

Ruffed Grouse

Kentucky's undercover bird

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The ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) has one of the largest distributions of any North American game bird. Its range spans from Canada to north Georgia. In Kentucky, ruffed grouse call the rugged Appalachian Mountains home.

Look closely at the toes of a ruffed grouse and you will find small finger-like projections. These projections are believed to act like mini-snowshoes to help the birds walk across snow.



Kentucky grouse feed opportunistically on a variety of foods throughout the year. Grouse chicks depend on a high-protein diet of insects in the early weeks of life, then shift to vegetation as the summer progresses. Blackberries, blueberries and wild cherries provide summer food. In fall, grouse eat the berries of dogwood, viburnum, greenbriar and wild grape. Grouse eat acorns, beechnuts and the buds and catkins of some trees like birch, hazelnut and serviceberry. In late winter, grouse rely on evergreen plants such as Christmas ferns, partridgeberry, trailing arbutus and mountain laurel.

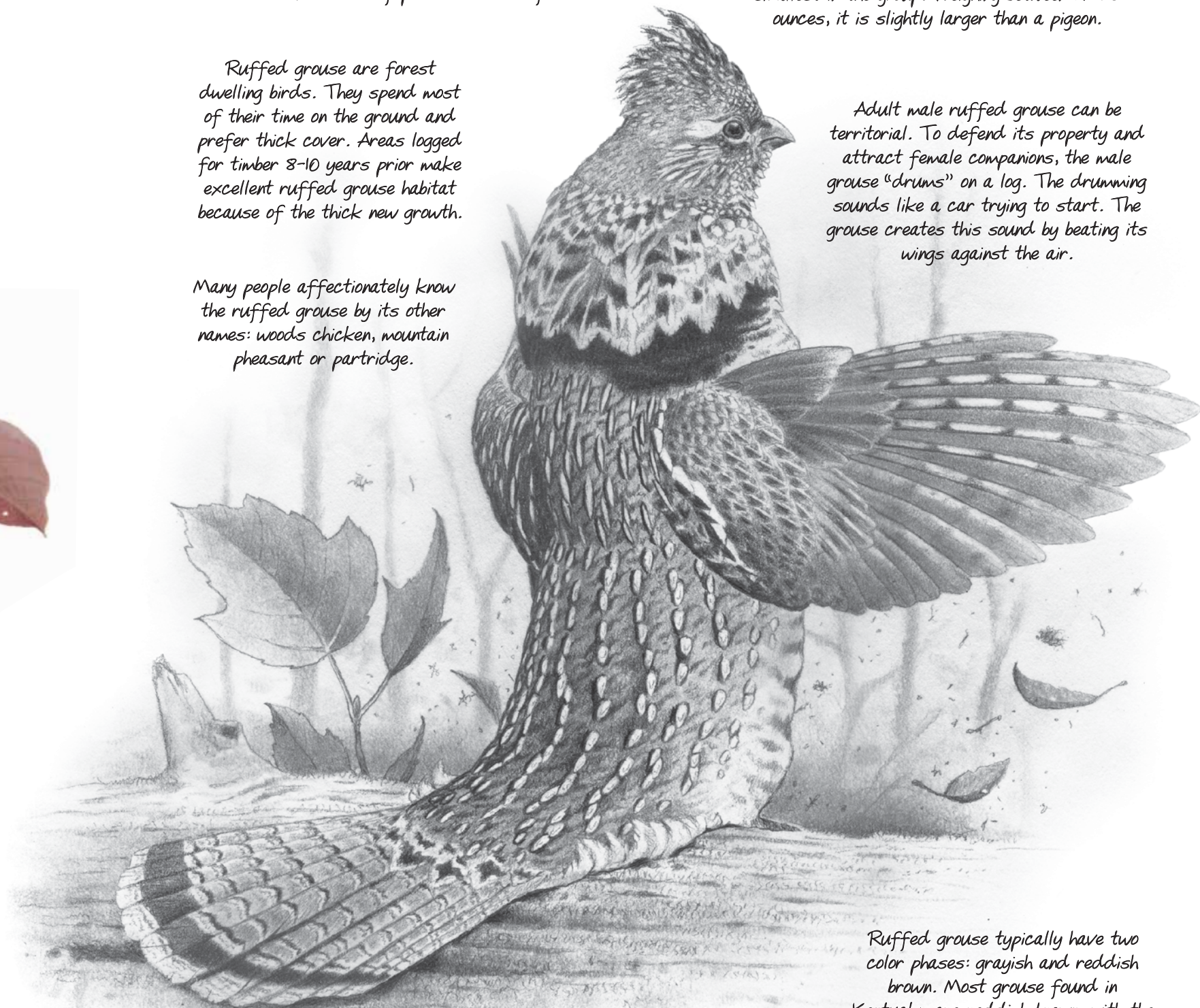
In northern states, ruffed grouse seek shelter in deep snowdrifts during harsh winter weather. In areas with lesser snowfall, such as Kentucky, ruffed grouse shelter in thick stands of pine or other conifers.

Ruffed grouse are forest dwelling birds. They spend most of their time on the ground and prefer thick cover. Areas logged for timber 8-10 years prior make excellent ruffed grouse habitat because of the thick new growth.

Many people affectionately know the ruffed grouse by its other names: woods chicken, mountain pheasant or partridge.

There are 12 species of grouse native to North America, with the ruffed grouse being one of the smallest in the group. Weighing between 17-25 ounces, it is slightly larger than a pigeon.

Adult male ruffed grouse can be territorial. To defend its property and attract female companions, the male grouse "drums" on a log. The drumming sounds like a car trying to start. The grouse creates this sound by beating its wings against the air.



Ruffed grouse typically have two color phases: grayish and reddish brown. Most grouse found in Kentucky are reddish brown, with the grayish color more common in upper mid-western states where winters tend to be more severe.

Males have long, shiny, dark feathers on the neck, the reason they are called "ruffed." Male and female grouse are difficult to distinguish based on color.