

A Walk in the Woods - May 2011

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Walking in the woods in May is probably one of the most relaxing and satisfying events of the year. The glacier of snow has finally receded and everything is green and new. It is as if the world is being reborn and essentially it is. Most of the waterfowl have made their annual passing, the mornings are warmer requiring only jeans and a shirt and our morning dog walks are highlighted by the wonderful roar produced by our migrating bird population.

I have never been good at identifying all of the songbirds that I hear. To me it is a wall of music that I enjoy as it is, unable to pick out individual birds. I have many friends who can identify every single bird by its song, I simply smile, nod and enjoy the concert. Outside of robins, chickadees, turkeys and a few others, I am pretty much song bird illiterate. There is one bird however that I can identify clearly through the confusion and that is the annual drumming of the male ruffed grouse.

All male birds mark the coming of spring with dramatic performances to establish mating territories which are aggressively defended. The ruffed grouse is as impressive as any of them however unlike most of our singing and gobbling feathered friends, the ruffed grouse does no elaborate singing to advertise his intent. To establish territory and attract the ladies the ruffed grouse struts and displays much like a wild turkey. The grouse adds to this performance by performing his drumming ritual.

To perform the drumming a male ruffed grouse climbs on a log, stands up, cups his wings and proceeds to beat the air with a series of hard wing beats. This action of flapping cupped wings creates miniature sonic booms that start very slowly at first followed by a rapid increase of the rhythm until the whole event crescendos with what sounds like a trailing drumroll. The event takes about twenty seconds and is repeated with what seems like endless repetition. The sound of the drumming carries through the forest advertising the grouse's territory and intent.

The thunderous escape of a ruffed grouse from thick cover is a heart-stopping moment that most of us have experienced. The sound of the drumming is not unlike this same sound however no flying is involved and the bird remains in one spot throughout the drumming event. The sound frequency is low enough that many people have trouble hearing it and I am quite certain that dogs don't hear it at all.

As you might guess the habit of a chicken sized bird to throw out his normally cagey survival instinct and aggressively advertise his location attracts the attention of not only other grouse, but many predators as well. Hawks, owls and some mammalian predators love to eat grouse, especially stupid ones and they easily key in on the sound of the drumming and the birds temporary love drunk pre-occupation and lack of self-preservation. The result is often an easy meal for a magnificent owl, and a pile of feathers on a log.

The male grouse and other birds perform admirably for their small size, but the male's efforts pale in comparison to the females who must raise the young birds throughout the summer.

Whether it is a song bird or a full grown moose, a mother of any size will defend her young with unimaginable aggression against any intruder. This is a tale for next month.

Enjoy the spring!