

# Stalking the Wily

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THE BLUE GROUSE makes its home in the trees of densely forested mountain slopes of Southeastern Alaska. During the winter, the birds sit on limbs of hemlock or spruce trees, filling their crops with needles and taking life easy. In the fall, grouse are scattered widely in alpine and subalpine areas inaccessible to all but the most ambitious hunters. Hunting them then is a bit laborious and ineffective, but an occasional bird is taken by the opportunistic big game hunter. In the spring, however, the males begin their courting calls (hoots) and it's then that avid grouse hunters take up their firearms and snowshoes to pursue this tasty bird.

A very handy accessory to the hunt is an empty Heinikens beer bottle. With this a hunter can blow a good imitation of the blue grouse's natural hoot. You might wonder why a hunter would want to talk over territorial tidbits with a hooter in a tree 100 feet tall. If you have hunted blue grouse and heard one way up on a mountainside and then 45 minutes later crawled breathlessly up to the general area, waited for another hoot, and heard none at all; or decided upon the tree the bird was in, but thought just maybe it could be the one next to it — or even perhaps another several yards above or below; or even been so lucky as to definitely determine the perch tree but not find the bird; — or find only the tail feathers — then you need a beer bottle.

All of the aforementioned can happen to a hooter hunter, leaving



# Blue Grouse

## take one beer bottle...

him feeling pretty desperate. About that time, however, just take that Heinikens bottle out and “who-who-who-who-who” a few times and Mr. B.G. will most likely have to poke his head out to get a good look at his competitor, fluff up a few feathers and hoot a reply. He’ll even strut out on his limb and the branches will bob up and down, giving his hiding place away.

If one has good eyesight and the patience of Job, (but no Heinikens bottle), movement can also be discerned in the tree branches when the bird starts to eat hemlock or spruce needles. In late spring, if a bird is fairly low in a tree, a hearty blow on the bottle can sometimes bring him rushing down to a fallen log or the ground where he’ll exhibit his fine fan tail, bulging red neck patches fringed with white feathers, and wide-spread wings. If he is an especially aggressive bird, he will do a little circle dance for you, pausing now and again to rush forward in a seemingly brave attack on the intruder. Sometimes he’ll just fluff up and strut about slowly, then walk away.

I use a Heinikens beer bottle because, of the many bottles I’ve tried, it most nearly resembles the tone of a blue’s hoot. To my ears it’s not perfect, though. It should be just a bit lower in tone to better match the bird’s call. However, at times they’re not too fussy. In fact, when they really get in the mood for the business at hand, even a cough or a thud on a limb will arouse an answer from the treetops.

I have heard the females call and

would like to devise an imitation to see how the males would react. It’s a very soft, low call and is probably used only when the female is quite close to the male.

Of course, the desirable outcome of a day’s hunt is to bag five birds with as little damage as possible to the breast meat. To achieve this I use a little Ruger .22 rifle with 4X scope and aim for the bird’s head — or if I’m too far away for a confident head shot, a low neck shot gives a bit more room for error — not much though. I have heard a few shotgun enthusiasts express slight distaste for this method of bird hunting, preferring to jump the quarry and wing shoot. I haven’t tried shotgun hunting enough to compare the two, but I don’t believe one would be very successful with this method because it can be very difficult to get blue grouse to fly from their lofty perches. I guess they feel quite safe up there. If they did take off, chances of seeing them long enough to get even one shot in are very remote.

It’s really quite a challenge to hit something as small as a grouse head or neck with a .22. The head is only about one and one-half inches high; to hit it while your rifle is sitting on your forehead pointing straight up at that small of a target in trees 100 feet or more tall, is quite rewarding. It’s sporting in that a hit is a definite, clean kill, and a miss would be a clean miss — unless the shot was a bit low and then it would be a neck shot which is fatal 99 per cent of the time. Breast or body shots on grouse are not very

desirable to me because I have seen the bird sit on the branch as if it were not hit; a second shot would bring it down and there would be two definite hits in the body.

On confirming their toughness, I have shot birds that flew away as if not even touched, then I just happened to walk in the direction they flew (which is very difficult to keep track of even if one wanted to), and found the birds lying dead on the ground at least 400 yards away from the tree in which they were hit.

Having spent many days in the heavily wooded forests seeking “hooter trees,” I have come to realize that I can almost always pick out the tree the bird is in (after getting close to the sound) by looking at the base circumference. This is a handy thing to know when you’re standing in the middle of a group of trees, five of which you think possibly the master ventriloquist could be in. One of the trees in the area will have a much thicker circumference at the base — sometimes being taller than the others, too. Search out that tree and you’re almost sure to find the bird in it, near the top and on a branch close to the main trunk. Perhaps they choose these old, sturdy trees because in high winds they do not sway as much. But for whatever the reason, blue grouse are most fond of inhabiting these old monarchs whose roots are usually helping to hold up a cliff face — so, of course, when they are shot out, they fall 200 yards down the mountainside you’ve just crawled up. Beware of

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*BIRD BAG—Author Sue Arthur displays blue grouse bagged in Southeastern Alaska.*

Photo by John Kibbons

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these steep inclines in early spring when heavy, wet snows are blanketing the ground. I once set off an avalanche which buried my dead bird and nearly buried me.

On the subject of snow, a normal spring will find the higher country under several feet of it. Since it is almost impossible for a grouse addict to resist the first hoots of spring, one has to don snowshoes and go where the hooters are. The modified bear-paw snowshoe is best for this type of travel because the snow is compact enough to hold considerable weight without needing extra length. Also, and most importantly, because of the difficult terrain, i.e., 70-degree grade slopes, brush, fallen trees, ravines, etc., it is much easier to travel with feet as small as one can get away with.

The hooters really start talking in late March and April and by May every well-timbered mountainside in Southeastern Alaska is vibrating

with their enthusiastic calls. The season for blue grouse closes on May 15, but opens again on Aug. 1, thus making it convenient to get a few birds while on early deer hunts. This time of year finds both males and females on the ground more — especially females with their broods. The young birds are capable of going it alone and do so shortly thereafter. The meat of the young grouse is more tender than the adults, making them very desirable. However, I don't think it is the actual meat of the adult birds which at times is tough, but rather the membrane covering each muscle bundle. This can be completely removed with the aid of a sharp knife and by peeling it off with the fingers. The method is similar to that employed when skinning an animal. Mention of only breast meat does not mean that the other meat is not good. The giblets are very tasty and I always take them. The legs are full of sinewy little

bones and are a bit discouraging to eat as drumsticks. However, they, along with the neck and giblets, are good when pressure cooked together for soups and stews.

Here are a couple of my favorite blue grouse recipes:

## Grouse in beer batter

- ¾ cup beer
- 1 cup pancake mix (wholewheat 'n honey instant mix is good)
- cooking oil
- grouse meat cut in small chunks

Blend beer and pancake mix until a rather thick consistency is reached. Dunk grouse chunks into mixture and drop into hot oil. Remove and drain on paper towel for few seconds. The meat cooks quite quickly so don't leave in oil over a couple minutes — depending on size of chunks.

## Breast of Grouse

- 2 breasts of grouse
- 4 tablespoons butter
- ½ glass tart jelly (apple, gooseberry, etc.)
- 5 ozs. dry sherry
- salt and pepper
- 3-4 tbls. heavy cream
- paprika

Saute breasts in butter until nearly tender, about 15 minutes, add jelly and wine. Salt and pepper to taste. Cook covered 15 to 20 minutes. Remove breasts to a platter. Add cream and a dash of paprika to the gravy. Taste for seasoning and, if necessary, add salt and pepper. Pour gravy over meat. Makes three to four servings. □

*Before joining the department in 1969, Sue Arthur studied commercial art and worked as an anatomical illustrator for the University of Arizona College of Medicine. She has worked as secretary to the commissioner and is presently game division secretary. She also uses her artistic skills to do some departmental illustrations.*

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