

Grouse Meet Spouse



Greater Prairie-Chicken
by Roger Hill

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First impressions are important, even in the grouse world. Booming of Greater Prairie-Chickens, drumming of Ruffed Grouse, and hooting of Blue Grouse are some of the ritual behaviors males perform each spring in the age-old contest of winning a mate. These unique and sometimes bizarre displays reflect the wide range of male-female 'relationships' in

the grouse family. For instance, among Spruce, Ruffed, and Blue Grouse, the sexes have separate breeding territories during the spring, and contact between males and females is limited. Males flutter-fly, drum, or hoot in an effort to entice females to mate. How females decide which male is tops is not clear, but they tend to choose older males.

Competition by males to impress females is perhaps most dramatic among the prairie grouse. Every spring males gather at traditional sites and perform elaborate vocal and visual displays. These sites are called 'strutting grounds' for Greater Sage-Grouse, 'dancing grounds' for Sharp-tailed Grouse, 'booming grounds' for Greater Prairie-

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Robert E. Bennetts photo

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Chickens, and ‘gobbling grounds’ for Lesser Prairie-Chickens; the names reflect the various courtship behaviors of each species. The number of males using a display site depends on the species and population, but may range from a few birds to over 200, as has been observed

for Greater Sage-Grouse. Despite a concentration of ‘available’ males, many female prairie grouse often all choose to breed with the same individual male. A dominant male Greater Sage-Grouse may mate with more than 20 females in a single morning.

In contrast to the prairie grouse, White-tailed, Rock, and Willow Ptarmigan are generally monogamous, with occasional bigamy. Males typically perform flight displays and songs as part of their courtship and territorial rituals. The pair bond is a strong one, and birds often remain together using the same breeding territory for several years. In spring, it is common to see males ‘guarding’ their mates. Although male ptarmigan do not help rear chicks, their alertness for predators may play an important role in nesting success, often by deflecting the predator’s attention to themselves and away from the hen and brood.

In general, the grouse with the briefest contact between the sexes (prairie grouse) have the most elaborate courtship performances, while those with the longest contact (ptarmigan) are relatively ‘low key’. Whether this variation is due to differences in habitat, or some other factor, has yet to be determined. Regardless of the explanation, these behaviors are another reason why grouse are so captivating.

Grouse reproductive behavior runs the gamut from monogamous White-tailed Ptarmigan (above) to highly polygamous Greater Sage-Grouse (below), where a master cock bird is seen in the act with other hens around him.

