



Small Game Hunting in Alaska

A GUIDE FOR NEW HUNTERS

Foreward

Small Game Hunting in Alaska: A Guide for Beginners



Lisa Whitman with a grouse.

Kat Betters was an adult the first time she went hunting, and she faced questions that confront most beginning hunters. Can I really kill something? What if I just wound it? How do I clean it?

Her friend Mike Taras took her grouse hunting near Fairbanks—and she was hooked. Betters said it was so rewarding she bought a 20 gauge shotgun the next day.

"It was a beautiful fall afternoon, and we got five grouse in two and a half hours," she said. "By the end of the day we had cooked and eaten them. I felt like I had done something for myself. I was excited. I think it's going to be a lifelong thing for me."

The path to being a hunter is a progression, she said, and grouse are a good place to start. Eventually she wants to harvest a caribou.

"I like the idea of getting my own food," she said. "I've dip-netted salmon, picked berries, and I love to hike in the woods and be outside. The food you get in the grocery store, the chicken in the plastic wrap, we're so disconnected from it. Somebody has to kill it, and I don't mind doing it if it has to be done."

She said she felt a little nervous the first time she shot a grouse.

"It's a paradox, having respect for life and going out killing something," she said. "I cringe when a bird flies into the window or I hit a vole with the car. But I'm not a vegetarian. I know most grouse don't make it through their first year. Something is going to get them – why not me?"

Hunters want to be successful, but even beginners understand that hunting is about more than bringing home meat. Betters heard she'd find more grouse on logging roads than in the woods, but that isn't where she wanted to spend the afternoon. "That's not the experience I want to have, hunting on a road," she said.

"I know there are people who are purists and elitists about the right way to do something," Betters said. "Afterwards a friend asked me if I got them on the fly, and I said no. Eventually that might be how I do it, but you make your own path."

Introduction

For many people hunting grouse means working with a well-trained dog and shooting birds on the fly. It's a great way to hunt but it's not the only way. It is possible to get started with minimal equipment and a little practice.

This guide offers an introduction for beginners to hunting small game in Alaska, focusing on ptarmigan, grouse and hares. It presents an overview of game, gear, guns and hunting techniques, but the information provided is by no means comprehensive. Two areas in particular demand additional study and practice: gun handling and outdoor skills.

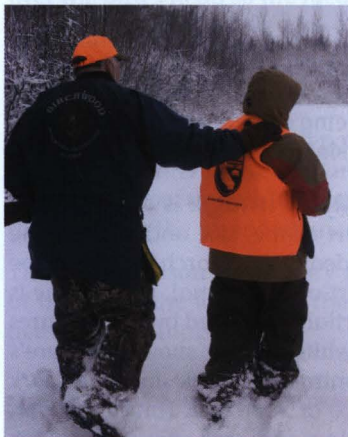


PHOTO BY CHERRIE RUESCH

A mentor is a enormous help to a beginning hunter, offering guidance with hunting, firearms and woodcraft. Hunting organizations and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game sponsor mentoring programs.

skills needed for hiking in the backcountry: dressing for the weather and terrain, getting around without getting lost, and being prepared for emergencies. It is important not to overestimate your abilities in the outdoors. This guide does not address wilderness survival and safe outdoor behavior, important for outdoor recreation in Alaska.

There is no need for a beginning hunter to push hard on initial outings. Spending a few hours in the field is a friendlier introduction than a dawn-to-dusk adventure, especially if the weather is wet or cold.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game publication, *The Grouse and Ptarmigan of Alaska: A guide to their identification, habits and habitat*, is an ideal companion to this introductory hunting guide and provides important details for hunters—where to find birds, their preferred habitat, their ranges, diets and behaviors.

A hunter education course is strongly recommended. It will provide a solid, essential foundation in safe firearm handling and wildlife conservation. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game hunter education program provides advice and tips on wildlife resources, hunting ethics, survival and first aid, water safety and hypothermia, and game care. Hunting and handling firearms requires good judgment, which comes with experience. A hunter education course can help develop the sensibilities needed in the field.

A beginning hunter with experience hiking, camping or fishing will have a much easier time in the field. Hunting requires the same

Hunting Basics

Start by walking slowly through the habitat. Look up, look down, and look ahead. Fresh snow helps, especially if you are somewhere new. If you see tracks, you know you're in a worthwhile area. Often, you can follow a set of fresh tracks to the game.

On Kat Betters first grouse hunting trip she walked right past a number of birds. She didn't know what to look for. Mike Taras, an experienced hunter and friend, helped her see them.

"We'd be walking in the woods and I'd say, 'There's a bird there, right there,' and point it out, but she couldn't find it," Taras said. "That's really something you learn—getting the search image and really being able to see. You need to get the shape of the bird in mind and lock into that sight picture."



ADRIAN PHOTO

The white fur of this snowshoe hare is an effective camouflage in the snow. Hunters need to develop a search image to help key in on game.

The search image is a mental picture of the shape, size and color of the quarry. Ideally, the search image can be just a part of the animal, since game is often partially obscured by brush. Hares may be white against snow, but there's some contrast to look for—the dark beady eye or the black rim of the ear. With willow and rock ptarmigan, look for the black tail feathers or the red eye crest on the males. The black eye stripe of the male rock ptarmigan can stand out even at a distance.

Camouflage is important to small game survival—it's possible to look right at an animal and not see it. Study pictures of game in books and make the most of wildlife watching opportunities. Most hunters are also avid wildlife watchers. Watching wildlife during the off-season is one of the best things a beginning hunter can do. Developing a keen eye for game animals in the field, and learning their habits, is critical for a hunter.

It's also important to be sensitive to motion. "As mammalian predators, we are really keyed into movement," says biologist Tom Paragi. "Movement gives animals away. A flick catches your eye."

Because they are well camouflaged, grouse, ptarmigan and hares will often freeze in place rather than run. Move slowly, stop periodically and listen, says Paragi. "If you move too fast, they'll freeze and you'll miss them."

Taras recommends changing your point of view. "I crouch down a lot and look at the ground level. You're not looking through as much brush that way."

Freezing is a good technique for the hunter as well as the hunted. Ptarmigan are seldom alone. "If you see a little bit of a white head shape sticking over the horizon, freeze right away—there may be more birds closer to you," Paragi says.

Once birds think they are spotted by an approaching hunter, they sometimes tuck low to the ground and run rather than flush, particularly ptarmigan in groups and ruffed grouse. Shotgun hunters can sometimes move ahead quickly enough to flush the birds for shooting on the wing. A shotgunner shooting birds on the ground at close range—less than 20 yards—should aim a couple inches over the bird's head so the meat is not destroyed by a volley of pellets.

Rifle hunters can often follow the birds and take quick aim during brief periods when the birds may stop running to look back for the pursuing hunter. The challenge lies in keeping up with the birds but not pushing them farther or faster.

Listening is an important part of hunting, says Juneau hunter Pat Henry. Fortunately a hunter has an advantage over a hiker. "It's like you can hear better," he said. "It's partly because you are taking pains to be quiet, but you hear things differently in the woods when you are hunting."

That's one reason why Henry goes hunting. Hunting heightens his awareness of the life in the forest and the many small clues that reveal the presence and activity of animals.

GEAR

Big game hunting often entails dawn to dusk outings or week-long expeditions to remote areas. Small game hunting is much more relaxed and the gear requirements are simpler. For the most part, pack what you would bring on a day hike.

Bring food and water for the length of time you plan to spend afield. Wear appropriate clothing for the weather. If it's cold, wear tight fitting gloves, with over-mittens if it's really cold. Pocket hand warmers can be just the ticket for keeping your shooting hand nimble. It is also recommended that you wear hunter orange color for safety. This color can be easily seen in heavy cover by other hunters and will not hamper your success as a hunter.



Bring a daypack large enough to hold your accessories and any game you harvest, but not so big that it hinders your movements. Plastic bags for game help keep your backpack clean. You'll want a sharp knife and latex gloves for dressing out your game, and a rag for cleaning up. You'll need ammunition, a gun and your hunting license. You should take a map of the area and a compass or handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) and the knowledge to use them to navigate in the field.

As with any outdoor activity, be sure to let someone know where you are going and when you'll return.

Hunting with a Partner

There are advantages to hunting with a partner and it's generally a good practice to have a companion outdoors. A beginning hunter can really benefit from a friendly mentor in the field. But safety is doubly important when hunting with others. It is critical to know exactly where your fellow hunters are. A hunter orange hat or vest really helps you keep track of your partner. In thick cover, keeping track of several people can be more difficult, and hunting with a group may not be advisable.

Hunting with a partner provides an extra set of eyes and ears and improves your chances of finding game. Hunters moving in parallel have a better chance of flushing game. Specific patches of cover can be worked strategically with the help of a partner.

One advantage to hunting with a partner is that one hunter can use a .22 while the other uses a shotgun. The rifle hunter can pick off a bird or two before they flush, and then the shotgunner can shoot the birds on the fly.

If a pair of hunters spots a flock of ptarmigan, the two can strategize their approach to maximize the opportunity. With safety in mind, one can hang back and let the other circle around, or the two can approach the flock from different directions. The birds will tend to hold better, and then flush away from one hunter toward the other.

If hares or birds are in a patch of brush, one hunter can be 'the dog' and move into the brush and flush them out to the waiting hunter. The location of the hunter in the brush must be clear at all times. Some hunters tie a bit of orange flagging tape to the gun barrel and raise it periodically. You can even talk while you're doing it, since the idea is to flush the game.

Hunters moving parallel through the forest should stay 25 to 100 feet apart, depending on the density of the brush. In promising habitat, hunters can move in an alternating stop and go pattern, with one hunter walking slowly while the other stops to watch. Game animals often focus on the moving hunter and overlook the still hunter.



PHOTO BY BOBBY PACE

Hunting partners Sydney and Jason Pace. One is using a shotgun while the other has a .22.

Hunting with a Dog

Since a beginning hunter is unlikely to have a trained bird dog, this guide does not detail hunting with a dog. But a few things about dogs are worth mentioning.

Bill Taylor, an avid hunter and retired wildlife veterinarian, suggests that a beginning hunter with a well-mannered pet might consider trying the dog out in the field.

"If you have a dog that will listen to commands—come, sit, stay, whoa—that can be a real plus," he said. "It doesn't need to have a great nose; it just has to be a dog that won't run all over. Some dogs, like labs and retrievers, are naturals. A dog that has some interest in hunting will cover ground and can help find birds."

Sometimes a dog will leap into the air after a flushed bird, and it is important to always be aware of your dog's position before you shoot. Some dogs may not have the temperament or talent for locating birds but can help retrieve fallen birds in heavy brush.



Tater brings back a blue grouse. A dog can be a helpful hunting companion, but the lack of a dog should not stop anyone from pursuing game birds.

SMALL GAME REGULATIONS

One of the most important tools for the small game hunter is the current Alaska hunting regulations. The hunting regulations cover harvest limits, seasons and general hunting restrictions. One of the most common hunting violations in Alaska is committed by small game hunters—shooting grouse from the road. Hunters are not allowed to shoot on, from or across the drivable surface of a road or highway.

Regulations are available free at the department of Fish & Game offices, most sporting goods stores, and online. See resources in the back of this guide.

Read the general hunting restrictions section, this applies to all hunters. Read the section on small game which details harvest limits and seasons. Alaska is divided into 26

game management units, or GMUs. Find the unit where you plan to hunt. Alaska's small game bag limits are generous compared to most states, but they differ from region to region. Some units are divided into subunits, and seasons and bag limits may vary.

Grouse bag limits range from five birds per day in some areas to 15 in others. Ptarmigan limits are even more generous. In most areas, the seasons run from late summer until early spring.

It is legal to hunt hares year-round in many parts of Alaska. In Southeast and coastal Southcentral, the season runs through the winter, extending from late summer to mid-spring.

Population Cycles of Small Game

The numbers of grouse, ptarmigan and hares increase and decrease from year to year, with years of high abundance followed by periods of relative scarcity. The populations of ruffed grouse and hares are especially variable and tend to fluctuate on an eight- to 10-year cycle. Over the past 40 years, the peaks have come in the latter part of each decade.

In low periods of the cycles, hares and game birds tend to be found only in the best habitat, but in peak years, they're everywhere. Hunting in years of low abundance can be a good opportunity to identify the best habitat, but it can be frustrating because you don't see as much game.

Biologist Neil Barten lived in Interior Alaska for 15 years before he saw an up-swing in the hare population. "Over the years I saw hares, a few here and a few there, but nothing remarkable. People talked about the hare cycle, and when I finally saw it happen it was unbelievable. In a peak year you'd see 25 hares in an hour. They were everywhere."

The hare population peaked in 2006-2007 in Interior Alaska, and in 2009 in Southcentral. After the peak, the population crashed within a year or two, followed by a slow, steady increase in numbers.

Hares

There are two species of hares in Alaska, the snowshoe hare and the Arctic hare. The Arctic hare lives in western coastal Alaska and the Alaska Peninsula. The snowshoe hare is more widespread and is found throughout much of Interior Alaska. Snowshoe hares are present in Southeast Alaska, but not abundant.

Arctic hares are generally found on windswept, rocky slopes and upland tundra, often in groups. They tend to avoid lowlands and wooded areas. They feed on willow shoots and green vegetation.



Snowshoe hare

ADF&C PHOTO

Snowshoe hares are found in mixed spruce forests, wooded swamps, and brushy areas. They feed on grasses, twigs, willow and aspen buds and green leaves, and their browsing often leaves signs. Hares nip twigs and branches neatly at a 45 degree angle with their sharp incisors. In the winter, as snow allows them to reach the tender shoots higher up, hares may stand up and clip twigs three or four feet above the ground.

Snowshoe hares weigh three or four pounds and the Arctic hare is larger, at six to 12 pounds. Both are grayish-brown in summer, with white underparts, and turn white in the winter. This winter camouflage is caused by physiological changes triggered by the shortening day length in autumn. That means that in years when the snow is late, these white animals stand out markedly to predators and hunters.

Hares are closely related to rabbits, but hares are born fully furred and with their eyes open and are able to hop around in just a day or two. Hares don't use dens and burrows for shelter or to escape from predators. Rabbits are born hairless and blind; don't open their eyes for a week or more, and use nests and burrows.

"Hunting hares in Alaska is different from hunting cottontails in the Lower 48," says biologist Tom Paragi. "Cottontails will jump up right at your feet, but these hares, they move out way ahead of you. You don't see them nearly as much. If you hunt slowly, you don't spook them as much and can pick them out."

Paragi prefers a .22 for hare hunting. He aims for the heart and lung region if there is any doubt about the animal moving, or takes a head shot at close range. "You can shoot longer range if you have a .22 with a scope, but you don't necessarily need one."

Paragi recommends moving slowly through the habitat. "Sneak through woods, move slow, stop and go. In more open terrain, you can use binoculars to scope ahead and look for hares—that's a good technique for game birds as well. If you spot them, stalk slowly into gun range."

Several hunters can work together to drive hares out of cover. The "watchers" should be positioned where the "drivers" will push hares out of the cover into the open—at the end of a long row of alders, along streamside areas with thick willow or alder or where there's cover next to open country.

"On islands in the Tanana and Yukon Rivers we'd hunt in thick brush or young, thick stands of spruce. The hares stay in that thick cover and don't go out in the open unless you push them out. You have someone positioned where you think you can ambush one coming by. The guys in the brush doing the drive may not see many, but the guys up ahead on watch will see them run past. You have to be really careful with shots—you don't want to be shooting back toward the people that are driving."

Hares can transmit a disease called tularemia. It is caused by bacteria that can infect people causing flu-like symptoms. It's not common, but occurs sporadically in Alaska, and 22 cases were reported between 1972 and 1997. It is much less likely to occur after the first hard frost of autumn. Transmission usually results from gutting and skinning an infected animal. As a general precaution when handling hares, minimize contact with body fluids (use protective gloves or wash well with antibacterial soap). Cooking kills the bacteria.

Grouse

Grouse and ptarmigan don't have teeth and can't chew their food. To grind up the buds, needles and twigs they eat, they depend on their gizzard, a muscular organ full of small pebbles. As the muscles in the gizzard contract, the pebbles roll around and grind up the food, preparing it for digestion.

In the fall, birds are drawn to locations where grit is available. Once the ground freezes, loose pebbles will be hard to find, and birds stock up before winter. The diet in winter includes tougher foods than the summer diet, and young of the year need to establish grit in their gizzards. Gravel roads and the shoulders of paved roads attract birds, but shooting on or across a drivable road is unsafe and illegal.

Wildlife tends to be most active in the morning and evening. Mornings are a particularly good time to hunt birds as they are often out picking grit.

Grouse hunting generally opens in August, although the exact date varies from region to region. In August, early season hunters will find both adults and young of the year. These young birds have grown rapidly during the summer and by September are just a little smaller than the adults.

Generally speaking, grouse taste best in the summer and early fall, and the young of the year are most tender and best tasting. Grouse eat greens and berries during the summer, which lend good flavor to the meat. In the winter, spruce and blue grouse feed on evergreen needles, giving the meat a flavor that's disagreeable to some people.

Sooty Grouse

Sooty grouse were formerly known as blue grouse, in recent years the American Ornithological Union officially changed the name. Because of their hooting call, many refer to the birds as "hooters." At about three pounds, they are Alaska's biggest grouse. Sooty grouse or hooters live in the rain forests of Southeast Alaska. Stalking hooters often requires a hike to the timberline in the spring. Although the birds may be found in the spruce and hemlock forests at lower elevations, and at the fringes of muskeg meadows, they favor the upper reaches of the timbered slopes near the subalpine.

In the relatively open country of the subalpine, sooty grouse often seek shelter in thickets of scrubby, low-lying mountain hemlock. In this

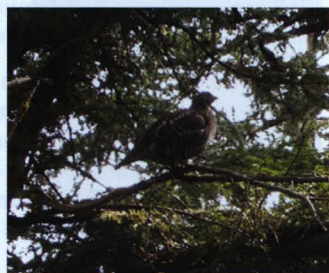


PHOTO BY NEIL BARTEN

The hunting season for sooty grouse extends into the spring, offering the opportunity to hunt these birds while they are calling or hooting for a mate. Although the call can be heard from a distance it is difficult to pinpoint the exact location.

country, it's possible to find ptarmigan and grouse in the same bush. Goshawks also hunt this country, and thickets provide important cover for game birds from those raptors. The birds may be hidden, but it's often possible to hear them clucking and calling back and forth. It pays to stop and listen for birds at promising patches of cover.



PHOTO BY JEFF MONDRAGON

Sooty grouse are found in the dense rain forests of Southeast Alaska.

Sooty grouse may be found in the same areas near the timberline week after week, and hunting timbered ridges in good habitat can mean scaring up a bird every 15 or 20 minutes. They generally do not fly far when flushed, and it's often possible to see where they land.

When the snow flies in the fall, grouse tend to move downslope. Most hunters concentrate their efforts early in the season, in late summer and early fall, and then again in the spring.

Spring hooter hunting offers a unique attraction and challenge. As the snow melts

from the ridges and the days lengthen, the booming mating call of the male grouse carries through the forests of Southeast. Hunters pursuing these birds find that the hooting is encouraging, but deceptive. The birds are there, but exactly where? The low-frequency hooting has a ventriloquist effect that makes it hard to pinpoint. To make matters more confusing, the bird needs only to turn his head and hoot in a different direction, and it sounds as if he's flown to another tree. A few tips can help.

"Because they're often high up in a tree, it helps to get upslope from them and look horizontally across the canopy," says bird hunter and state wildlife biologist Doug Larsen. "It may be steep hiking, but it gives you that advantage."

The hooter is generally near the trunk of the tree, not out on the limb, and may be partially obscured by branches. Don't look for an entire bird; look for something that's a little out of place against the bark, branches and sprays of evergreen needles. Watch for subtle movement. Sooty grouse tend to bob rhythmically when they hoot. If you broaden your eyes, scanning with your peripheral vision as well, it's possible to catch sight of that slight, jerky movement and then zoom in.

Hooters tend to favor hemlock over spruce trees. Biologist Neil Barten, an avid hooter hunter, says they even favor specific trees.

"Hooters have special trees, and parts of trees, they like to hoot in," Barten says. "If you know an area, you can learn where their choice spots are. I can kill a hooter in a tree and next week there can be another one in the same place."

The Southeast rain forest is dense, and one advantage to hunting sooty grouse with a partner is bird retrieval. A shot bird may drop into the undergrowth and disappear. Before taking a shot, position a spotter below the tree, keeping a sharp eye on the bird, and retrieve it when it falls. A dog may prove useful here as well.

Spruce Grouse

Spruce grouse are found in the boreal forests of Alaska, and a subspecies (known as Franklin's spruce grouse) inhabits Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska.

These birds favor fairly thick cover, often near white spruce trees. In Interior Alaska, that generally means drainages. The Susitna, Skwentna, Matanuska and Talkeetna River drainages have spruce grouse, and some of the best spruce grouse densities in the state are on the Kenai Peninsula.

Spruce grouse may be found throughout the Interior in the mixed upland forests, especially habitat with an understory of cranberry or blueberry bushes and near areas that provide the birds with grit and pebbles.

Spruce grouse are not travelers and spend most of their lives on the same few acres of ground. In winter, a grouse may sit tight in the same spruce tree or spend the daylight hours in a tree and nights under the snow near the base of the tree.

Snow roosting is a common behavior of grouse and ptarmigan. The birds plunge into a soft snow bank and hunker down, sheltered from wind and hidden from predators. The temperature under the snow can be 40 degrees warmer than the surface temperature.

Spruce grouse are notorious for holding tight when approached and not flushing. When a spruce grouse is flushed from cover it will often fly into a nearby tree. A grouse in a tree will generally sit on a branch near the trunk, hidden by the boughs. Keep your search image in mind, and be sensitive to slight movement.

Hunting with a partner can be an advantage with a spruce grouse in a tree. The two hunters can approach the tree from different directions – mindful of each other's location—and be in position to take a shot whichever way the grouse flushes.



PHOTO BY JEFF MONDRAGON

Spruce grouse experience dramatic population swings and are abundant in some years and scarce in others.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Sharp-tailed grouse favor country more open than Alaska's other grouse species. Sharptails are similar to the grouse known as "prairie chickens" found farther south. They are known for their showy spring mating rituals at communal sites known as leks, where males display and "dance" for hens. The valleys and foothills of Interior Alaska are home to most of Alaska's sharptails, and the private agricultural lands near Delta Junction (often referred to as the agricultural projects) and the areas around Tok, Tanacross and Northway are popular for sharptail hunting.

Sharp-tailed grouse will seek cover in fencerows and when hunting around farms and agricultural projects be sure to ask permission from landowners. If you offer to share game with the landowner you will probably earn an invitation back. When hunting a fencerow it pays for a pair of hunters to walk abreast along either side ready for the other to flush game out.

These grouse thrive in the early years after fire has burned an area, and these good areas to concentrate hunting effort.

At the first snow fall, sharptails will often pick up and move to expanses of dwarf birch shrub land. Of Alaska's grouse species, sharptails are the most likely to move around. Most other grouse are fairly restricted in range and move seasonally on foot rather than flying.

Sharptails stay in brood groups in late summer and fall, and they'll often form flocks in winter, like ptarmigan. Spruce and ruffed grouse may be found in groups of several broods in late summer and fall, but in winter most are solitary or in groups of two or three birds.

Ruffed Grouse

Ruffed grouse are a favorite among bird hunters. Ruffed grouse have white meat, while other grouse and ptarmigan have dark meat. Ruffed generally taste good year-round.

Ruffed grouse are found in aspen forests in Interior Alaska in the Yukon, Tanana and Kuskokwim River valleys. In the 1980s, grouse were transplanted to the Matanuska-Susitna region. Ruffed grouse prefer stands of aspen and birch, especially areas where young trees are becoming established after a fire. These provide dense cover that protects the grouse from predators.

In summer ruffed grouse eat berries and green leaves, and south-facing slopes with berry bushes and wild rose bushes are a good bet for finding birds. In the



PHOTO BY JEFF MONDRAGON

Sharp-tailed grouse are found in Interior Alaska.



Ruffed grouse are one of the most popular game birds in America. In winter these birds will sometimes fly into a snow bank and roost beneath the snow.

Ruffed grouse are drawn to roads and trails in the early morning to peck grit. Many grouse hunters walk the back roads and trails in search of game. For some, it's tempting to just drive the roads until grouse are encountered, then jump out and shoot. That's illegal and unsafe.

"That's not hunting. That's shooting," says Tom Paragi. "You don't know who's coming down the road—dog walkers, joggers, other vehicles—or what house could be back in the trees."

Ptarmigan

Ptarmigan are widely distributed throughout Alaska. They are most often found in open country, tundra, above treeline, and among alders and willows in drainages. Willow ptarmigan are the Alaska state bird and the most commonly encountered ptarmigan. Rock and white-tailed ptarmigan tend to be found at higher elevations than willow ptarmigan.

Ptarmigan are similar to grouse but smaller, with white wings. Ptarmigan turn white in winter. They also have feathered toes, an adaptation that helps them walk on snow in winter.

Most people prefer the flavor of birds taken in late summer and early fall. Juvenile birds in August and September are particularly good. The flavor of ptarmigan meat changes over the course of the winter, and can be strong in late

winter they feed on catkins from male aspen trees, and buds and twigs of aspen, willow and soapberry. They are often found in these trees in winter, especially in late afternoons and evenings.

Early in the hunting season the nearly grown chicks will likely still be with the hens. The broods tend to break up and disperse in mid-September and hunters later in the fall are more likely to encounter single birds.

Male grouse advertise their claim to breeding territory in the spring by drumming, beating the air rapidly with their wings. Males also sometimes drum during autumn, possibly to let young dispersing males know that an area is already occupied.



PHOTO BY JEFF MONDRAGON

In late summer ptarmigan begin to molt their brown summer feathers and develop the all white plumage that helps hide them in winter.

winter. Another benefit to hunting in early fall is that ptarmigan have turned partially white at that time and their white feathers contrast with the surrounding vegetation.

Hunting early in the season can mean encountering birds in family groups of a half-dozen birds. Family groups converge into flocks as snow begins to cover their habitat. Females and young tend to seek lower elevations as winter progresses and males tend to remain higher in elevation. Large flocks of 100 or more birds can be found in winter and flock movements can be abrupt in response to snow burying food, predators, human disturbance or other factors. They can pick up and skip over to the next mountain, or travel much longer distances.

Once snow has fallen, it's possible to find fresh tracks and work the area, or follow the tracks to the birds. Even though ptarmigan can be well-camouflaged, they often get nervous when approached within 40 or 50 yards, and start clucking. It pays to listen.

Ptarmigan also become noisy in the spring when they are getting ready for breeding. Males vocalize with distinct croaking and clucking calls, and perform their mating displays for prospective females. This trait helps biologists track ptarmigan population trends over the years, similar to the drumming surveys done for male ruffed grouse.

Finding and dispatching wounded game

All hunters strive to kill their quarry with a single, lethal shot. No hunter wants to injure an animal, or worse, injure an animal that escapes. If a wounded animal is fleeing, a quick second shot may be necessary. With a shotgun, aim to the side of the animal so the load of pellets does not destroy the meat.

It is important to keep track of the animal after the shot is fired, especially to note the spot where a bird falls after being shot on the fly. Trained dogs are a valuable asset in locating and retrieving small game. A wounded animal may leave a blood trail on vegetation, and with careful observation the animal can be tracked down and dispatched. This is easier with snow on the ground.

Encountering a dying animal requires a humane method to end its life quickly. A strong squeeze is a respectful and effective method. Holding the animal away from you on the ground, wrap



Ptarmigan

PHOTO BY JEFF MONDRAGON

the fingers of one hand around the chest cavity from the back, and squeeze the ribs firmly to compress the heart-lung area until the animal stops moving. Other methods may be used, but the chest squeeze eliminates the chance that a bullet could ricochet from a close head shot. Grabbing a bird by the head and spinning the body will break the bird's neck, but many experienced hunters believe the chest squeeze is a more respectful end.

Cleaning Game

Game should be cleaned as soon as possible after it has been shot. It is important for the body heat to escape and for meat to cool. A clean, sharp knife is your main tool, and latex gloves are handy.

You are legally required to salvage the breast meat from game birds. For small birds such as ptarmigan, the breast is most of the meat on the bird.

To remove the breast meat from game birds such as ptarmigan and ruffed grouse, slit or tear the skin down the middle of the breast. Tear the skin loose from the entire breast. The two breasts are separated by the keel of the breastbone. Slip the blade of a sharp knife under the breast meat and work it forward. When you hit the front – the wishbone – follow the wishbone right on down and peel the meat off. It's also possible to simply pry the breast meat out with your thumbs. There is no need to gut them. To take the drumsticks, peel the skin and feathers off the legs. Cut the feet off, and then cut the legs off at the hips. Rinse the meat off.

There is a trick to cleaning spruce grouse that is probably best demonstrated. It is possible to lay the bird on the ground with its wings spread, step on the wings, then grab the legs and pull. The legs and breasts come off, and the guts stay with the wings.



PHOTO BY CHERRIE RUESCH

A lesson in cleaning game birds at a hunting clinic sponsored by the Hunter Heritage Foundation.

Blue grouse are about twice the size of ruffed grouse and most hunters prepare these birds like chickens. Rather than take just the breasts and thighs, they'll pull the organs out and take the entire bird home.

Some people prefer plucking the feathers off game birds rather than skinning. Leaving the skin on the bird helps keep the meat moist and tender, but plucking is a chore.

In all cases, be sure to trim away any badly shot up areas, and remove any shot pellets. Some folks soak the meat in salt water for three hours in the refrigerator, as the salt water helps draw out the blood and any feathers that the shot has pushed into the meat.

To field dress a hare, cut off the head. Break the feet at the ankle joints and cut them off. Pinch the skin on the rabbit's back and pull it so you can cut through the skin, cutting across the back. Hold the hide and pull the skin away in opposite directions, peeling it completely off. Remove the tail. Cut the abdomen open—be careful not to cut into the entrails—grab the heart and lung portion of the viscera and pull backwards, removing all the entrails. Clean out all blood and blood clots under running water.

Depending on how you plan to prepare the hare, you may wish to cut it into five pieces—the backstrap, the two forequarters (right and left ribs and legs) and the two hindquarters. Like chicken, a whole hare will take longer to cook than a hare that is cut in pieces.



PHOTO BY BOBBY PACE

Firearms for Hunting Small Game

One of the many benefits a hunter education course provides is a solid introduction to firearms and firearm safety. Understanding how guns and ammunition work and what it takes to be a good shot and a safe hunter are critically important. This guide does not attempt to cover these details, but does offer a brief overview of the firearms most widely used to hunt small game.

The .22 caliber rifle

The .22 caliber rifle has long been the most popular gun for hunting small game. The caliber refers to the diameter of the bullet in hundredths of an inch and .22 is almost a quarter of an inch in diameter—a relatively small bullet. A .22 is not considered adequate for hunting game as large as deer, but it is ideal for small game. A good .22 rifle is accurate and has very low recoil or kick. A .22 also uses rimfire ammunition, which is far less expensive than centerfire cartridges.

Four styles of .22 rifles are popular with small game hunters: bolt action, lever action, autoloading, and pump action rifles. Most rifles have a magazine, a compartment in the gun that holds ammunition, but some bolt action rifles are single-shot and have no magazine. After taking a shot the hunter slides the bolt

or works the lever to eject the spent cartridge. This action inserts a fresh round from the magazine into the chamber and readies the gun to fire as soon as the trigger is pulled again.

With an autoloading rifle, some of the energy generated by the expanding gases from the fired round is used to automatically work the action and chamber a new round for firing. Once the hunter chambers the first round the gun is ready to fire every time the trigger is pulled.



PHOTO BY BOBBY RICE

Some people hunt small game with a .22 pistol. Pistols are easy to carry and effective at close range (up to about 50 feet) but they are less accurate than rifles and require much more practice.

Rifles are aimed using open sights or a scope. Open sights sit on top of the gun barrel and generally feature a small metal post about a quarter-inch high at the muzzle end of the barrel, and a V-shaped notch at the end nearest the shooter. The gun is aimed by carefully lining up the sights on the target. A scope generally has crosshairs that are centered on the target. A scope offers the advantage of telescopic magnification, usually three to seven power.

Most shots in the field are made from the standing, sitting or kneeling positions. To become an accomplished hunter, you should practice shooting in each of these positions. Shooting from the sitting position is more accurate than standing. A standing hunter who can shoot with some support—braced against a tree or rock—will tend to be more accurate than a hunter shooting freehand.

Hunters have a responsibility to make a clean, humane kill. Every hunter needs to know his or her abilities, and not take shots that will injure animals or cause game to be lost.

"I try to get as close as I can. I don't think taking long shots is responsible," says Tom Paragi. "You need to know your capabilities after practice with different shooting positions. Sitting is easy in hilly terrain if you're shooting downhill, but when shooting uphill, kneeling is better."

Because .22 ammunition is inexpensive it's affordable to practice. It's important to practice shooting from different positions in a field situation. "I think a pop can is a good, realistic target—the 2 by 2-inch round end of the can," says Paragi. "The distance at which you can no longer consistently hit the target is your personal shooting limit. You should restrict yourself to that range."

A .22 bullet can travel a mile, and a hunter must consider what is behind the intended target and where a bullet could go. Hunters need to be especially cautious when shooting at grouse in trees, where the bullet may carry a long distance, and when shooting at game near rocks or water, where a bullet may ricochet.

Shotguns

Shotguns are very different from rifles. Instead of a bullet, a shotgun fires a cloud of pellets, a “shot string” of small lead or steel shot that sprays out as it leaves the barrel of the gun. The main advantage of a shotgun over a rifle is that it is easier to hit a moving target—a flying bird or running hare—with a spray of 200 pellets than with a single bullet. A shotgun does not have to be aimed as precisely as a rifle, as the expanding string of shot covers more area to intercept the target.

Shotguns are considered short-range firearms. The cloud of pellets spreads out and slows rapidly—about 20 to 40 yards is considered effective range for average shooters hunting most small game. Although the pellets lose power, they may travel several hundred yards, so a shotgunner must also be aware of what is behind the intended target. This range is far less than a rifle and for this reason many states restrict hunting in populated areas to shotgun only. Although the shotgun is a short-range firearm, that cloud of pellets is deadly at close range.

Different types of shotguns and shotgun ammunition are appropriate for different kinds of hunting, and hunters should match their selection to the game they are pursuing.

The diameter of a shotgun barrel is not measured caliber, but by an old term called gauge. The smaller the gauge, the larger the barrel. In general, a large gauge such as the 12 gauge is favored for geese and ducks, larger game, and shooting at longer ranges. Smaller gauges are preferred for upland birds such as grouse and ptarmigan, and game shot at closer range.

BIRDS BAKED OR FRIED

Birds baked or fried. One simple method is to place clean grouse breasts in a cast-iron skillet with half a chopped onion. Lay four or five slices of bacon on top and bake at 325 degrees for 20 to 30 minutes, until golden brown.

Grouse can be battered and fried: use 1 cup beer and 1 cup pancake mix, and cut the grouse into small chunks. Blend the beer and pancake mix into a thick batter, and dunk grouse chunks in the batter and fry

in hot oil. Remove and drain on paper towels. The meat cooks very quickly so don't leave it in the oil for more than a couple minutes, depending on the size of the pieces.



Blue grouse can be baked like a chicken. Baste the bird frequently with a bit of butter, or the grease from a couple of bacon slices. Small game birds can be

excellent in chow mein dishes as well. Just follow a good recipe and use your wild game bird in place of chicken.

The 12 gauge is the most popular shotgun, followed by the 20 gauge. A 20 gauge shotgun is probably better suited to a beginner than a 12 gauge. It is lighter, easier to handle and there is less recoil or "kick" when shooting.

Other shotgun gauges sometimes seen are 10, 16, 28 and the .410, which is a very small gauge shotgun. The .410 (actually a caliber) corresponds to about 67 gauge. The .410, referred to as "four-ten" and the 28 gauge were introduced initially for competitive target shooting, shooting at flying clay targets.

The .410, although light and easy to fire, does not contain enough shot for beginners to quickly achieve success and confidence—the .410 is a challenging gauge even for skilled clay target shooters.

Like a rifle cartridge, a shotgun shell is loaded with powder, but instead of a bullet, a plastic "wadcup" holds the shot. A 12 or 20 gauge shotgun shell holds about an ounce of shot. The shot, or pellets, come in different sizes. The larger the number, the smaller the shot size. Tiny #12 shot look like pepper grains, and #1 shot is about the size of the familiar BBs used in air guns.

Different size pellets are appropriate for different purposes. For grouse and ptarmigan, #6 or #8 shot is most often used. Larger shot, such as #4 and even #1 shot is needed for ducks and geese. A shotgun shell will hold about 50 pellets of BB size shot, and about 225 pellets of #6 shot.

PREPARING HARES

When frying a hare, coat the pieces with corn meal or flour, as you would chicken. Brown it on all sides, then reduce the heat and cover the pan, simmering until it's tender. This provides a moist coating, but takes a little longer. For a crisp coating and shorter cooking time, first boil the hare until it's almost tender. Pat the pieces dry, roll them in corn meal or flour and fry them.

To see if hare is done, pierce it with a fork. You should be able to insert the fork with ease, and the juices should run clear. Hare is thoroughly cooked when it is no longer pink inside. If you use a meat thermometer, hare is done when a thermometer inserted in the meatiest part reads 180°F (82.2°C)



For roasted hare, rub surfaces with onion, garlic, and lemon. Place on a greased rack in a shallow pan. Brush generously with melted butter and cover loosely with foil. Roast at 325 degrees for 1 to 2 hours. Remove foil during last 1/2 hour to brown.

Hare can also be slow cooked in a Dutch oven, large covered pot, or a crockpot. The pieces of meat can be seared first in hot fat, using the Dutch oven on the stovetop. Before baking, add liquid, either several cups of hot water, condensed soup mix or red wine. Vegetables may also be added as desired. Bake at 325 degrees for 1 to 2 hours, depending on the size of the pieces.

Shotgun pellets are most often made of lead or steel. Lead is preferred because it is a dense metal and performs well. Unfortunately, it is also toxic when eaten, and waterfowl ingest the lead shot that falls into wetlands. To address this, nontoxic shot (most often steel, although some other metals are sometimes used) is required for hunting waterfowl, sandhill cranes and snipe in Alaska. Lead shot is legal for hares and upland birds such as grouse and ptarmigan.

To hunt with a shotgun, it is important to understand how the shot performs. When the shot first leaves the shotgun barrel, the flying cloud of pellets resembles a cone flying point first. It immediately begins to spread out. The pellets slow until they no longer have enough energy to penetrate game, and the pellets are too far apart to ensure numerous hits. It is important that hunters select ammunition with the right shot size to penetrate the game at an effective shooting distance (pellet energy) and enough pellets to hit the animals with four or five lethal strikes (pellet density).

Hunters shooting birds at close range want a pattern that will spread quickly. Hunters after birds that are further away, such as duck hunters, want a tighter pattern that doesn't completely disperse by the time it reaches the birds. The spread of the shot is determined by the roundness of the shot, the shot size, and the "choke" at the end of the shotgun barrel.

The choke is the degree of constriction at the muzzle, the opening at the end of the barrel. Shotgun barrels typically come in three chokes: full, modified, and improved cylinder. Many guns have adjustable chokes or interchangeable choke tubes. Full choke is the most restricted muzzle and produces the tightest pattern. A full choke will put about 70 percent of the pellets in a 30-inch circle at 40 yards. With improved cylinder, the choke diameter is larger and the pattern will be more spread out. About 50 percent of the pellets will be in a 30-inch circle at 40 yards.

One of the best ways to practice with a shotgun is trap or skeet shooting—shooting at small flying clay discs. The clay "pigeons" are flung into the air and "fly" away (trap) or across (skeet) from the shotgunner, similar to a flushed game bird. Gun clubs and ranges offer clay target shooting opportunities. It is also possible to buy a small handheld clay pigeon thrower and practice with a friend in a safe area.

Shotguns come in several basic styles; the most common are break action, pump and semi-automatic. Break action shotguns open on a hinge, exposing the chamber. There is no magazine, the cartridge is loaded in the chamber and the gun is closed. Break action guns are either single or double barrel.



PHOTO BY CHERIE RUESCH

A break-action, over-and-under double barrel 20 gauge shotgun.

Double barrel shotguns are popular and represent the most classic sporting shotguns. Double guns are either side by side or over and under, and have either a selector that determines which barrel fires first or they may have separate triggers for each barrel. The two barrels each have a different choke, typically improved cylinder for the first, closer shot, followed by the second shot through the modified choke.

Pump action shotguns have a single barrel and a tubular magazine that holds three to six shells. A slide is pumped after each shot to eject the spent shell and insert a new shell.

Semi-automatic shotguns have a magazine that holds several shells, but they automatically eject empty shells and reload after firing. With more moving parts, however, semi-autos need to be kept clean to ensure that they operate properly.

A classic gun for hunting small game is the over-and-under .22/shotgun combination. It pairs a 20 gauge or .410 shotgun with a .22 caliber rifle—in the same gun.

It is important to use a shotgun that fits—a shotgun suited for a large man will be awkward for a woman or teenager. A beginner borrowing a gun should keep this in mind, and try several guns to get one that feels comfortable. The most important things to consider are the stock length—the distance from the end or butt of the stock to the trigger—the barrel length and the overall weight. If you are buying a shotgun, work with a knowledgeable friend or dealer to get a good fit. If the gun doesn't mount comfortably to your shoulder or you can't swing it easily you will not shoot well.

"It's critical to get a gun with a short stock to fit a youngster or a woman, or any small statured-person," says Nick Steen, an experienced hunter and retired wildlife biologist. "The standard stock is about 14 inches. Youth and ladies models are 13 or 13 1/2 inches, but a 12-inch stock may be even better. If the stock is too long, you will not be hitting where you're pointing, and the recoil is more intense than if the stock fits correctly."

Shotguns do not have the same kind of sights as a rifle. Your eye is the rear sight, and it is critical that the barrel of the gun aligns with your eye when you mount the gun. If the stock is too long or short, you will aim too high or low, and shots will be off-target. In addition, a proper length stock snugly tucked into the right place on your shoulder will reduce the recoil that often distracts hunters when they shoot.



Sasha's first rooster.

PHOTO BY CHERIE RUESCH

Resources

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game website has a wealth of information for hunters. See: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/> The Alaska hunting regulations and information on shooting ranges, (the Rabbit Creek shooting range in Anchorage, the Fairbanks Indoor Shooting Range, and the Juneau Indoor Shooting Range), wildlife diseases and parasites in Alaska, including tularemia, and game animals is available.

Shooting ranges and hunter education programs are excellent resources for beginning hunters. The Basic Hunter Education Study Guide provides a wealth of information on hunting, firearms and outdoor safety. For information on hunter education in Alaska, see the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website, and look for the hunter education page at www.huntereducation.alaska.gov. For information on hunter clinics in the Anchorage area, call 907-267-2187, in the Fairbanks area call 907-459-7206 or 459-7306.

For more on small game hunting opportunities see Alaska Fish and Wildlife News, www.wildlifeneews.alaska.gov article from September 2011.

Acknowledgements

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Thanks to the following contributors: Mike Taras, Bill Taylor, Nick Steen, Tom Paragi, Steve Lewis, Jeff Mason, Neil Barten, Jeanette Earnest, Kat Betters, Bob Weeden, Laurence Ellison, Tom Roethe, Doug Larsen, Rick Merizon and Pat Henry.

Reviewers: Michelle Sydeman, Tom Paragi, Jerry Soukup, Eddie Grasser, Lee Rogers, Tom Roethe, Lori Thomson, Mike Taras, Cathy Brown, Rick Merizon and Carole Healy.

Drawings and photographs: Jeff Mondragon, Cheree Rusch, Mike Harrington, Bob Hines, Jack Whitman, Jodi Snyder and Susan Pace

This publication was produced by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. This is the second edition. It was redesigned by Anne Kincheloe, A Sign of Design

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Small Game Hunting in Alaska

A Guide for Beginners

This guide offers an introduction to hunting small game in Alaska for beginning hunters, focusing on ptarmigan, grouse and hares. Much of the information can serve experienced hunters as well. It presents an overview of game species and hunting techniques, including stalking and searching for game, hunting with a partner, small game population cycles, dealing with wounded game, dressing and cooking game, firearms for hunting small game, and provides additional resources for more information.

Small Game Hunting in Alaska: A Guide for Beginners addresses concerns and questions beginning hunters often have, and draws on the experiences of seasoned hunters, biologists, naturalists and wildlife managers. This guide should serve as a complement to hunter education and mentoring in the field.

