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### The Other Grouse!



Here in Maine we are all very familiar with the ruffed grouse. But Maine is also home to its smaller cousin, the spruce grouse. Spruce grouse are associated with the boreal forests of Alaska, Canada, and the northern border states. Though they prefer the conifer dominated boreal forests, spruce grouse are also closely associated with low-lying coniferous wetlands and bog edges. Spruce grouse are a medium-sized dark-colored bird. Males are dark, slightly larger than females with a black throat and breast, and the characteristic red comb over the eye. The tail is black with a chestnut-colored band along the edge. Females are generally more mottled gray-brown with white

barrings on the under-parts which allows for concealment during nesting. In fact, spruce grouse rely heavily on camouflage and will often stay still when approached within a few feet. This type of behavior has earned the nickname "fool hen".

Like their cousin, male's springtime courtship behavior includes "log drumming", but also features strutting, tail-spreading, and periodic flights with exaggerated wing beats. Nests are usually a well-



concealed depression on the ground in brush or adjacent to a tree trunk or stump. Incubation lasts for three weeks, and clutch size ranges from 4-10 eggs that hatch in late May to early June. After hatching, the hen "broods" their chicks all night and leads them to feeding sites during the day. Mortality is highest for chicks in the two weeks after hatching and is primarily due to predation although exposure does contribute to some mortality. Chicks remain in broods for 70 to 100 days at which time they begin to disperse. Males begin to disperse before females.

This bird, listed as non-game here in Maine forages on the ground and in trees. During warmer months they feed on a variety of berries, green plants, insects, and mushrooms. In winter, they rely almost exclusively on conifer needles. The bird's crop can store up to 10% of its body weight in food, to be digested at night.

So keep a look out for these birds we call fool hens while you are out and about the woods this winter.



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