



GROUSE WHISPERER

Why do some ruffed grouse respond to loud noise fearlessly? The answer is unclear, but the behavior has been documented for a century and a half.

IF YOU KNOCK ABOUT IN THE OUTDOORS LONG ENOUGH, YOU'RE BOUND TO SEE SOME STRANGE ANIMAL BEHAVIOR. MAYBE IT'S A WILD TURKEY SWIMMING IN A LAKE OR A GROUNDHOG PERCHED IN A TREE—THEY ARE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU SHAKE YOUR HEAD AND MUTTER TO YOURSELF, "I NEVER EVEN HEARD TELL OF THAT."

 **Written by Jim Wilson**
Photographed by Russell Wyatt 





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The stories that intrigue many people are those in which a wild animal seems to establish some kind of relationship with a human. Perhaps being so close to a wild creature allows us, at least temporarily, to feel that we have slipped the confines of civilization.

Russell Wyatt of Madison County has been having one of those up-close-and-personal encounters for some months now. As Wyatt rode his ATV around his farmland in the summer of 2006, he began noticing a grouse flying close to him, closer than he would have expected of a bird known for its wariness and rocketing flushes when it is hunted. "I saw him two or three times and then, golly, one day he was there beside me," Wyatt said. Soon afterward, the grouse flew up behind Wyatt among some apple trees and landed about 15 yards away. The grouse also would appear when Wyatt was checking his clover plot.

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As the grouse became bolder, it began to hop up on the toe of Wyatt's boot. "I've taken a twig and rubbed his back and his belly with it," Wyatt said. "The other day he grabbed my glove and just started fluttering. I've had him jump up and knock my cap off. He'll follow me around. I'll go to different spots and he'll find me. He's gotten pretty used to me now."

Why did this grouse strike up some kind of fowl relationship with Wyatt? Although no one knows for sure what is going on in that small, gallinaceous brain, for decades stories

of weird grouse behavior have provided fodder for writers. Biologist Gardiner Bump included a short section in his massive 1947 book "Ruffed Grouse" entitled "Tame Grouse."

Tame is something of a misnomer, because the grouse Bump writes about—and Wyatt's grouse—are not domesticated fowl, they just act that way occasionally. Bump relates incidences of grouse that were attracted to the sound of automobile engines, and in the anecdote of "Billy and the Steel Mule," Bump tells about a grouse (Billy) that would display in front of a tractor with its engine running. Other birds were drawn to the sound of a man chopping wood and would perch atop a freshly cut pile of firewood and watch the proceedings. Another bird attracted by the sound of an ax could be summoned from the woods by banging two sticks together.

Bump concludes, as do biologists today, that the sound of an engine suggests to a grouse the male's springtime drumming, when the cock birds display to hens just how truly splendid they are by standing atop a fallen log or stump, puffing out their feathers and beating their wings. "[W]hat associations are inspired by the staccato ring of an axe, remains a mystery," Bump writes. (However, there might be some long-ago connection. Like many birds, ruffed grouse have numerous regional names. One of those is wood-pile quawker, which, according to Bump and the *Wilson Journal of Ornithology*, was a term used only on Long Island, N.Y.)

Ruffed grouse have been known to exhibit other odd behavior. In the fall, birds of the year occasionally kill themselves during periods of "crazy flight." These grouse take off in any direction and might fly into trees, houses or cars or simply end up in places where the secretive birds are not normally found. Crazy flight, also called the fall shuffle, has been blamed on the full moon or grouse eating late-season fermented berries, but biologists suspect that crazy flight is simply a method of young birds dispersing into new territory. Adult grouse, if they survive for a second season, tend to remain in their same home range.

The spruce grouse, a cousin of the ruffed grouse and a forest inhabitant of the northern United States and Canada, has long carried the name fool grouse or fool hen because of its lack of fear for humans. Theodore Roosevelt, writing in "The Wilderness Hunter" in 1903, said: "The mountain-men call this bird the fool-hen; and most certainly





it deserves the name. . . . They are marvelously tame and stupid.”

Roosevelt also noted that ruffed grouse, under certain circumstances, could be equally as foolish. “The ruffed grouse, a very wary game bird in all old-settled regions, is often absurdly tame in the wilderness.”

Numerous 19th-century writers, including pioneering ornithologist Alexander Wilson, had made the same observation. Writing in “American Ornithology” in 1832, Wilson noted that ruffed grouse normally are quick to flush. “With a good dog, however, they are easily found; and at some times exhibit a singular degree of infatuation, by looking down from the branches where they sit, on the dog below, who, the more noise he keeps up, seems the more to confuse and stupify them, so that they may be shot down, one by one, till the whole are killed, without attempting to fly off. In such cases, those on the lower limbs must be taken first; for, should the upper ones be first killed, in their fall they alarm those below, who immediately fly off.”

In “American Game in Its Season” of 1853, Henry William Herbert related a similar experience but observed that this behavior occurred only “when the bird is in its natural solitudes, unacquainted with man and his murderous weapons.”

Even today, hunters have encountered grouse that will simply stare at them and walk away, seemingly unperturbed and unimpressed by an encounter with “man and his murderous weapons.”

Obviously, lacking fear of humans is not a good survival strategy for wild animals. And just as obviously, making pets of wild animals—as people will do with fawns or other animals they believe are abandoned—is always a bad idea. Doing so without a permit also is against N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission rules.

Wyatt’s grouse, however, is certainly not captive. And living as it does near cultivated areas, it is no wilderness bird either. (One might ask if there is enough deep wilderness remaining in North Carolina for there to be any wilderness grouse these days.) It was, actually, encroaching civilization that led Wyatt to give up grouse hunting. “Years ago I used to grouse hunt quite a bit,” he said. “Then it got so everywhere you went, there was a housing development, so I got into bowhunting. It’s been a long time since I’ve grouse hunted.”

Why this bird came to have no fear of Wyatt and seek out his company is something that will forever remain inexplicable, but it provides an unforgettable experience. Wyatt himself doesn’t have a theory as to what’s going on. “It’s just real strange,” he said. ❖

Jim Wilson is the associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina.

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