Michigan Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Division

# 2013 RUFFED GROUSE AND AMERICAN WOODCOCK COOPERATORS EARLY SEASON REPORT

Early season reports from ruffed grouse and American woodcock cooperators allow biologists to quickly assess hunter success and local field conditions across the state of Michigan at the beginning of the grouse season. This report is a summary of their responses for September 15-18, 2013.

Cooperators returned 83 useable surveys. They hunted approximately 465 hours in 39 counties during the survey period (Table 1). Respondents hunted most in Zone 2, followed by Zone 1, and Zone 3. Hunters reported the highest flush rates for grouse in Zone 2 (Table 1). Individual counties having at least 10 hours of hunting with the highest flush rates for grouse were Lake, Mason, Kalkaska, Newaygo and Marquette. Although the woodcock season was not open during the survey period, cooperators were asked to also count woodcock flushes. Individual counties having at least 10 hours of hunting with the highest flush rates for woodcock were Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Lake, Wexford and Mason.

About 16% of the respondents thought grouse populations were up or slightly up from last year in the areas they hunted, with 29% reporting populations about the same as the previous year and 55% describing them as down or slightly down (Table 2). About 25% of the respondents thought woodcock populations were up or slightly up from last year, while about 50% thought they were the same as last year and 25% thought they were down or slightly down (Table 2).

Ruffed grouse have approximately ten-year cycles in abundance over much of Canada, Alaska, and the Great Lakes states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan (Rusch et al. 1999). Over the years, many theories have been proposed to explain these cycles including diseases, weather, forest fires, sunspots, starvation, crowding, predators, genetic changes, and chance (Rusch 1989). It appears that we are beginning the decline following the peak in the grouse population cycle (Figure 1). However, hunters should note that increased or decreased abundance of animals at a regional scale does not ensure the same trend locally. The best grouse and woodcock hunting opportunities will continue to be in areas of young early forest successional habitat.

Many hunters commented on rainy conditions for the opening of the grouse season. Hunters also commented that fruits were plentiful throughout the state. Distribution of birds appeared to be spotty, with some hunters reporting a very successful opener to the grouse season, while other hunters were not finding birds. We wish all hunters an enjoyable and successful time afield pursuing grouse and woodcock.

## Acknowledgments

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**Literature Cited**

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Rusch, D.H., J.R. Cary, and L.B. Keith. 1999. Pattern and process in ruffed grouse cycles. Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference 61:238.

Table 1. Ruffed grouse and American woodcock flush rates reported by zone and year for September 15-18.

| | 2012 | | | 2013 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Zone | Hours | Grouse / hour | Woodcock / hour | Hours | Grouse / hour | Woodcock / hour |
| 1 | 174 | 2.2 | 0.6 | 112 | 1.0 | 0.3 |
| 2 | 402 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 299 | 1.7 | 2.2 |
| 3 | 27 | 1.3 | 1.2 | 35 | 0.9 | 1.0 |
| State | 604 | 1.7 | 1.2 | 465 | 1.4 | 1.7 |

Table 2. Hunter opinions about ruffed grouse and American woodcock populations.

| | Ruffed grouse | | Woodcock | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trend | 2012 | 2013 | 2012 | 2013 |
| Up | 13% | 4% | 16% | 13% |
| Slightly Up | 14% | 12% | 17% | 12% |
| Same | 41% | 28% | 37% | 49% |
| Slightly Down | 17% | 26% | 16% | 10% |
| Down | 15% | 30% | 14% | 16% |

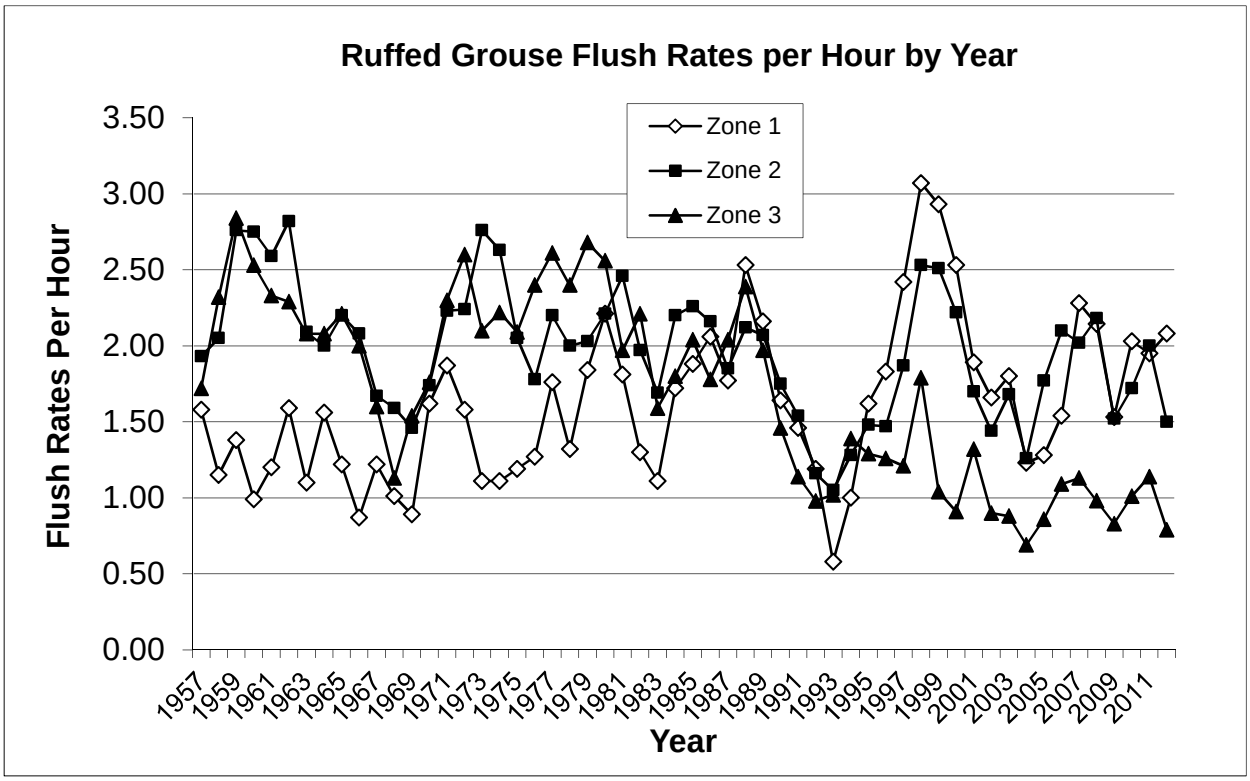


Figure 1. Ruffed grouse flush rates as reported by cooperating hunters, 1957-2012.
This figure shows a summary of the data collected during the entire grouse hunting season. Data for 2013 will be added after the end of the season.