

# RUFFED GROUSE: CRAZY-FLIGHT CONCLUSIONS

CTOR C. FRIESEN, P.O. Box 65, Rosthern, Saskatchewan. S0K 3R0

The author has previously published articles on the crazy-flight phenomenon of the Ruffed Grouse.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> They described the grouse's propensity at times for wildly flying about, often into objects and killing itself. Various theories about the cause were discussed. Now an article by Wedgwood on the same phenomenon has prompted further analysis of this puzzling activity.<sup>10</sup>

The very diversity of explanations in the literature on the subject — some 16 in number reviewed in these articles — seems to suggest that they may but point to possible *contributing* factors of the flight. For example, the crazy flight cited by Wedgwood all involved young birds in the fall season. Savage correctly says that "in all likelihood" fall dispersal of young grouse is responsible for crazy flights.<sup>8</sup> That more crazy flight would occur in fall and to young birds is reasonable: there are more young birds (relative to old), they are inexperienced, and, in seeking home territories, they may be in unfamiliar

surroundings where fatal collisions could easily happen.

That the fall dispersal in itself directly causes the crazy-flight phenomenon, however, does not have complete supporting evidence, as made clear in the previous articles. Mature grouse have killed themselves in wild flight in other seasons.<sup>2 3</sup>

Perhaps there is an *underlying* cause, a trait in the instinctive behaviour of Ruffed Grouse which, when coupled with other factors, leads to so-called "crazy flights." What is suggested is the bird's typical mode of take-off — a rocketing flight with speeds up to 80 km/h.<sup>3</sup>

Almost every study of this grouse makes reference to this unique take-off, and quoted here are references from studies not cited previously. Pough writes of the grouse "springing into the air ... and roaring off on an erratic course through the woods."<sup>7</sup> Blachan says that the bird "hurls itself from the ground," seemingly as if it were "shot from the mouth of a cannon."<sup>1</sup>

Probably the best description of the grouse's take-off is given by Forbush and deserves quoting in length:

"No sound of the forest is more startling than the sudden thunderous roar of beating pinions with which it rises, sometimes almost from underfoot, scattering the fallen leaves like a little whirlwind, tearing its way through rustling leaves and bending twigs, winning distance and concealment in one breathless instant. A stirring dash, a swirl of leaves and it is gone, leaving the slow blundering human biped startled and staring with open mouth and



Ruffed Grouse

Juhachi Asai

fast-beating heart. It is not necessary for this grouse to rise with such bluster for it can fly and alight as quietly as most birds, but the sudden whir speaks eloquently of fear and is the birds's method of escaping quickly, confounding its enemies, and sounding the alarm to its companions in danger." <sup>6</sup>

The Ruffed Grouse, with its short, curved wings, is capable of only limited manoeuvrability during the time of its exceedingly fast take-off. In its natural surroundings, this limitation is not a real handicap, for it can dodge trunks and branches well enough to make good its escape. Still, the wings often clip twigs in the bird's swerving course through trees (the clicking sound is readily heard), and there have been instances of a bird being impaled on a dry branch.<sup>2</sup>

In winter the grouse makes additional use of its rocketing flight to "dive" into snowbanks for an overnight covert, where it will be insulated from the cold. Seton devotes four pages of a true account of a particular Ruffed Grouse in his classic *Wild animals I have known* to describe such an event.<sup>9</sup> Manoeuvrability is not a concern here at all, and the action can stand the grouse in good stead.

Envision, then, the Ruffed Grouse in surroundings other than natural, in an environment with man-made structures — large buildings and plate-glass windows. The incidence of being unable to avoid them and thus crashing into them after a rocket-like take-off would be manifold. And this incidence would be markedly increased each fall with many young, inexperienced birds in territory unfamiliar to them.

Wedgwood notes that a stray cat stalking a covey of grouse initiated that crazy flight. It is just such coincident actions — in this instance fear of predator and a fast take-off — which led to the fatal crazy

flight of three birds crashing into a window of a shed.

So it may be that the crazy-flight phenomenon can be generally accounted for in part by one or more of many explanations given in the past: dispersal, migration instinct, population pressure, diet, disease, predation, frigate strange surroundings, sparse cover, aggression, etc.<sup>2,3</sup> But these explanations may be secondary, needing always to be combined with the primary reason — the Ruffed Grouse's sudden, exploding take-off and its insufficient manoeuvrability to avoid large objects in an unnatural environment.

<sup>1</sup> BLANCHAN, N. 1917. *Birds of North America*. Doubleday, Doran, Garden City, N.Y. 3 vols. 272 pp., 271 pp., 289 pp.

<sup>2</sup> FRIESEN, V.C. 1971. The crazy flight phenomenon of the Ruffed Grouse. *Blue Jay* 29:121-124.

<sup>3</sup> FRIESEN, V.C. 1978. Further observations of the Ruffed Grouse's "crazy flight." *Blue Jay* 36:192-199.

<sup>4</sup> FRIESEN, V.C. 1980. Crazy grouse comment. *Blue Jay* 38:135-136.

<sup>5</sup> FRIESEN, V.C. 1985. Banging heads and taking notes. *The Drummer* 11:14.

<sup>6</sup> PEARSON, T.G. *et al* 1936. *Birds of North America*. Garden City Books, Garden City, N.Y. 3 vols. 272 pp., 271 pp., 289 pp.

<sup>7</sup> POUGH, R.H. 1951. *Audubon warbler bird guide*. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 352 pp.

<sup>8</sup> SAVAGE, C. 1985. *The wonders of Canadian birds*. Western Producer Prairie Books, Saskatoon. 211 pp.

<sup>9</sup> THOMPSON, E.S. [E.T. SETON] 1883. *Wild animals I have known*. Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 298 pp.

<sup>10</sup> WEDGWOOD, J.A. 1989. Two Ruffed Grouse encounters. *Blue Jay* 47:102-104.