

PROPOSAL 91

5 AAC 85.065. Hunting seasons and bag limits for small game.

Reduce the bag and possession limits for grouse in a portion of Unit 20D as follows:

The Hunting Regulations Booklet would read:

Unit 20D, that portion lying west of the east bank of the Johnson River and south of the north bank of the Tanana River:

Five per day, fifteen in possession, provided that not more than ten in possession may be ruffed grouse or sharp-tailed grouse.....Aug 25 - Mar 31

By falconry only, five per day, ten in possession, provided that not more than two per day and two in possession may be ruffed grouse or sharp-tailed grouse.....Aug 10 - Aug 24

Change 5 AAC 85.065 to read:

Unit 20D, that portion lying west of the east bank of the Johnson River and south of the north bank of the Tanana River

5 [10] per day, of which not more than **2** may be **ruffed grouse or** sharp-tailed grouse, by falconry only; 10 in possession, of which not more than 2 may be **ruffed grouse or** sharp-tailed grouse, by falconry only Aug. 10 - Aug. 24 Aug. 10 - Aug. 24

5 [15] per day, **15 in possession**, of which not more than **10** [5] may be **ruffed grouse or** sharp-tailed grouse [30 IN POSSESSION, OF WHICH NOT MORE THAN 10 MAY BE SHARP-TAILED GROUSE;] however, a season may be announced by emergency order during which the bag limit is less than **5** [15] grouse per day, **15** [30] in possession, and less than **10** [5] **ruffed grouse or** sharp-tailed grouse [PER DAY, 10] in possession Aug. 25 - Mar. 31 Aug. 25 - Mar. 31

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? Grouse hunting opportunity and harvest allocation in Unit 20D. Grouse populations, while naturally cyclic, are notoriously slow to recover from greater than normal population declines caused by weather, habitat loss, and over harvest. Unit 20D enjoys a reputation as the epicenter of quality grouse hunting in Alaska, due to huntable populations of all three species of grouse found in interior Alaska, and a road and trail network that provides easy access to large areas of prime grouse habitat. That reputation, buoyed by outdoor TV show coverage, articles in hunting periodicals, and books on grouse hunting in Alaska, draws many hunters from around the state, as well as nonresidents. Hunters from

Alaskan urban centers and nonresidents far outnumber local hunters and are more likely to continue to harvest birds up to the limit, even when populations are noticeably down. This is natural since they have invested time and money to get to Unit 20D and want to maximize their return. Because of the consistently increasing pressure from these hunters, local hunters often choose to forego hunting and harvesting grouse when populations are down.

In addition, with the increasing number of hunters, more each year come earlier in the season to try and beat other hunters and take advantage of higher grouse numbers early on, before grouse numbers have been substantially reduced. This has resulted in a disproportionate share of available grouse being harvested during the first two weeks of the fall season, leaving few grouse for hunters choosing to wait until the later part of the fall season (mid-September and later) when grouse are more mature, cooler/dryer conditions are available for working dogs, and hunters can enjoy a more traditional mid to late fall upland hunting experience. Another factor contributing to the high early pressure is the “two-fer” opportunity that allows hunters to get in a week of grouse hunting in August, then switch to hunting waterfowl and/or moose - two other hunting opportunities for which the area is well-known, and which draw non-local hunters.

To more equitably allocate the pre-season grouse population to hunters throughout the fall season, harvest during the early part of the season needs to be reduced by lowering the daily bag and possession limits. This will more equally allocate the portion of the grouse population available for harvest annually to all grouse hunters regardless of when they decide to hunt in the fall. Thus, rather than incentivizing grouse hunters to concentrate their efforts earlier and earlier, they can have similar harvest opportunities longer in the season. As the trend toward high pressure early in the season increases, and the accessible areas become crowded, the quality of the hunting experience is degraded.

A daily bag limit that matches species limits also removes potential for accidentally exceeding a species limit. A very common grouse hunting technique, especially for hunters without dogs, is to shoot sitting grouse from the ground or from trees. Especially with a rim fire rifle, it is possible to harvest all or most of the birds in a flock, since they often don't spook and fly at the shot, or go very far when they do. These hunters are more likely to shoot birds before the species is identified, as identification is more difficult when the tail is not readily visible prior to the decision to shoot. In these situations, with a daily limit of 15, it is easily possible that a hunter could exceed a species-specific limit of five birds without even realizing it.

The Delta Advisory Committee originally conceived a proposal to limit ruffed grouse to five per day, to match the current sharp-tailed grouse limit, and leave the total daily bag (15) and possession (30) limits unchanged. We decided to modify that into a five bird per day total limit to increase opportunity, maintain sustainable harvest levels for all species, simplify the regulation, and to reduce the complexity of shoot/don't shoot decisions in the field.

In addition to helping stabilize populations of our various grouse to normal cyclic variations, the five-bird daily limit will maximize opportunity for all hunters throughout the season and eliminate the possibility of accidentally exceeding a species specific limit. While this proposal reduces the daily bag limit by two thirds, it only reduces the possession limit by one half, to reduce the overall impact of the new bag limit on hunters who have limited time in the area.

PROPOSED BY: Delta Fish & Game Advisory Committee

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