

Statewide Summary

Climate patterns during RY13 were favorable with the exception of the higher alpine ptarmigan habitats in the southern Interior and Southcentral. Despite the late arrival of spring in May 2013, conditions warmed rapidly in late May and dry conditions persisted throughout the state well into August 2013. Post hatch weather conditions were ideal for survival of grouse and ptarmigan broods during the summer of 2013. Reduced chick body size was apparent based on field observations and hunter reports throughout the state at the beginning of the RY13 hunting season as a result of the late arrival of summer and subsequent delayed nesting. Throughout the winter, snow and temperature conditions were also near average or slightly milder than average. Late April and May 2014 were unseasonably warm and dry throughout much of the state, resulting in normal timing of the spring breeding season and subsequent nesting season. Ptarmigan nest abandonment rates were high in the Alaska Range, Talkeetna and Wrangell Mountains and chick survival will likely be very low this year due to a late snowstorm. As a result, hunters can expect low ptarmigan densities in these areas during the RY14 hunting season.

Ruffed grouse throughout Alaska appear to be increasing in abundance based on spring drumming counts. Drumming counts from Delta Junction, Anderson, and Palmer all reflected higher abundance than in 2013. Observations from those areas, and from Glennallen, Tok, and the Mat-Su Valley, also reflect higher abundance than in previous years.

Sharp-tailed grouse abundance was unevenly distributed across the species' range in Alaska during RY13. Based on springtime searches for lek activity between Chicken and Tok, sharp-tailed abundance appeared to be quite high. However, within traditional monitoring sites in Delta Junction, abundance appeared to be similar to the recent 5-year average. Overall brood production also was low based on wing samples collected near Delta Junction.

Spruce grouse appeared to be at low abundance during RY13 throughout much of the easily accessible areas in Alaska. Brood production for spruce grouse was low on the Kenai Peninsula but appeared to be good in Southcentral and the Interior despite low sample sizes. Overall, hunters reported seeing and harvesting fewer spruce grouse this season than in the past.

Rock ptarmigan were more abundant than in the recent past throughout Southcentral and the Alaska Range this year. Hunters reported observing and harvesting more rock ptarmigan, and spring abundance survey data reflect a similar increase along the Denali Highway and remote locations throughout GMU 13. However, a snowstorm in late June in the eastern Alaska Range and Wrangell and St. Elias mountains likely had a negative impact on chick production. In addition, very low abundance of territorial male rock ptarmigan was documented along the Steese Highway this spring.

Very little is known about white-tailed ptarmigan abundance throughout its range in Alaska. Most of the harvest occurs near high alpine road systems (Hatcher and Thompson Pass) and alpine hiking trails throughout Southcentral and the Kenai Peninsula. Generally, very few hunters report harvesting this species due to the difficulty of accessing large portions of its high alpine range.

Willow ptarmigan abundance was also variable across its range. Willow ptarmigan abundance was higher than the recent 5-year average along the Denali Highway and southern portions of GMU 13; however, average to below average abundance was found throughout the Kenai Peninsula and many popular hunting locations throughout Southcentral. Large flocks of willow ptarmigan were also reported on the Seward and Alaska peninsulas during the fall of 2013.

Alaska hare is the least well known of all the small game species in the state. Overall, this species remains at low abundance throughout its statewide range with only periodic harvest being reported.

Throughout Alaska, snowshoe hare populations were at or very near the low of their 8–10 year population cycle. Hunters reported seeing and harvesting very few snowshoe hares during RY13. It is anticipated that hare abundance will begin to increase over the next 1–3 years with higher densities being observed first in the north (Interior) and last on the Kenai Peninsula.

