

## Fright in the forest

The sudden flight of the grouse can spook even the most seasoned hunter



**BRAD TRUMBO**  
UPLAND PURSUITS

A heavy fog hung over the ridgetop, cloaking both hunter and elk in a dripping haze. The ponderosa pines wore a coat of white fuzz over their somber, green needles — the only green to be had in early December. The mercury hung around 35 degrees Fahrenheit, leaving conditions somewhere between miserable and tolerable.

Stalking quietly along an old logging road, I stopped to gaze upon a long-forgotten cable log skidder perched on a landing below the road. What was once red or orange steel had been replaced with a cancerous, dingy rust and a variety of brown and blue lichens. Imagining the logs being transported to the ridgetop, I turning to continue in the assumed direction of elk.

The road began winding down and cut deeply into the mountainside. A young fir stood at the toe of the uphill slope, flanked by rose and elderberry, growing in the opportune light of the road opening. There was nothing remarkable about this particular spot; however, I recall the location perfectly as the details of terrifying situations either scar us for life or become tucked into the deepest, darkest corners of memory, only to resurface with the assistance of a psychologist. A blue grouse exploded from beneath the fir, nearly taking my right leg out on its panic-stricken flight to safety.

Nearly everyone who has set foot in the major mountain chains of this great nation has suffered near cardiac arrest thanks to our continental “King of the Woods,” the ruffed grouse. The vibration of wingbeats and leaf litter left tussled in their wake is enough to spook the most seasoned mountaineer, but add that explosive power to a bird the size of domestic chicken and you will come to realize a terror rivaled

only by a charging grizzly, unless you’re expecting the bird sitting somewhere beyond the nose of a pointing dog.

I am either an old timer or nitwit because to me, blue grouse are blue grouse, but ornithologists recently suggested otherwise. By recently, I mean blue grouse were thought two distinct species — the dusky and the sooty — in the Lewis and Clark days. They were then lumped into “blue grouse” in the 1900s, and again separated in 2006, but are still referred to collectively as blue grouse.

Current range maps of dusky and sooty grouse show the sooty grouse hugging the western Sierra Nevada, Cascade, and Coast Ranges, while the dusky grouse occurs east of the Cascades through the Rockies.

Physically, sooty and dusky males vary in appearance. Our local dusky males boast a solid black tail fan, red neck air sacs that are displayed during the breeding season, and an overall brown appearance. Sooty grouse have a darker overall body appearance, a lighter tail fan with an ashen band on the tip, and yellow air sacs. It is possible for these species to overlap and interbreed along their eastern Cascades dividing line.

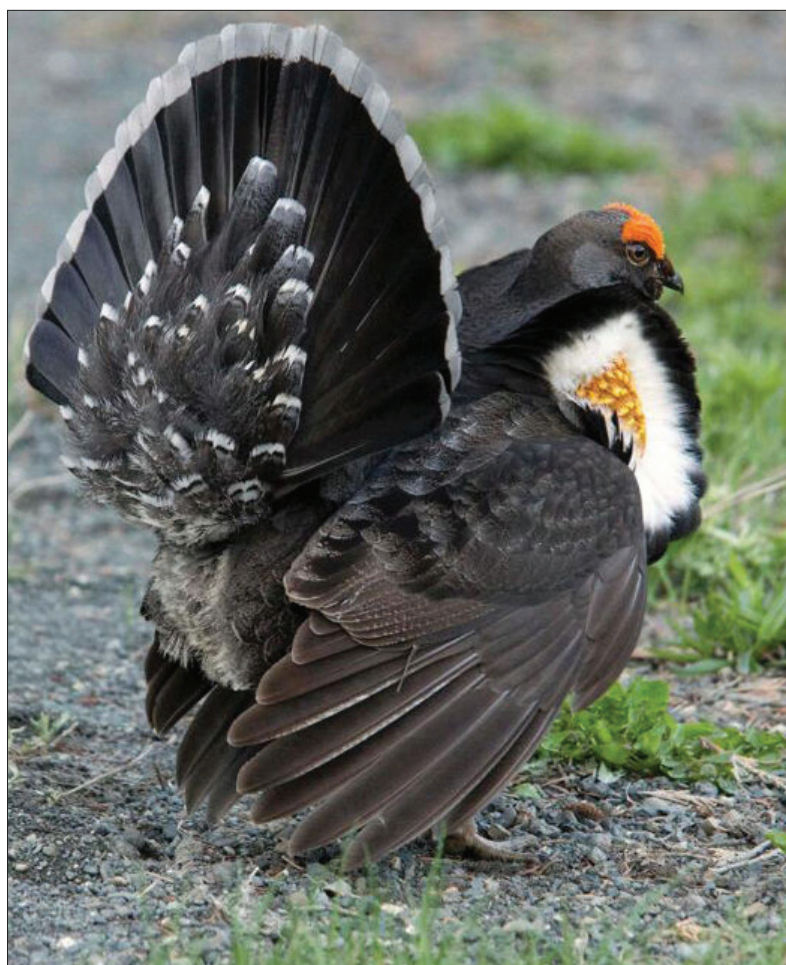
While both species overwinter in coniferous forest, their breeding habitats vary and include shrub-steppe, steppe, mountain shrub, open coniferous forest, clearcuts, old growth forest, and alpine tundra. Both species nest on the ground beneath the protection of plant cover and within one mile of conifers.

Both species are managed for hunting and big dusky grouse can be found in Northeastern Oregon’s Blue Mountains. Dusky grouse typically occupy higher elevations than ruffed grouse. When you find dusky grouse, continue to hunt that approximate elevation. Preferred habitat includes timber edges, open timbered slopes, and mountain meadows with nearby water. Insects and berries like currant and chokecherry are good food



Jeff Foot/National Park Service

Male blue grouse with air sacs inflated during a mating season display.



National Parks Service/Contributed Photo

A sooty grouse in breeding display. Notice the gray band around the tip of the tail fan and yellow air sacs on the neck.

sources in September. Later in the season, dusky grouse move higher in elevation into the conifers for winter.

While I prefer hunting birds with a dog, blue grouse can be found by simply hiking along the edge of clearcuts and other changes in vegetation types and densities, and can be found mid-morning pecking soft greens on the ridgetops under conifers. I have never encountered more than a couple birds at a time, but rumor has it that dusky grouse can be found in greater numbers in close proximity to one another.

October is a fine month to hike the grouse woods. I can think of no finer grouse hunt than walking semi-open ridgetops behind a couple pointing dogs as the daytime highs decline and the yellows and reds of autumn foliage fleck the conifer forests. The golden hours of the shoulders of the day are calling, as is the impressive flush and humble beauty of our big dusky grouse of the Blues.

*Brad Trumbo is a fish and wildlife biologist and outdoor writer in Waitsburg, Washington. For tips and tales of outdoor pursuits and conservation, visit [www.bradtrumbo.com](http://www.bradtrumbo.com).*

## Exploring a remote ‘road’ amid fall colors



**JAYSON JACOBY**  
ON THE TRAIL

I like to hike on roads that are slowly ceasing to be roads.

The transition from maintained road to decrepit track typically is a process measured in decades.

But the actual rate depends on natural forces, particularly those which belong under the category of erosion.

A summer cloudburst, for instance, can render a road all but impassable, or at least sections of it, in just a few messy minutes.

If the road runs through forest, a powerful gale can topple enough trees to cut off easy access, at least until somebody comes along with a chain saw.

Generally, though, a road left alone, untouched by bulldozer or grader, will only gradually degrade, its decline defined by the accumulation of many small wounds.

A boulder dislodges a culvert, allowing a stream to divert onto the road and begin gouging ruts where tires pass (or passed).

Scree from a tall cut sloughs onto the grade, slowly narrowing the tread.

The first encroachment, though, on a previously pristine road, tends to be from trees.

### IF YOU GO

Drive to Pilcher Creek Reservoir west of North Powder. From the reservoir, drive west on the gravel road for about a mile to a sharp left turn, just after a cattle guard. This is the Porcupine Road, Forest Road 4330. Follow Road 4330 for two miles to a junction with Road 7312, marked by a sign pointing to Anthony Creek. Turn left and follow Road 7312 for 1.9 miles to the bridge over the North Fork of Anthony Creek. Road 7312-150 is on the north side of the creek.

Left to their own devices, trees will relatively quickly take over, either by way of seedlings sprouting where vehicles once went, or by growing tall enough that their tops begin to form a sort of tunnel of foliage.

Deciduous trees such as alders are especially adept at the latter, as their trunks tend to extend at an angle, rather than the typically straight boles of the conifers.

A line of alders can intrude on a road in just a few years in the absence of pruning.

You can often still drive a rig on such a road — but only if you’re not particularly concerned about the sanctity of its paint job.

I find it intriguing to hike such roads, to wonder when they began to decay, to see a culvert that no longer bears water and ponder what force caused it to cease its one simple function.

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Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Colorful autumn foliage along the North Fork of Anthony Creek on Oct. 9, 2021.