

Grouse Hunting

This is a great year to start hunting grouse

By Jay Johnson

Ever hunted ruffed grouse?

If not, this is the year to start.

The tasty, fast-flying forest game bird is at high population levels. This means opportunities to see and harvest grouse are about as good as they get.

And when they get good in Minnesota, they are the absolute best in the nation. Minnesota, which offers more than 11 million acres of public hunting land, often has the highest ruffed grouse harvest in the country. In fact, Minnesota is to grouse hunting what South Dakota is to pheasant hunting.

So, if you aren't hunting ruffed grouse, you are really missing out on the best upland bird hunting in the state.

Here is some practical information to get you on your way:

* The season opens Saturday, Sept. 17, and runs through Sunday, Jan. 1, 2012. The daily limit is five and the possession limit is 10.

* You'll need a small game license, 12- or 20-gauge shotgun (preferably with an open choke) and No. 7½ target or field loads.

* Round out your equipment needs with a blaze orange hat and vest, a comfortable pair of boots, a pair of gloves and shooting glasses.

* Next, you'll need to locate a general area to hunt. Top counties in the state include Aitkin, Cass, Itasca, St. Louis, Beltrami and Koochiching. Still, there are quality hunting opportunities across much of the northern half of the state. Grouse are also available in the heavily forested portions of southeastern Minnesota.

* Once you decide on the general area you plan to hunt, search the internet (you can find hunter walking trails, wildlife management area maps and other useful grouse information on the DNR website.

* Talk to the DNR area wildlife office or visit the county courthouse to view a plat book that identifies lands open to public hunting.

* Once you've pinpointed a hunting area focus on the best available habitat; ruffed grouse prefer young forests, especially the subtle transitional seams and edges of these forests.

* As a rule, try to find places where the tree size at their base is between the diameter of your wrist and your calf. Trees of this size will be between 15-30 feet high. The type of tree although important, is less important than the size and how close they are together.

* Try to hunt areas where aspen are present and avoid areas that

are solid conifers. While you may find grouse in such cover, your chances of getting a shot at them is slim.

* Trails that run through cover are great places to start. Remember, grouse often relate to edges and a trail provides two edges. Grouse are often drawn to trails to feed on clover and forbs and ingest gravel for digestion.

* If you intend to hunt without a dog, have your hunting partners assist in a "partridge push." This tactic involves having one hunter 20 yards into the cover on the left of the trail and one hunter the same distance to the right of the trail. The third hunter positions on the trail and serves as the "push coordinator." The hunting team proceeds slowly down the trail stopping briefly every 50 steps or so. The push coordinators job is to make sure that the team members stay abreast of each other and no one get's themselves in an unsafe position. Constant communication between team members is the key to maintaining a safe and productive hunting experience.

* If the piece of woods you are hunt has no trails, then look for any other type of edge or seam. These could include swamp edges, field edges and edges where two different tree types or sizes come together. You can hunt these areas much the same way as you would a trail but the walking will be more difficult. Hunting with a team in an area without trails makes it more difficult to work together and stay in a safe position. Be extra conscious of safety.

Hunting linear cover like trails, seams and edges is a great way to begin your journey grouse hunting. Always remember to be sure of your target and what is beyond before taking the shot.