

Alaska's Grouse & Ptarmigan



Breeding Male
Spruce Grouse



Breeding male
Sharp-tailed Grouse



Breeding Male
Sooty Grouse



Red phase breeding male
Ruffed Grouse



Winter
White-tailed Ptarmigan



Summer female
Rock Ptarmigan



Breeding male
Willow Ptarmigan

Spruce Grouse

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Sooty Grouse

Ruffed Grouse

White-tailed Ptarmigan

Rock Ptarmigan

Willow Ptarmigan



Males have a black throat, red eye comb and a rusty-orange band at the tip of the tail. Females lack the red comb and the black throat and are generally a mottled rusty brown to gray with heavy barring on a whitish-colored belly. Southeast Alaska birds lack the rusty tail band.

Spruce grouse are found in white spruce, spruce/birch, black spruce bogs, and, in Southeast Alaska, Sitka spruce and hemlock forests.

Sharptails have a short, pointed tail and appear silver-gray with white-spotted wings. Both sexes look similar; males weigh about 2 pounds and are slightly bigger than females.

They prefer recent burn areas, open grass-shrub habitat, agricultural lands, sparse shrub-spruce at timberline, and sedge muskegs.

Male sooty grouse (formerly called blue grouse) weigh up to 3 pounds. They have a yellow comb, a slate blue head and a long, black tail tipped with pale gray. Females are browner than the males and about a third smaller.

They live in wet, evergreen forests of Southeast Alaska. Big timber provides food and shelter in the winter months. Muskegs and alpine meadows are essential summer and fall feeding areas.

Ruffed grouse can be one of two colors. Red phase have a reddish brown back and tail. Gray-phase birds have distinctly gray tail and rump feathers, paler bodies, and only a hint of light brown feathers along their sides.

They prefer young stands of aspen and birch. In fall, birds frequent the forest edge where wild rose, highbush and lowbush cranberry, and blueberry are available. In winter, they switch to a diet of aspen and willow buds.

In winter, these birds are almost pure white; tail feathers are pure white year-round. Summer plumage includes a finely barred back and an overall grayish color.

These birds live above timberline almost all year in mountain ranges. Breeding habitat includes boulder fields, snowfields, glaciers, cliffs, and rockslides at higher altitudes than other ptarmigan. They usually move lower in late fall, wintering on slopes or in high valleys with alder, willow, birch, and some spruce.

Both sexes have black tail feathers with white tips and narrower bills than willow ptarmigan. They turn white in early October and remain white until early May. Males have a black mask in winter, a bright red eyebrow and white body. Most hens have no mask but may show a partial stripe.

Breeding habitat is hilly or mountainous tundra. They prefer high valleys or slopes with low shrubs, herbs and grasses. In winter males move to the lower edge of their breeding range; hens move to hills around large valleys in shrubby, open habitat.

Both sexes have a thick, wide bill, and in winter are white with black tail feathers. In spring during breeding, males develop a white patch behind the bill and a chestnut-red cape. By early August the male is growing white feathers.

Breed habitat is sparsely timbered or treeless areas. Otherwise they favor willow-lined waterways on the coastal plains of western and northern Alaska or subalpine areas in the rest of the state. In winter, birds remain close to shrubby slopes and valleys at lower elevations than their breeding habitat.

To learn more about Alaska's Grouse and Ptarmigan Visit Our Website:

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You can also get a copy of *The Grouse and Ptarmigan of Alaska* booklet at your local ADF&G office or by sending an email with mailing address to mike.taras@alaska.gov

Photo Credits:

Steve DuBois - Sharp tailed grouse male breeding and winter white-tailed.
Mike Taras - Female sooty grouse, female spruce grouse, breeding male and winter willow ptarmigan.
Rick Merizon - Summer white-tailed ptarmigan.
Ryan Schmidt - Male spruce grouse.
Stephanie Sell - Male rock ptarmigan.
Tom Lawler - Sooty grouse breeding male.
Bob Armstrong - gray phase ruffed grouse, female willow ptarmigan.

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Division of Wildlife Conservation
2012

