

## **Roughing it in Winter - The Ruffed Grouse**

Ruffed Grouse are a fairly common bird in this area, and a popular game bird amongst hunters. They are about the size of a small chicken and are camouflaged with mottled brown feathers to blend into the forest where they spent most of their life. They like to live in mixed-wood forests, and seem to thrive in portions of forest that have experienced a natural disturbance or are in an early succession stage.

During the winter, ruffed grouse depend on snow as a roosting site. If the snow is soft and a foot or more in depth, a grouse will build a tunnel by plunging into the snow from a tree. Then, with its wings and feet it will extend the tunnel, by up to 10 feet! They will bury themselves in the snow in order to provide insulating cover and protection from predators. They exit their tunnel by flying up through the roof of their roost. Ruffed grouse will also develop fleshy projections on the sides of their toes. These comb-like nubs, which will fall off in the spring, increase the surface area of their feet, acting like snowshoes. This increased surface area is also believed to help grouse grip onto icy tree branches. Additionally, grouse develop special feathers partially covering that extend down its beak to cover its nostrils to help it breathe the cold winter air. They also have feathers that partially cover their legs, acting as insulating long johns.

Once the weather warms up, the drumming of male ruffed grouse is a common sound in our forests. The male will perch on a fallen tree or stump, and quickly rotate its wings forward and backward. The air that rushes into the temporary vacuum beneath the wings creates a miniature vacuum, generating a deep, thumping sound wave that carries up to a quarter of a mile. This is done to attract a mate and defend their territory. After mating, females choose a nest site at the base of a tree, stump, or rock in areas with sparse ground cover that give a clear view of predators. Nests may also be built in brush piles, or in the bases of partially open, hollowed-out stumps.

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