

SHARP-TAILED — SPRUCE GROUSE MIXTURE

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I am a Conservation Officer stationed in The Pas. I was driving along a gravel trail near Reader Lake about 1015, 19 September 1979, when I saw a group of grouse on the road ahead of me (the day was cloudy and the temperature was approximately -12°C). I stopped my truck about 15-20 metres from the grouse, turned off the motor and watched the birds. I sat still inside the truck and the grouse quickly forgot their alarm. I was surprised, as I started counting the birds, that there were some Sharp-tailed Grouse among the Spruce Grouse which were pecking gravel and feeding on the vegetation at the sides of the trail. There appeared to be three male and five female Spruce Grouse, and five Sharp-tailed Grouse of undetermined sex; there may have been more as it was difficult to count them as they moved in and out of the vegetation.

As I watched, some of the Sharp-tails did their mating dance routine which I have seen them do in the spring. They danced with less intensity than in spring but nevertheless some of the dances lasted 2-3 seconds. The unusual part was that on three occasions the object of a Sharp-tail dance was a Spruce Grouse (twice a female and once a male). The reaction of the Spruce Grouse ranged from absolute disdain as exhibited by one hen, to mild alarm as exhibited by the other two birds; this prompted them to take not more than a few steps away from the

dancing Sharp-tail.

What surprised me most was that the Sharp-tails seemed to have as much affinity for the Spruce Grouse as they had for each other. When some Spruce Grouse moved across the road, three of the Sharp-tails followed them while the other two stayed in the brush and I did not see them again.

I observed these birds for 20-25 minutes and during this time tried not to influence their behavior in any way. I took a number of photographs of them from inside my truck, the clarity of which suffers due to a dirty windshield. When I finally got out of the truck to get some closer pictures, the grouse moved into the brush and, when I got too close, they flushed in a group and flew into some adjoining young aspen. Even at this point the Sharp-tails remained with the Spruce Grouse.

This sighting occurred in young aspen growth on a gravel ridge (probably second growth after a fire), with the only coniferous trees in the area being a few small spruce. Other vegetation in the area included White Birch, Choke Cherry, Wild Rose and Raspberry.

I am very curious to know if other people have seen similar occurrences and would be pleased if they would write to the *Blue Jay* or write to me personally.