

Idaho Fish & Game News

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In Search of the Idaho Native Grouse Grand Slam

This year, starting October 1, seasons opened on all five grouse species native to Idaho; the first time sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse opened on the same day since 1997.

To mark the occasion, Idaho Fish and Game wanted to recognize the first successful upland bird hunter who harvested one of each native grouse in Idaho – dusky, ruffed, spruce, sage- and sharp-tailed grouse.

featured in this issue of Idaho Fish and Game News.

Five species of grouse are native to Idaho and they span the entire state. From the dusky, ruffed and spruce grouse that inhabit the forests, to the sage- and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse that still remain on the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem in southern Idaho.

Idaho is only one of two states where you can harvest all

five of these species legally. Montana would be the other, and Plains sharp-tailed grouse are found there.

This opportunity still exists here in Idaho, but it is fragile. Sage- and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse have both been petitioned for listing, and Idaho Fish and Game is working to ensure their continued status as a game bird in the state.

The sage-grouse season was open from October 1 through 7, with a one-bird daily bag limit and two-bird possession limit.

The sharp-tailed grouse season in eastern Idaho is open from October 1 through 31.

The season for

forest grouse, which includes ruffed, spruce and dusky grouse, opened August 30 and remains open through December 31, except in the Panhandle Region where the season runs through January 31.



Hunters seek Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in southeastern Idaho grasslands.

Photo by Mark Arana

Among upland bird hunters, many strive to achieve this each year, and Idaho Fish and Game is honoring Mark Arana of Burley as the first person to report a successful grand slam in 2011. Arana submitted a series of photos and his story,

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Burley Hunter Bags the Five Native Idaho Grouse Species

Story and Photos by Mark Arana

Grouse hunting has always been one of my favorite fall pastimes because it gives me the opportunity to explore beautiful country with lots of public access and hardly any people.



Mark Arana and Bixar show off a sharp-tailed grouse.

Growing up in south-central Idaho, I gained a great appreciation for the desolate and remote mountain and sagebrush country of our state, as well as the wildlife that lives here. We are lucky to be able to hunt five different species of grouse, which can take us on hunting adventures from one side of the state to the other.

Every year I look forward to hunting grouse with my Drahthaar pointer, Bixar, and I plan the season so I can hunt each species.

During my hunting career, I have hunted, collected and mounted a male of each species of grouse in Idaho.

This season, I followed my same

annual routine for Idaho grouse hunting, and with a quick morning trip to the Curlew National Grasslands on October 5, I was able to bag a sharptail, the last grouse of the five species I needed to complete my Idaho grand slam of native grouse for 2011.

Sometimes getting all five species in one season is a matter of luck because of fluctuating population numbers, but with patience and determining where good habitat still exists, I have done well.

From the mountains to the desert, hunting Idaho’s five grouse species will take you to some of the most beautiful country the state has to offer. Any hunter looking for a little adventure and challenge should try to accomplish the Idaho native grouse grand slam.

“After a day of hunting sharptails on the windswept Idaho grasslands, it gives me a greater appreciation of how valuable our remnant grasslands are and how fragile they can be.”

Blue Grouse

Every year the beginning of fall starts with a trip to the Hells Canyon area to hunt blue or “dusky” grouse.

Over the years I have located several good spots that always seem to produce a lot of birds. Either with family or friends, I go every year to the tops of the high peaks to where the grouse are feeding on ripe berries and grasshoppers.

Normally I try to let the dog locate the birds, jump them, and I attempt to shoot them out of the air instead of out of a tree. This can be difficult at times because they often won’t give you a flying shot, but instead just fly into the nearest tree.

I’ve found the older birds can be difficult to hit and won’t necessarily sit in a nearby tree; these are the flushes I hope for.



The hard work of walking the mountains for blue grouse is often rewarded by beautiful fall scenery and their great tasting breast meat.

Ruffed Grouse

Ruffed grouse are normally the next species I pursue.

Usually I can take a few every year while blue grouse hunting, but a trip to northern Idaho and the Palouse region would never fail to fill my bag. While attending college at the University of Idaho, I hunted the old logging roads before dark, and there seemed to be birds around every corner.

In southern Idaho, I search out mixed-age aspen stands and other damp places with thick cover, and then send my dog into the mess hoping a bird will flush out on my side of the brush. When flushed, they are explosive and can be hard to hit. Finding ruffed grouse can be hit or miss, but water sources seem to be a good bet.



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Spruce Grouse (Franklin’s Grouse)

The one grouse species in Idaho that I have had the hardest time locating is the spruce grouse or “Fool Hen.”

They are commonly found in the backcountry lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests of central Idaho. In past seasons, I have taken many birds while elk or deer hunting simply by hitting them over the head with a stick or with a rock, but I have never taken one behind my dog.

They seem to be a tricky grouse to find, but I have found them most often where meadows and tree lines meet, as well as along creek bottoms. Of the five species we have in Idaho, spruce grouse are definitely the least sporting to hunt, but to me their meat is quite good. For a collector, I believe the male spruce grouse is one of the more handsome grouse of our five species.



Sage-grouse

As a young hunter, I always looked forward to hunting sage-grouse in the Bruneau desert southwest of Buhl.

“I realize how much of a privilege it is to still be able to hunt them, if only for seven days a year.”

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission’s policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor’s office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.

My friends and I would hunt water holes and desolate sagebrush steppe flats, occasionally jumping upwards of 20 to 30 birds in one group. As time went on, the sagebrush started to disappear and so did the sage-grouse.



Now, most of my traditional spots are closed to hunting, and I’ve had to find new areas to chase them. With the hunting season short and the daily bag limit down to one bird per day, I make it a point to go out at least twice while the season is open.

It always amazes me how big the male birds are and how this species is able to survive in such a harsh environment. It is truly a unique bird. Most people don’t think it’s worth driving out in the middle of nowhere for one bird, but I realize how much of a privilege it is to still be able to hunt them, if only for seven days a year.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, which inhabit the grasslands of eastern Idaho, is a species that I’ve found to be almost impossible to locate without the use of a dog.

I first hunted sharptails on the Curlew National Grasslands, but I found them more abundant on the CRP fields in the southeastern part of the state. These

grouse hold well for a dog and fly fast, making them a fun bird to hunt.

You can spend many days walking miles just to jump one bird, but occasionally you find a covey which makes things more exciting. With the Idaho daily bag limit of two, your day may end quickly if you can find a couple of birds that will hold for you. After a day of hunting sharptails on the windswept Idaho grasslands, it gives me a greater appreciation of how valuable our remnant grasslands are and how fragile they can be.



Mark Arana, 39, grew up in Buhl. He started hunting at age 12 with his dad, family and friends in the Buhl area. When he began hunting, the pheasant population was at an all time high in the Magic Valley, so the first birds he hunted were pheasants. He also hunted chukar in the Jarbidge-Bruneau desert and the Bliss area. He has hunted with Drahthaar pointers most of his life for pheasant, chukar, huns, quail and grouse species. He also enjoys hunting many of Idaho’s big game species.

He is a wildlife biologist with the Bureau of Reclamation in Burley. His work area includes all Reclamation lands from the Magic Valley to Jackson Lake, Wyoming. He holds a bachelors degree in wildlife biology from the University of Idaho, and he earned a masters degree in wildlife science from New Mexico State University in 2001.



Forest Grouse Harvest Statistics

Year	Hunters	Harvest
2000	14,200	86,000
2001	31,900	149,400
2002	33,500	147,700
2003	33,600	182,800
2004	34,100	134,100
2005	24,400	95,100
2006	36,900	129,800
2007	25,400	113,400
2008	21,500	68,900
2009	23,300	93,200
2010	20,100	66,800
10-year average	28,500	118,100

Sharp-tailed Grouse Harvest Statistics

Year	Hunters	Harvest
2000	2,800	5,800
2001	2,200	4,100
2002	1,900	3,500
2003	2,300	4,500
2004	2,300	4,800
2005	2,200	5,200
2006	3,000	6,900
2007	2,200	4,900
2008	2,300	5,000
2009	2,200	5,600
2010	2,000	6,100
10-year average	2,300	5,100

Sage-grouse Harvest Statistics

Year	Hunters	Harvest
2000	5,900	7,200
2001	5,300	7,000
2002	5,800	7,600
2003	5,700	7,300
2004	7,400	8,100
2005	6,800	10,500
2006	8,900	12,500
2007	4,700	4,940
2008	5,000	7,700
2009	4,400	7,200
2010	3,500	4,100
10-year average	5,700	7,700

Idaho’s Native Forest Grouse at a Glance:

Dusky grouse, formerly called the blue grouse, is a large bird about 20 inches long of uniform sooty-gray color. Females are smaller, mottled brown above, with a gray belly. Males sport a bright yellow-orange eye comb and white feathers surrounding fleshy reddish-purple air sacs on each side of the neck. During courtship, these air sacs are inflated for a flashy show of color that amplifies their deep, owl-like hooting call, audible up to a quarter mile away. In the breeding season, dusky grouse favor forest edges and openings, where they feed on a mixed diet of insects, green plants, and berries. In winter, in an unusual reverse migration, they head uphill to dense conifer stands, where they subsist on fir needles.

Spruce grouse are smaller and stockier than the dusky. Males have a black throat edged with white, black breast, and a scarlet eye comb. Female plumage varies from gray to reddish brown. The male’s courtship display includes a series of low frequency hoots and a gliding flight ending in two loud wing claps - like gunshots. Spruce grouse inhabit dense conifer forests of spruce, fir and lodgepole pine. In winter, their diet consists entirely of conifer needles. In other seasons, they feed on green shoots, leaves, berries, flowers and insects. Spruce grouse are noted for their boldness with humans, often feeding or perching mere feet from observers, a behavior that has earned them the nickname “fool hen.”

Ruffed grouse are similar in size to spruce grouse, but have a distinct crest on the head, black ruffs on the sides of the neck and a dark band near the tail tip. Males are renowned for their “drumming” courtship display, which produces a series of accelerating, muffled thumps that can be felt as well as heard. The sound is made by beating wings against the air to create a vacuum. Riparian areas and other moist habitats are commonly used by ruffed grouse

(Source: Jim Lukens, former supervisor of the Salmon Region.)



Photo by Pete Zimowski



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