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THE FOOL HEN OF THE NORTHERN FORESTS

(These Wildlife Articles Are Written by William
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As a rule, all game birds are wary and flush at the approach of man because for so many generations they have been hunted for food and sport. In the more remote sections of the northern and western forests where the foot of man seldom treads the wild trails, one bird has never learned and apparently never will realize that man is a dangerous animal. This is the Franklin grouse.

We were packing along one of the more remote trails in the north eastern part of Oregon. The old packer yelled:

"There are some woods chickens."

"Wait a minute till I can get my camera ready. Maybe I can get a good shot," said the photographer.

A flock of seven grouse was feeding in a little open space at the side of the trail. They paid little or no attention to the horses. As I approached within twelve feet they merely looked up as if to ask: "What do you want?" I stood quietly and waited until they began feeding again on some berries. Then I crept nearer a few inches at a time.

Two members of the party came up and stood nearby looking on with interest. The birds were now between me and our packer. I was crawling on my hands and knees. One bird walked along fearlessly and came to a stop within a few inches of one of the men's feet. Another went between his legs as if they were wooden posts. There were no sudden noises or movements. Everyone was surprised at the tameness of the birds.

We actually picked up three and held them in our hands and petted them. While the old packer was not surprised, it was almost unbelievable to some members of the party.

Because of their gentleness and confidence in man, this Franklin grouse is commonly called "fool hen." Trappers often kill them with sticks or snare them with strings on the ends of poles. I thought the birds must surely show more caution and wariness in the wilds where coyotes and bobcats thrive. Otherwise, this species whose flesh is so tempting as food could hardly have existed in the wild state. It is a game bird that has not adapted itself to changing conditions. It is the same today as a hundred years ago. The species, therefore, has disappeared with the coming of the homesteader. It can never survive except under careful protection in the haunts of its native forests.

One might speculate as to why the fool hen never does grow wild even where people are accustomed to kill these birds. Cases have been recorded where a flock of several has flown up in a tree, and there they sat without fright as one after another was picked off with a twenty-two rifle. George Bird Grinnell records an instance of a bird that sat on a limb while a man shot at it several times. He was a poor gunner, but finally a bullet cut off one leg of the grouse, whereupon the bird simply shifted its weight to the other foot and continued to sit still until the marksman was at last successful.

The Franklin grouse is a bird that never seems to go wild even where it is hunted. Nearly all the species of grouse were very tame in pioneer days. Some species have been

able to survive by growing wild and flying at the sight of man. But the fool hen has never learned by experience. His survival is hopeless wherever man has moved into the regions that he inhabits. The only chance of such a species remaining on the earth will be in wilderness areas where the Forest Service doesn't build roads.

The Franklin grouse was first discovered on the Lewis and Clarke Expedition. In the Rocky Mountains they killed a male grouse which was given to the Philadelphia Museum. At the time this bird was called the "spotted grouse."

Thomas McCabe has given us some interesting notes on the courtship of the Franklin grouse. He recounts a morning's nest hunting in second growth spruce and balsam, carpeted with deep green moss, where he found the cock in his usual locality, sitting quietly on a tussock. He was undisturbed and indifferent to a spectator. A little before noon he had moved about two hundred yards from his first perch, and appeared flying through the tree-tops, then lit in a spruce about fifteen feet from the ground and close to the pack trail. He still displayed no unusual excitement. All at once the hen appeared and squatted on the ground in the center of the trail. The cock came walking down the path toward her in a typical attitude of display--head drawn up and back, tail spread about two-thirds of a circle, and straight up, not bent over toward the head. The fine undercoverts of the tail fell back from it like the sticks of a fan, the wing points dropped slightly, the combs bulged upward into elongate crimson rolls which met in the center of the forehead. In this guise he strutted very slowly with a statuesque

pause of about eight seconds every two or three feet.

When about ten feet away from the male, the cock was transformed with the suddenness of a conjuring trick. His tail snapped together and sank nearly to the ground. The head was lowered and extended far forward. The plumage was flattened so that a hard sleekness replaced the fluffy roundness, and the size of the bird was reduced a half. He uttered a low hutteral note, vibrant and threatening, in from five to seven periods, the first two distinct and slow, the remainder losing interval and less sonorous, trailing off to silence. This was accompanied by a slight movement of the tail in a vertical position- rather a periodic trembling. Between these utterances the bird moved forward three to six feet very slowly. The movements were in various directions, a few perhaps directly toward the hen, but for the most part oblique and keeping five or six feet away from her.

After about four minutes of this, the hen took wing, silently but with amazing suddenness and speed, flashed down the trail and made a quick turn into the woods. Her sudden start scarcely gained a foot on the eager male, and both disappeared together. The details of the primitive drama with its suggestions of threatening, beseeching, lamenting, lay beyond the power of interpretation, but except in the opening movement the element of simple and lavish display was absent.

The nesting habits of the Franklin grouse are similar to those of the spruce grouse. The eggs are very rare in collections as the nests have seldom been found, and very little has been published about them. A set of six eggs is in

the Bendire collection of the National Museum. These were taken in a nest at the end of an uprooted tree among some lodgepole pines. The hollow in the ground was lined with pine needles, weeds, and other material that came handy.