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The ruffed grouse population is booming
Birds I View
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Ruffed grouse are experiencing a boom year likely related to the mild winter. The red morph bird was photographed at Cape Spear. (photo: Rick West)

The island of Newfoundland like other islands tends to have lower species diversity than comparable mainland areas. This pattern is evident among mammals of which there are just 14 indigenous species that include two species of bat. Racoons, skunks, ground hogs, white-tailed deer, etc. that are common in the Maritime Provinces are non-existent on the island of Newfoundland.

While biologists warn against the perils of introducing non-native species, this was not always so. And if you consider the illogic of farming Atlantic salmon in the Pacific Ocean – you can see there still are a lot of blind eyes avoiding the issue.

The most well-known and successful mammalian introduction on the island involves moose. These magnificent creatures flourished from a Noah's Ark type of release of just a few animals in the late 1800s and early 1900s. With no competitors, no natural predators and a food-rich boreal forest, the large lumbering beasts were soon an icon of Newfoundland culture and a dinner table staple. The ubiquitous red squirrel introduced in the 1960s and 1970s has also proliferated throughout the boreal forest.

Because birds can fly and because the island of Newfoundland is close to the mainland, avian diversity is not as limited as that of the mammals. Even birds such as starlings and house sparrows that were introduced elsewhere in North American in previous centuries are ubiquitous abundant residents throughout the island.

A number of direct introductions of bird species to Newfoundland have also been made. All have been of "game" birds. Most (capercaillie, black grouse, ring-necked pheasant) have failed, though two have been highly successful. Following releases in the 1950s and 1960s, spruce grouse and ruffed grouse are well established on the island. Spruce grouse are found throughout

the coniferous forests of central Newfoundland. Ruffed grouse inhabit deciduous and mixed forests and riparian habitat throughout the island.

Ruffed grouse from Labrador, Nova Scotia, Maine and Wisconsin were released on the northern peninsula and at sites through to Salmonier on the Avalon Peninsula. Ruffed grouse on the island have two color morphs - a red/russet morph (as in the column image) and a duller gray morph. The red grouse appears to be more common on the island or at least on the Avalon Peninsula but I know of no quantitative data to substantiate this impression.

The red and gray color morphs vary with geographic location, climate and population cycles. Todd (1963) in the *Birds of the Labrador Peninsula* remarked that the majority of Quebec grouse are gray. Sources such as the Audubon master bird-guide and the Ruffed Grouse Society note that red birds are more likely found in warmer/milder climates than are gray birds. While this association seems at odds with the Newfoundland situation, the apparent predominance of red grouse is likely due to some extent to the origins of the introduced birds.

The local pattern of predominantly red grouse could also be related to population fluctuations. Research in Minnesota and British Columbia has shown that male red grouse increase disproportionately when the grouse population increases and decreases disproportionately when the overall population declines. This suggests that there may be a selection for red grouse when environmental conditions are good and a selection against them when situations are poor. As both red and gray birds can occur in the same brood, as red and gray birds are known to mate and as there is some suggestion that red birds may gray with subsequent molts, the situation is not simple.

Yet if we see more grouse when their population is high we also might expect to see more red ones. Hence as this year's abundance of grouse is high, red ones may be more common.

The past mild winter has no doubt contributed to the abundance ruffed grouse in our area. There is great opportunity to see grouse as it appears to be a booming year. Ruffed grouse are continuing to show in Portugal Cove. On Witch-hazel Road – one slammed into a window at the Harleys but managed to fly off, and Billy Matthews snapped an interesting image of a grouse and a robin perched side by side in an oak tree. If you do observe a grouse, try to determine if it a reddish or gray bird. With grouse as with most birds, there is so much that we don't know and so much to learn. Keep looking and learning.

Birds in the area

On 20 April dozens of gannets and a minke were feeding in North Arm in Holyrood (Andy Woodford). The gannets were no doubt from Baccalieu Island and while they might have been pursuing herring, early inshore capelin is also a possibility. The same holds for huge flocks of plunge-diving gannets around Fogo Island (Kara Gerrow, Gordon Slade).

DFO's spring capelin survey detected large concentrations of capelin in Conception and Trinity Bays (Christina Bourne). The situation may be similar in Notre Dame Bay and elsewhere along the northeast coast (Larry Easton). The DFO survey also indicated however that the fish have

poorly developed gonads so the expectation is that this will be another late year for beach-spawning capelin. Stay tuned.

Helen Spencer has been checking the kittiwake colony at Church Cove off the East Coast Trail near Torbay. The birds appeared skiddish in April and early May but by mid-May some were on nests. Early in the nesting season kittiwakes often engage in panic flights at the colony, as it takes them a while to adjust to terrestrial contact after returning from life at sea.

In early June, a breeding plumaged dunlin and two lesser black-backed gulls were seen in Musgrave Harbour and a Caspian tern was in Gander Bay South (Ed Jenkins). Great horned owls have been calling in forest around Beachy Cove Mountain (Janet Montevecchi).

Richard Northcott has been seeing some interesting birds on Ramea, including a yellow-bellied sapsucker on April 22, a tree sparrow on 13 May and a white-crowned sparrow on the 14th. On 23 May a male bobolink was noted. Catbirds were in the area throughout May and on the 26th one member of a pair was carrying nest material.

On 5 June a pair of black-and-white warbler were gleaning insects in Banting Park (Musgrave Harbour). A junco nest with three young and an unhatched egg was found just off trail to Beachy Cove Mountain in late May (Nick Montevecchi). Hopefully they had fledged before the snow fall of early June.

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