

## 'Hun' Population Reverses Growth

By Ken Durbin  
**Ore. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife**  
 "They scare me half to death when they take off, and I never could hit those little buggers!" That comment or others like it, mixed with assorted expletives, has probably been applied to the Hungarian partridge more often than to any other Oregon game bird.

The "Hun," as it is more popularly known, or gray partridge, as it is known throughout Europe, was an early immigrant to Oregon and has maintained a foothold in our state for more than 80 years.

The name "Hungarian" partridge is something of a misnomer as this bird is native to the British Isles, most of Europe and parts of Asia. Although it is now found in Oregon only on the east side of the Cascades, the Hun was originally introduced in the Willamette Valley in 1900, by individuals understandably encouraged with the earlier success of the ring-necked pheasant. The Hun was not released in eastern Oregon until 1912. Initial stocks came from central Europe, and later releases were made from stock reared on game farms in the state.

Last year saw what may well have been Oregon's all-time record Hun population. At least 1981 provided the record harvest of 98,000 birds to Oregon's upland hunters. This take far exceeded the previous annual high of 70,000 and impressively topped the twenty-year harvest average of 20,000 birds. Rated in order, highest harvest to lowest, the top ten counties last year were Umatilla, Morrow, Baker, Wallowa, Malheur, Gilliam, Union, Wasco, Sherman and Harney counties.

This year Hun populations have dropped off dramatically in most areas. The result of overhunting? Some hunters think so, but biologists say not. Major fluctuations are common in many upland bird species, including the Hun. Last year's hard winter followed by cold, wet weather during the nesting season was more likely the reason. And, as has happened in the past, favorable winter and nesting season weather will see a reversal.

Unlike the flashy pheasant, or even the distinctly-marked chukar—Oregon's other partridge species—the Hun appears a dull bird. From a distance it seems a drab gray-brown. But close-up it has a rich and distinctive blend of earth-tone hues. The color is a mixture of gray and rusty-brown with fine lines of gray, brown, and black found throughout the feather pattern. The head of adults is a tawny cinnamon except for a buffy brown crown and ear-patch. The breast and upper abdomen is a finely vermiculated gray which is interrupted by a chestnut brown "horseshoe" marking in males, and the gray flanks are similarly interrupted by vertical chestnut barring.

The sexes appear similar although the "horseshoe" on the breast may be smaller or absent in females. Also, the scapular feathers on the wings can be used to help separate the sexes. On males, these feathers have a distinctive narrow white stripe along the shaft. Females have a wider stripe, usually with several crossbars.

Huns are somewhat smaller than chukars, but larger than mountain quail. They are a covey bird and are usually found in small bunches of up to about 20. When flushed the covey usually remains together and lands together. If the covey is broken up, birds will usually regroup as soon as possible.

Huns pair off in late February and early March, although nesting does not take place until May and June. Clutches of ten to 20 olive-white eggs are laid, and after hatching, both adults care for the young. All remain together as a covey until the next mating season, and several groups may join during the fall and winter.

Food consists of waste grain, weed and grass seeds, insects and green vegetation. Huns can scratch through several inches of snow to feed, and in cold weather may burrow under the snow at night for shelter. Although they can normally withstand fairly severe winter weather, bad conditions during the nesting period and immediately following the hatch can have a devastating effect.

In many areas the range of chukars and Huns overlap and the hunter never knows which species will flush next. In other areas Huns and pheasants may be intermixed in the same habitat. In general, the best habitat for the Hun is that country between the brushy, agricultural haunts of the pheasant and the steep rimrock scabland of the chukar. Rolling land covered with bunchgrass and scattered sagebrush, and especially areas adjacent to wheat and other grain fields, is the kind of country where the Hun is most common.

Huns leave the ground in an explosive flush with a distinctive squeal of alarm. Sometimes these birds will sit tight until the hunter is almost upon them, and the sudden rattle of wings and squeal of alarm is enough to unsettle even seasoned gunners. It is doubtful that Huns fly any faster than chukars, but because they are smaller they appear to depart at a faster rate and many hunters think they are the fastest of the upland birds.

A good wide-ranging point-  
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