so in a different manner. The male of the Ruffed Grouse spreads his wings and standing on a firm piece of ground, beats the air until a sound not unlike the start of a motor engine is produced: “Bup...Bup... Bup...rrrrr,” slowly at first, becoming faster and faster until the spring air is filled with the low-pitched throb of the Grouse’s wedding drum.

Grouse are non-migratory birds. Being seed eaters they find enough food even during the depth of winter. They seek out the shiny fruit of Poison Ivy and there is a theory that the toxicity, present in all parts of the plant, is used by the bird to combat internal parasites.

My own Grouse is forever pecking away at something to eat. But I don’t think she is hungry. She lives in freedom; she can go wherever the morsels are the juiciest. It seems that the place for this is right here in my back woods. It is quite clear that she likes it there. I think she will talk to me about it the next time that I will be out there.

The late Charles Hildebrandt of Georgetown has left an impressive body of written and photographic work, of which this is one, dated 1970.