Wild populations of grouse might be vanished from the Prairie State, but some still talk of a recovery.

Distant Drums

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Southern Illinois University Cooperative Wildlife Research Lab

Their trademark sound has been described as an old tractor engine turning over and over before starting—whump, whump, whump—-increasingly rapid and urgent, then fading away.

Before there were tractors, the comparison was drums, and the reverberating sound was known throughout the woodlands of Illinois. But as recently as the late 1800s, the exact physical source of that drumming sound remained a mystery, even as people understood that somehow, through some metaphysical trick of sound amplification, the ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) was able to produce a long-distance drumming noise from within its body.

Today the mystery of the ruffed grouse isn't the sound it makes (it's an implosion created by a vacuum when a male pulls his wings away from his body), the question is: Could grouse once again thrive in Illinois? After all, the popular game bird's native range extended across much of eastern North America, and Illinois once had at least

Early 1980s efforts to re-establish grouse populations in the Shawnee National Forest included partnerships with the Department of Conservation (now DNR), the U.S. Forest Service and Southern Illinois University's Cooperative Wildlife Research Lab.

Monitoring grouse populations included spring surveys of known "drumming" sites. Grouse often used the same log or rock to stand on while making their calls.

moderate numbers of grouse, although they sometimes went by different common names.

Illinois Natural History Survey scientist Robert Ridgway wrote in 1893, six years before hunting for grouse was outlawed in Illinois, "The Ruffed Grouse or "Pheasant" as it is popularly known, is found throughout the State in wooded districts, becoming more rare southward. It is uncommon in the vicinity of Mount Carmel, and is becoming less so as the woods become cleared."

Ridgway's words, taken literally, imply grouse were more common after forests were cleared, and that interpretation would be important for wildlife managers to understand in the next 100 years. But Ridgway's apparent effort to suggest a connection between a rapidly developing Illinois and the loss of wildlife habitat fell short of predicting the massive changes which eventually would affect even "common" Illinois wildlife. Ridgway scarcely bothered to describe prairie chickens, whose Illinois population today consists of approximately 200 birds within south-central counties. In 1893, prairie chickens seemed to be so common, Ridgway brushed aside the scientific obligation to properly describe the species in his text.

"To describe...the habits of the Prairie Chicken, seems almost as superfluous as 'carrying coals to Newcastle; hence we omit further reference to this species..." Ridgway wrote.

When it came to ruffed grouse, a less common but well-known game bird, scientific descriptions of the bird's requirements were equally sparse. That lack of understanding would be a problem as the 20th century progressed and attempts were made to protect and restore populations of struggling or vanished native species, including ruffed grouse.

Between 1953 and 1962, some 300 grouse were released in Pope County. Those birds originated in Wisconsin and Michigan, and when populations failed to take hold in the Shawnee National Forest, it was decided the northern birds (a different subspecies) were unable to adapt to warmer climates and different vegetation.

As new understory growth replaced dying, 1930s-era pine plantations, biologists found grouse utilizing the temporary habitat.

Successful nesting of grouse has been documented in Illinois. Yet it appears grouse no longer exist in the Prairie State.

Another attempt was made to release 31 birds from Ohio (the same latitude as southern Illinois) in 1967. All of those birds, released at Lusk Creek in Pope County, also vanished. Another attempt was made in Alexander County in 1972-73, when 55 grouse from Indiana were released. Those grouse also faded away. Birds were released in Jo Daviess county in northwest Illinois, without success.

Unfortunately, it wasn't precisely known what kind of habitat grouse required, although conclusions were roughly drawn based on grouse habitats in other states. About the time it became apparent grouse utilized the environmental windfall of dense, brushy habitat which appears following timber cutting, much of the timber harvest within the Shawnee came to a court-ordered standstill.

Additional research conducted in the 1980s through the Cooperative Wildlife Research Laboratory at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale showed grouse were surviving well enough shortly after being released, but reproduction was less successful than in other states due to sufficient habitat, and the small populations in Illinois eventually failed. By the early 90s, most state and federal efforts to restock ruffed grouse in Illinois were abandoned.

Tracking individual birds 25 years ago was made possible by the development of electronic transmitters. Today's devices are a fraction of the size.

"The consensus with everyone was that it wasn't going to work," recalled DNR wildlife biologist Mike Murphy, who participated in some of the later grouse-monitoring programs. "It was an effort that was tried and failed."

Retired wildlife biologist Richard Andrews, who monitored the grouse-stocking programs in the 60s and 70s in Pope County, noted that grouse and wild turkeys were being released in Illinois under similar trial-and-error conditions. Sometimes with low expectations.

"At that time, nobody thought turkeys had a chance," Andrews said. "People thought turkeys needed huge areas of unbroken forest to survive, which they don't, we found out."

As wild turkeys began to thrive, the lack of success with grouse suggested something else was wrong. After all, if turkeys merely needed to be released into the forest, why not grouse?

Murphy said he isn't convinced grouse cannot return to Illinois, with critical habitat management and dedicated restocking efforts. But for now, the biologist merely visits the Pope County backwoods where he used to hear those few grouse every spring—whump, whump, whump—increasingly rapid and urgent, until one day the sound faded away.