



Did You Know? The Drummer

By Lee Wiesner

"What's that noise?" I asked my father, as we walked along the banks of the Little Rib River west of Wausau, Wisconsin. My dad replied he didn't hear anything. Being a gunner on a Navy ship in World War II had taken a toll on my father's hearing ability. I was 6 years old, it was 1955, and we were hunting ruffed grouse, better known as partridge to the locals, and approaching our favorite cover we called the jungle. We were trailing our trusty German short haired pointer, Queenie, my dad carrying his model 37 Ithaca and me with my new Red Rider Daisy BB gun. My new awesome grouse gun was capable of holding over 50 BBs in the barrel, but I was limited to one BB in the chamber as my father said the BBs rolling around in the barrel made too much noise and good shots only require one shot. Our well seasoned pointer seemed to be leading us in the direction of the sound I had heard. "Did you hear that?" I asked, as the loud thumping was much closer now. This time my dad heard the thumping and told me it was a male grouse drumming.



I asked my dad where the grouse got the drum from and he laughed and said he does the drumming with his wings usually while sitting on top of a large log. At 6, I was full of questions so I asked my dad why the grouse was drumming. He told me it was drumming to attract a mate. My next question was what's a mate. My dad took a long pause and then responded we will discuss that in a few years.

So that was my first exposure to the sound of a male grouse drumming and I still love to hear that thump, thump, thump today. This article is being written because I met at least 12 people on our morning walks along our road this spring and either they did not hear the two different grouse drumming or paid no attention to it. When I drew the sound to their attention they all asked what was making the sound.

I went on to explain to them that the male ruffed grouse beats his wings in a forward motion trapping air under his wings that creates a vacuum which makes the thumping sound. The wing beats start out slow and then quickly speed up to about 50 wing beats in about 8 to 10 seconds. Some people state that the drumming sounds like an old tractor starting up. There is a pause between drumming varying in length from around 5 to 15 minutes and then the drumming starts again. This ritual usually takes place on a large log on the ground so the drumming grouse can be spotted by the female grouse he is calling to and also so he can see potential predators approaching. The drumming can be heard by the human ear from about one quarter of a mile away. Once the female grouse approaches the drumming male, the drumming stops and the male fans out his tail and ruffles out the black feathers on his neck to show how handsome he is. This drumming activity is most prevalent in the spring mating season from the last part of April to the end of May. Grouse will drum throughout the year less vigorously and will even drum at night under a full moon. Drumming is also done to warn other male grouse that this is my territory, stay away. A male grouse typically mates with around 3 female grouse each season.

Each spring wildlife biologists conduct a drumming count stopping along selected spots on the same route counting how many drumming grouse they hear. These drumming counts are then used to predict the relative abundance of grouse in the spring and the prospect of the upcoming fall hunting season.

The female grouse makes a nest on the ground, usually at the base of a large tree, rock or fallen log. She lays one egg a day and lays about 8 to 14 cream colored eggs, with 11 being the average. The incubation period is 24 to 26 days. The young chicks leave the nest the day after they are hatched and have to find food on their own. They are capable of short flights at 12 days old. The mother cares for the chicks until they are 3 to 4 months old, teaching them where to find food and how to avoid predators. She also shelters them the best she can from cold June rains which can quickly kill the chicks due to hyperthermia.

The next time you are out for a walk and hear the low-pitched thumping of the wing beats of the male grouse, stop and take it in, it's a special spring ritual that's too precious to pass up.