

Status of Small Game Along the Road System

2013

This report covers the current status of snowshoe hare and the species of grouse and ptarmigan that occur within the road system portion of the Interior and Southcentral Alaska. Many of these populations fluctuate in an 8 – 10 year natural cycle that is influenced by weather, predation, forest fires, and other factors. In 2013, the southern Interior and Southcentral Alaska experienced an incredibly late and cold spring; however conditions warmed rapidly and the month of June was unseasonably warm and dry. Despite the cold start to the breeding season, conditions in June were ideal for grouse and ptarmigan nesting, early chick survival, and for the insects and vegetation on which they depend.

Ruffed grouse occur throughout forested areas in the Interior where aspen is plentiful, and along major drainages with large willow bars. Interior ruffed grouse populations are expected to be increasing after a low in 2010. It does not appear that the late spring had a significant negative impact to Interior ruffed grouse populations other than delaying drumming activity by 7-10 days. Ruffed grouse were translocated to the Matanuska/Susitna Valleys in the late 1980s and onto the northern Kenai Peninsula in the mid-1990s. To date these populations have not fluctuated in any manner resembling Interior populations. The Mat/Su population has slowly increased and now contains pockets of moderate density with continued range expansion. The Kenai Peninsula population has remained at very low density near the release sites northeast of Nikiski and near Cooper Landing. The ADF&G asks for your field observations of ruffed grouse on the Kenai Peninsula at: www.smallgame.adfg.alaska.gov.

Spruce grouse have the largest range of Alaskan grouse and are found throughout most of the mature mixed spruce-hardwood forests of Alaska. They are also the most hunted grouse in Alaska. Spruce grouse tend to be most plentiful along larger drainages where white spruce is a major species. Spruce grouse densities are expected to be high away from the primary road corridor and lower along traditional hunter access points. Interior populations are expected to be slightly higher than in 2012-2013. Southcentral and Kenai Peninsula populations are expected to be at moderate densities.

Sharp-tailed grouse prefer more open grass and shrub habitat, and are often associated with recent burns and large agricultural areas in the Interior. Low-density populations of sharp-tailed also occur along the upper Copper, upper Kuskokwim, and middle and upper Yukon rivers. Sharp-tailed populations in the Interior are expected to be higher than in 2012-2013. Spring counts of males on leks in Delta Junction increased in 2013 and numerous field reports suggest higher densities of sharp-tailed grouse. Populations in the better habitat east and south of Delta Junction and near Tok should have moderate densities of sharp-tailed grouse. The areas that burned in 2004 along the Steese and Taylor highways are now providing excellent sharp-tailed habitat, with many reports that birds are beginning to occupy these areas.

Willow ptarmigan occupy subalpine habitats dominated by small, high elevation willow-lined drainages. During summer 2012, cold and wet weather during a critical period following the hatch had a negative impact on chick production in the Alaska Range. In 2013, despite the late cold spring, nesting and hatch timing appeared normal with average egg production. In 2013-2014, willow ptarmigan populations in the Alaska Range are expected to be at moderate densities. Densities along the western Denali Highway will remain low. Willow ptarmigan in the Chugach, Kenai, and Talkeetna mountains are expected to be at moderate densities.

Rock ptarmigan occur in higher more open, exposed alpine habitats with moderate slope and dwarf birch and crowberry. Spring surveys in the Alaska Range and Chugach and Talkeetna mountains in 2013 indicate more abundant rock ptarmigan than in the recent past. Despite the moderate increase in abundance, overall densities remain below the peak observed in 1999. The counts of territorial males along the summits of the Steese Highway in the spring have been consistently low for the last five years, when compared to historical data. However, in these areas densities appear to increase throughout the winter and are expected to increase modestly in the alpine areas north and east of Fairbanks during the 2013-2014 season.

White-tailed ptarmigan occur in pockets of low to moderate densities in rugged, rocky alpine habitats from the Alaska Range south through the Kenai Peninsula. Population data on white-tailed ptarmigan is insufficient to determine trends but this smallest of our upland birds appears to be maintaining populations within historical ranges in Southcentral Alaska.

Snowshoe hare occur throughout the road system and prefer willow/alder near subalpine areas or early successional vegetation that emerges after burns or mechanical clearing. Hare numbers also fluctuate dramatically in a natural cycle that appears to progress from north to south over 8-10 years. In 2010 and again in 2011 hare numbers declined sharply following a peak that occurred between 2008 and 2009. In 2013, hare densities in the Interior and Southcentral are expected to be very low and are at or very near the bottom of their cycle. Snowshoe hare densities on the Kenai Peninsula have remained higher longer than other areas of the state; however, they also are expected to be low to very low during the hunting season of 2013-2014.

The small game program asks for your help in collecting grouse and ptarmigan wings, tails, and heads. To learn more about this program and other exciting small game information please visit:

www.smallgame.adfg.alaska.gov.