

# Alaska

## Small Game Summary 2026

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Species considered small game in Alaska are defined by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), for regulatory purposes as grouse, ptarmigan, and hare. Alaska has 7 species of grouse and ptarmigan (Tetraonidae) including ruffed (*Bonasa umbellus*), sharp-tailed (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*), sooty (*Dendragapus fuliginosus*), and spruce (*Falciapennis canadensis*) grouse; and rock (*Lagopus muta*), white-tailed (*L. leucurus*), and willow (*L. lagopus*) ptarmigan. In addition, Alaska has 2 species of hare (Leporidae) including Alaska (*Lepus othus*) and snowshoe (*L. americanus*) hare. All 7 species of grouse and ptarmigan and snowshoe hare can be legally harvested in Alaska with liberal seasons and bag limits for all game management units (Unit). Alaska hare, which have a distribution limited to western coastal areas, can be harvested in most Units with liberal season dates but more conservative bag limits due to reduced numbers relative to historical observations. The exceptions are Units 9 and 17 where the season for Alaska hare is currently closed.

The statewide Small Game Program (SGP) has three primary responsibilities including research, management, and outreach. Recent research results are briefly described within the specific species sections. Management efforts largely focus on spring breeding and summer brood surveys, harvest composition, recommendations to the Alaska Board of Game (BOG) regarding regulatory proposals and addressing concerns from staff and the public. Specific survey methods are fully described in Merizon and Carroll (2023). Survey and research efforts occur across the state from Nome to Ketchikan and along the road system from the Steese Highway south to the Kenai Peninsula. Outreach and education efforts focus on recruiting new hunters, providing hunters with tips, recommendations, and insight into Alaska's small game species.

This report summarizes the activities conducted by the SGP during the 2025 regulatory year (RY25, 1 July 2025–30 June 2026) in addition to preliminary brood survey results from summer 2026. Specifically, it addresses: 1) 2025-26 weather patterns, 2) species status including spring 2026 breeding and preliminary summer 2026 brood survey results, and RY25 harvest composition, 3) research updates, 4) recent BOG regulatory changes, and 5) new developments and outreach efforts. A more thorough multi-year management report is available (2024) or will be available (late 2026) at

<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=smallgamehunting.research>).

For clarity when reading this summary, we regularly report data from large geographic areas including the Interior (Game Management Units [GMUs] 12, 19-21, 24, and 25), Southcentral (GMUs 6, 13A, 13D, 14, and 16A), the Alaska Range (GMUs 9A, 9B, 11, 13B, 13C, 13E, and 16B), and the Kenai Peninsula (GMUs 7 and 15).

### 2025 / 2026 Weather

June 2025 began cool but quickly transitioned to warm and dry for much of the state, which resulted in an increase in fire activity and poor air quality during the latter half of June and into early July of 2025 (Alaska Climate Research Center 2026). For the remainder of July 2025, it was moderately warmer than normal in the Interior with below average precipitation throughout most of the state. August 2025 weather was variable across the state with warm and dry conditions in early August, transitioning to cool and rainy conditions in Western and Northwest Alaska towards the end of the month. Southcentral and Western Alaska saw multiple strong wind storms, while Southeast Alaska remained warm and dry for much of August. December 2025 was cold and dry for much of the state, although Southeast experienced well above average snowfall, with Juneau receiving its snowiest December on record. By late winter 2026, snow cover was present throughout most of Alaska, with Fairbanks receiving its snowiest February on record in 2026. Southcentral had multiple periods of cold dry conditions but quickly gained snowpack during late winter 2026. March 2026 was colder than average across much of Alaska with little precipitation except for Southeast, with Juneau also receiving its snowiest

March on record. April and May 2026 yielded cooler than normal average temperatures across most of the state, with variable spring conditions throughout Southcentral and the Interior. Early June 2026 was cool but relatively dry in many areas of Alaska, with warm temps resulting in numerous wildfires by late-June. These conditions transitioned to cooler than average temperatures in July 2026, with increased precipitation across most of the state.

Beginning in 2017 and continuing into 2025, a spruce bark beetle (*Dendroctonus rufipennis*) outbreak has severely affected large stands of mature ( $\geq 15$ cm diameter) white spruce (*Picea glauca*) throughout Southcentral and the Kenai Peninsula. While much of the Matanuska-Susitna valley (Mat-Su), northern Kenai Peninsula, and Anchorage bowl has been severely affected, new beetle damage was also observed on the north side of the Alaska Range near Denali Park and along the eastern Copper River Basin in 2025. This loss of spruce grouse habitat may have a strong negative effect on spruce grouse populations throughout affected areas over the coming years, while also increasing the risk of wildfires. (Alaska Dept. of Natural Resources 2026).

## Species Status

### Ruffed Grouse

Spring breeding surveys were completed at long-term monitoring sites near Palmer, Delta Junction, Anderson, Fairbanks, and Tok. Surveys were conducted from 27 April-15 May 2026 in Interior Alaska and 19 April to 10 May 2026 in the Mat-Su. Survey conditions in the Interior were generally good; however temperature and wind data was not collected consistently during 2026 surveys. Snow persisted along survey routes into early May and could have delayed drumming behavior, especially in areas surveyed in late April. Survey conditions in Mat-Su were generally delayed, and spring leaf-out occurred about 1-2 weeks later than in 2025. The average number of drumming males heard along survey routes in the Interior near Tok and Delta Junction suggest ruffed grouse numbers may be starting to decrease, while numbers near Fairbanks and Anderson suggest a continued increase in ruffed grouse. The average number of drumming males heard on survey routes in the Mat-Su decreased slightly in 2026 but was only slightly below the most recent high documented in 2025.

The proportion of juveniles in the harvest (based on hunter harvested wing donations) is used as a relative index of chick survival and recruitment (Merizon and Carroll 2023). In Southcentral, the number of wing donations in RY25 ( $n = 8$ ) was slightly above RY24 ( $n = 5$ ) and below the long-term average ( $n = 17$ ; 2011-2024). The low sample size precludes a reliable estimate of the proportion of juveniles. In the Interior the number of wings received in RY25 ( $n = 39$ ) was slightly below the long-term average ( $n = 46$ ; 2011-2024) and less than the number received in RY24 ( $n = 44$ ). The proportion of juveniles in the harvested sample from the Interior in RY25 (0.92) was above RY24 (0.70,  $n = 44$ ). The data suggests chick survival may have been higher in 2025. However, the relatively small sample sizes across a large geographic area of collection warrants caution in drawing strong conclusions about population trends from the wing data alone.

Overall, spring breeding surveys in 2026 coupled with periods of dry conditions in the Interior and fairly warm and dry conditions in Southcentral during the early brood rearing period (mid-June to early July) suggest hunters may expect to see more ruffed grouse in portions of the Interior and Southcentral regions this year.

### Sharp-tailed Grouse

The SGP conducted annual spring breeding surveys near Delta Junction from 18-29 April 2026 and near Tok from 27-30 April 2026. Survey conditions were generally good with mostly light winds and cool temperatures. Snow depth was greater at both locations than the long-term average during spring 2026, making access to leks slightly more challenging.

The average number of male sharp-tailed grouse estimated per lek near Delta Junction was lower in 2026 (3.8 males per lek) than 2025 (5.6 males per lek), but the 2026 estimate was similar to the previous 5-year moving average (3.8 males per lek; 2021-2025). The average number of male sharp-tailed grouse estimated near Tok was higher in 2026 (8.5 males per lek) compared to 2025 (6.1 males per lek) and above the previous 5-year moving average (5.4 males per lek; 2021-2025). The number of active leks near Delta Junction in spring 2026 was 24, which was similar to the 25 active leks recorded in 2025 and above the 5-year moving average of 22 active leks (2021-2025). The same number of active leks were observed near Tok in spring 2026 (5) as in 2025 (5). For clarity, a lek is defined here as an area with  $\geq 1$  male sharp-tailed grouse observed displaying in at least 2 consecutive years. A lek is considered inactive or abandoned when no males are observed displaying for 5 consecutive years.

The SGP has been conducting brood surveys for sharp-tailed grouse through 2024. Data from brood surveys provides information on nest success, chick survival, and recruitment into the population just prior to the hunting season. Warm, dry weather conditions throughout June and into early July are ideal conditions for good chick survival. Sharp-tailed grouse brood surveys were not completed near Delta Junction in 2025 or 2026 and SGP staff are still evaluating whether to potentially revise the survey design due to recent fencing on private lands and the relatively few broods observed each year since 2020.

There were fewer sharp-tailed grouse wings donated from hunters throughout the Interior in RY25 ( $n = 70$ ) than in RY24 ( $n = 104$ ). The number of wings donated in RY25 was also lower than the long-term average ( $n = 84$ ; 2011-2024). The proportion of juveniles in the harvest calculated from donated wings was higher in RY25 (0.81) compared to RY24 (0.58). Most of the wing donations from the Interior come from Unit 20D (74% in RY25 and 72% in RY24). Therefore, the data suggests juvenile production during the summer of 2025 in Unit 20D was likely comparable to summer 2024 but whether that applies throughout the Interior is less clear due to limited samples from other areas.

Considering spring breeding densities of sharp-tailed grouse were slightly down near Delta Junction, but higher around Tok, with warm and dry conditions beginning in mid June; hunters should expect to see good numbers of sharp-tailed grouse while afield in the Interior for the 2026-27 hunting season.

### **Sooty Grouse**

Spring breeding surveys were completed in Juneau, Petersburg, and Ketchikan between 8 April and 24 May 2026. No breeding surveys were completed near Haines in 2026. The spring breeding estimate of the number of singing males (“hooters”) per stop near Juneau was the same in 2026 (1.1 males per stop) compared to 2025 (1.1 males per stop), increased near Petersburg in 2026 (2.9 males per stop) compared to 2025 (1.9 males per stop), and declined slightly near Ketchikan from 2025 (1.6 males per stop) to 2026 (1.1 males per stop).

Fewer sooty grouse wings were donated to the SGP in RY25 ( $n = 8$ ) compared to RY24 ( $n = 28$ ). The number of wings donated in RY25 was also well below the long-term average ( $n = 41$ ; 2012-2024). The proportion of juveniles in the harvest calculated from donated wings was down in RY25 (0.50) compared to RY24 (0.61). Most of the sooty grouse wing donations come from Unit 1C (63% in RY25 and 96% in RY24). Small sample sizes warrant caution in drawing strong conclusions from the wing data, and we did not have enough wing samples to make inference on juvenile production in Unit 1C near Juneau during RY25.

Southeast grouse hunters should anticipate good numbers of sooty grouse this fall near Petersburg, and similar numbers near Juneau and Ketchikan based on spring counts.

### **Spruce Grouse**

Limited data are available for spruce grouse and relative abundance projections are limited to inference made from wing donations and field observations. However, beginning in fall 2019, a roadside survey technique was initiated to develop an index of abundance in the Mat-Su. This technique has shown promise in its ability to provide an efficient and cost-effective means to index spruce grouse relative abundance at a localized scale. Fall roadside spruce grouse counts declined in Mat-Su from 2021 to 2023 but increased from 2024 to 2025.

Wing donations for spruce grouse throughout Southcentral and the Kenai Peninsula in RY25 ( $n = 91$ ) were higher than that received in RY24 ( $n = 66$ ) but below the long-term average ( $n = 159$ ; 2011-2024). The proportion of juveniles in the donated wing sample from Southcentral and the Kenai Peninsula was 0.67 in RY25 compared to 0.37 in RY24, possibly suggesting higher juvenile production in RY25. The relatively small sample size across a large geographic extent warrants using caution when drawing strong conclusions from the wing data alone. The number of donated wing samples from the Interior was down in RY25 ( $n = 80$ ) compared to RY24 ( $n = 115$ ) and also below the long-term average ( $n = 104$ ; 2011-2024). The proportion of juveniles in the harvest in RY25 (0.61) was similar to RY24 (0.63) and has stayed relatively consistent since RY20.

In 2026, Southcentral spruce grouse populations may still be negatively affected by the ongoing (although slowing) and widespread spruce bark beetle infestation throughout the region. Similar to the weather during the second half of June and early July of 2025, conditions were relatively dry during the same period in 2026, which may have improved production and recruitment of juvenile spruce grouse in Southcentral. However, above average precipitation and cooler weather in the Interior during the month of July could have negatively affected brood-rearing. Hunters are likely to see average numbers of spruce grouse during RY26.

### **Rock Ptarmigan**

Rock ptarmigan spring breeding surveys occurred from 26 April to 18 May 2026 throughout the Kenai Peninsula, Chugach Mountains, and Alaska Range. No surveys were conducted in the White Mountains in 2026. The spring breeding relative abundance for rock ptarmigan on the Kenai Peninsula in 2026 (0.8 males per stop) was up slightly from 2025 (0.7 males per stop) and comparable to the previous 5-year average (0.7 males per stop; 2021-2025). The estimate for the Chugach Mountains in 2026 (0.6 males per stop) was above the estimate from 2025 (0.4 males per stop), however challenging spring survey conditions limited the number of surveys completed around Anchorage and on the Kenai Peninsula. The survey estimate for rock ptarmigan in the Alaska Range in 2026 (0.5 males per stop) was slightly above the estimate from 2025 (0.3 males per stop) and comparable to the previous 5-year-average (0.3 males per stop). Survey data from 2026 indicate a decline in rock ptarmigan near Mount Fairplay (0.29 males per stop) compared to 2025 (2.4 males per stop), although only one survey was completed. No rock ptarmigan surveys were completed near Donnelly Training Area (DTA) in 2026.

Wing donations from hunters for rock ptarmigan declined in RY25 ( $n = 47$ ) from RY24 ( $n = 69$ ). These samples were spread over a very large geographic area with the most wing samples coming from Unit 14A near including Palmer and Wasilla, Unit 1C near Juneau ( $n = 10$ ), and Units 20E ( $n = 9$ ) and 10 ( $n = 7$ ). Drawing any conclusions about juvenile production for a given area from this sample is very difficult.

Brood surveys for rock ptarmigan were completed between 15 July and 9 August 2026 at Eagle Summit, the Denali Highway, and within Chugach State Park. Very few rock ptarmigan are typically observed on brood survey routes along the Denali Highway which are primarily focused on willow ptarmigan, however, in

2026, 25 total rock ptarmigan were observed along Denali Highway brood survey routes. This was more than the 6 rock ptarmigan observed in 2025. Surveys near Eagle Summit were completed from 24 to 26 July 2026. Nine groups of rock ptarmigan were observed (25 total rock ptarmigan) along survey routes. Five of the 9 groups encountered were broods and the average number of chicks per brood was 4.4. At the time of publication, data was unavailable from most of the brood survey locations in Chugach State Park. Again, the data for these areas is currently incomplete, but rock ptarmigan populations in these areas likely benefited from warmer and drier weather during the June brood-rearing period of 2026.

Overall, hunters can likely expect to see average numbers of rock ptarmigan in the Interior and possibly above average numbers in the Alaska Range and Southcentral.

### **White-tailed Ptarmigan**

Beginning in summer 2021, an increased brood survey effort was employed in select areas of Southcentral Alaska for white-tailed ptarmigan. In addition to hunter harvested wing donations, the brood survey data affords a better understanding of white-tailed ptarmigan chick survival and subsequent population productivity at select survey locations. In 2026, brood surveys were completed in the Chugach mountains for white-tailed ptarmigan, although data was incomplete at the time of publication and therefore it is unknown what hunters can expect to find in this area for white-tailed ptarmigan numbers. Nonetheless, both Southcentral and the Kenai Peninsula experienced comparably warm and dry weather in June of 2025 and 2026 during the brood-rearing period, likely having a positive impact on chick survival.

Ten white-tailed ptarmigan wings were donated to the SGP in RY25 with 100% of the wings coming from the Southcentral region. The proportion of juveniles in the sample from Southcentral in RY25 (0.50) was higher than RY24 (0.31). Again, due to the large geographic extent of the sample it is very difficult to make meaningful inference from the harvest data alone.

Despite the limited data at time of publication, periods of warm and dry weather throughout Southcentral and the Kenai Peninsula during the during the brood rearing period may have helped production and recruitment of white-tailed ptarmigan in 2026.

### **Willow Ptarmigan**

Willow ptarmigan spring breeding surveys occurred from 25 April to 18 May 2026 throughout the Kenai Peninsula, Anchorage Bowl, the Alaska Range, near Nome, and within the Tanana Valley. The 2026 spring breeding estimate (1.6 males per stop) was similar to 2025 (1.8 males per stop) within the Anchorage Bowl. The spring breeding estimate for willow ptarmigan along the eastern Denali Highway (Unit 13B) in 2026 (2.0 males per stop) was above the 2025 estimate (1.8 males per stop), and above the previous 5-year-average (1.3 males per stop). The 2026 estimate (1.1 males per stop) from the western Denali Highway (Unit 13E) was similar to the 2025 estimate (1.2 males per stop), and higher than the previous 5-year-average (0.9 males per stop). The Denali National Park (DNP) estimate for 2026 (3.3 males per stop) was below the 2025 estimate (3.7 males per stop) but comparable to the previous 5-year-average (3.2 males per stop). No surveys of willow ptarmigan took place near Delta Junction within the Donnelly Training Area (DTA) in 2026. For Mount Fairplay, the 2026 estimate (0.8 males per stop) for willow ptarmigan showed a large decrease from the estimate in 2025 (2.5 males per stop) and is below the previous 5-year-average (1.3 males per stop). Willow ptarmigan numbers on the Seward Peninsula appear to be high and stable according to field staff reports from early 2026.

Summer brood surveys were completed between 15 July and 9 August 2026 along the Denali Highway and within Chugach State Park. Although brood surveys near Eagle Summit largely target rock ptarmigan, a few willow ptarmigan broods are often seen each year. Denali Highway brood surveys documented 13 willow

ptarmigan brood groups on transect where age composition could be determined. For the brood groups with a known composition, the number of chicks per brood (4.5 chicks per brood average) was comparable to the average brood size recorded in 2025 (4.5 chicks per brood average). One group of willow ptarmigan (2 total willow ptarmigan) were recorded on transects near Eagle Summit, which was lower than the 4 groups (29 total willow ptarmigan) observed in 2025. At the time of publication, data from most of the Chugach State Park brood survey locations were unavailable. However, willow ptarmigan populations in these areas likely benefited from warmer and drier weather during the June brood-rearing period of 2026.

Wing donations from hunters in RY25 ( $n = 371$ ) were comparable to donations during RY24 ( $n = 383$ ). Samples were collected primarily from the Seward Peninsula ( $n = 159$ ), the Alaska Range ( $n = 125$ ), and the Southcentral region ( $n = 53$ ). Only 15 willow ptarmigan wings were donated from the Interior in RY25. The proportion of juveniles in the harvest went down from RY24 (0.72) to RY25 (0.64) in Southcentral, stayed the same between RY24 (0.63) and RY25 (0.63) for the Alaska Range, and was comparable from RY24 (0.69) to RY25 (0.70) for the Seward Peninsula.

Overall, in 2026 hunters are likely to encounter more willow ptarmigan throughout much of the Alaska Range and possibly more in Southcentral due to the warm and dry conditions experienced during the latter portion of June. Reports are positive for willow ptarmigan on the Seward Peninsula in 2026.

### **Alaska Hare**

Following a research project (2018-2022) that documented low to very low abundance of Alaska hare in Units 17, 22, and 23, the SGP is working to continue long-term monitoring of the species. In 2026 snowmachine surveys to collect fecal pellets were conducted in Unit 17 and Unit 22, although the data from fecal pellets collected from these units is not yet available. Based on field reports from hunters and ADF&G staff, although there has been a slight uptick in the number of sightings of Alaska hare, it appears that the hare populations continue to remain at low density in Southwest and Western Alaska.

### **Snowshoe Hare**

In the Interior, snowshoe hare populations peaked in 2018-19 and are just now beginning to rebound from the low of their normal 10-year population cycle, with annual counts indicating a slight increase during spring 2026. Furthermore, field reports from ADF&G staff this summer suggest snowshoe hare numbers are increasing in the Interior and along the Seward Peninsula road system. In Southcentral, hare populations around Anchorage peaked in 2020-21 and are likely starting to increase from the population low. On the Kenai Peninsula, the peak in the snowshoe hare cycle is often 2-3 years after the peak in the FIRS region and 1-2 years after the peak along the Southcentral road system region. Based on hare pellet counts conducted annually on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge completed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), population density most recently peaked in 2022, and likely declined during winter 2024-2025.

## **Regulatory Changes**

At the Southeast Region BOG meeting in January of 2026, the BOG failed all four proposals for small game regulatory changes. These proposals included three proposals to modify the hunting season dates for grouse and ptarmigan and one proposal to change the bag limit for grouse in Southeast Alaska. Otherwise, there were no small game regulatory proposals at the March Southcentral BOG meeting in Kodiak. Therefore, there are no new regulatory changes for small game taking effect during the upcoming 2026-27 hunting season.

The next BOG meetings are scheduled for January 2027 in Kotzebue (Northwest Region) and March 2027 in Fairbanks (Interior Region). There were 0 small game proposals submitted for consideration at the Northwest

Region BOG meeting in January 2027 and 1 submitted for the Interior Region BOG meeting in March 2027. For the upcoming BOG meeting schedule and the list of proposals to be considered please visit the BOG webpage at: [www.boardofgame.adfg.alaska.gov](http://www.boardofgame.adfg.alaska.gov) and select “Meeting Information” from the list of options.

## **Public Involvement and Support**

The dedication of numerous veteran and new volunteers and their trained pointing dogs has allowed the annual volunteer-based brood survey project to continue. This collaboration between the SGP and volunteers documents annual chick survival for rock, white-tailed, and willow ptarmigan at several locations along the road system of Alaska. Engaged volunteers and their highly trained pointing dogs are recruited to locate and enumerate broods along survey routes. Survey locations currently include Eagle Summit (Steese Highway), portions of the Denali Highway, and the front range within Chugach State Park. Since 2021, volunteer hours have been used to match federal Pittman-Robertson funds that have allowed the SGP to further increase overall population monitoring efforts and research. New participants are always welcome and encouraged to join the effort. If you are interested in participating in this program as a future volunteer, please contact Cameron Carroll in Fairbanks (907.459.7237) or Tim Spivey in Anchorage (907.267.2897).

The statewide wing collection program continues to have widespread support among hunters. This program allows biologists to gain valuable insight into the harvest composition (age, sex, species, and Unit of harvest) of numerous hunted populations of grouse and ptarmigan. Please consider donating your harvested grouse and ptarmigan wings, as it is often the only way the SGP can gather important harvest information from across Alaska. If you're interested in participating, at no cost, please contact your local ADF&G office or SGP staff for free wing envelopes.

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