

## A Jungle Out There

### High Grouse Numbers, Heavy Foliage Define Early Hunt

By Dick Ellis

Maybe you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but playing a very old game with a 12-year old yellow lab took on special considerations in northern Wisconsin September 19 and 20th. With Gunner disregarding his geriatric status to tenaciously work the aspen and pines for ruffed grouse in temperatures soaring toward 80 degrees, regular water and rest stops were a must. Extremely heavy foliage meant extremely difficult shooting. But increasing grouse numbers on the bird's 10-year population cycle made every effort worth it.

According to pre-season reports issued by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), statewide the ruffed grouse population increased about seven percent between 2007 and 2008. Each year since 1964, state biologists, foresters, wardens and members of the Ruffed Grouse Society have driven survey routes, stopping to listen at predetermined locations for the unmistakable sound of the bird's drumming, the report states. The drumming sound is made by the male grouse rapidly beating its wings on a hollow log with the intention of attracting a female bird. The drumming counts and observational data on breeding success are used to estimate grouse population changes and season outlooks.

"The northern and southeast regions showed the greatest increase in



*During a September 19 grouse hunt, John Ellis and Gunner work an aspen and birch lined ridge for birds. Northern Wisconsin grouse numbers continue to improve on the 10-year population cycle.*

drumming activity over last year, with 12 percent and 33 percent increases, respectively," said Scott Hull, DNR Upland Game Biologist. "The central region showed a slight decrease of three percent and the southwest region showed a decline of 20 percent fewer drums than in 2007."

For reasons not fully understood, said Hull, grouse populations fluctuate on a roughly eight to 10 year population cycle. Wisconsin's population has been on the upswing for about the past three or four seasons. More birds mean more hunters in the field, with about 101,000 hunters reporting spending 806,000

days in the field hunting grouse, with roughly 482,000 grouse harvested in 2007. During the last population peak in 1999, hunters took about 768,000 birds.

Hunters spending time in the field each year know what to expect in their own back yards. John Ellis and I, hunting terrain near our cabin in Vilas County, expected the increase based on the local population of grouse that gave us more shooting opportunities each year over the past several years. Gunner, who was just three and in his prime during the last peak, continues to be our key to success. Extremely hot September weather last weekend and Gunner's age made us heed the advice of my friend and hunting dog expert Kevin Michalowski, author of "15 Minutes to a Great Gun Dog".

Heat stroke in your dog, with symptoms that include staggering, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures and confusion, according to Michalowski, can be avoided by training or in this case hunting earlier or later in the day, and making sure ample water is available. In particular because Gunner's enthusiasm doesn't allow him to stop working in the field without the command to do so, we packed a jug of water, detoured to known pot-holes and creeks, made Gunner stop for rest often, and hunted only a maximum of two hours each of two days.



Heavy foliage in northern Wisconsin makes for tough shooting during a September 20 grouse hunt. Keeping the hunter on logging roads while dogs like Gunner work young aspen stands is one way to get the occasional open shot in the early season



The occasional rest and water break keeps 12-year old yellow lab Gunner, and John Ellis, fresh on a grouse hunt September 20 in northern Wisconsin. Temperatures approached 80 degrees.



Young aspen are a good place to search for grouse and woodcock, but early season foliage September 19 and 20 makes shooting tough. Writer Dick Ellis says he needs no heavy foliage, though, to be a rotten shot.

That was plenty of time to verify that Gunner, owned by my sister and brother-in-law and Blue's life long hunting partner, still has a great nose, grouse numbers are indeed on the up-swing and I am still a rotten shot. Now to be honest, shooting was very difficult with almost all leaves remaining on the trees during these September 19 and 20 hunts. After not pulling the trigger at all despite five flushes Friday, we took seven snap shots through the foliage after split-second, close en-

counters with a blur of bird. I claim four of those misses, and one empty game bag. John, clearly however, stunk too.

Most of our flushing success came from mature pine stands on the edge of swamps. We also flushed some birds in immature aspen stands after purposely seeking out wrist-sized trees left in the wake of recent logging operations. Three woodcock also flushed in the aspen. Although the season on that migrating bird began September 20 and the woodcock presented better shooting with their flushing, vertical flight pattern, we didn't yet have the necessary waterfowl stamps and refrained from shooting.

For your information in planning your own trip north, leaves are rapidly changing colors with maples and aspen leading the charge toward full Colorama. I would estimate that by September

21 color change was almost at 25 percent in Vilas County and literally changing on a daily basis. Consider a trip north this week or at the latest the following to experience fabulous color.

When the leaves tumble, hunters, the birds will be waiting for you and the dog. Unlike pheasants, although a good dog makes the hunt so much better, grouse can be hunted without a canine partner. Go for it.

Dates for the 2008 ruffed grouse hunting season are: Zone A, September 13 through January 31, 2009 and Zone B, October 18 through December 8. Find additional information on the ruffed grouse page of the DNR website at [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov). "15 Minutes to a Great Gun Dog" is available through Krause Publications at \$12.95. *W*<sub>o</sub>