

THE RUFFED GROUSE ON LONG ISLAND: EXTANT OR EXTIRPATED?

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“Everybody knows that the autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a ruffed grouse. In terms of conventional physics, the grouse represents only a millionth of either the mass or energy of an acre. Yet, subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead....”

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

It was early May of 1991 and I was leading a hike for 25 people for the Long Island Pine Barrens Society. Our destination was the Dwarf Pine Plains, a globally rare forest of pygmy pitch pines located in Westhampton, New York, in the eastern reaches of the 110,000 acre Long Island Pine Barrens. Picking the northwestern section of the Plains for the trip, I decided to come in from the west on a trail known as Middle Line Highway, from what I understood to be an old survey road established many decades before.

We had made it halfway to our destination, in the transition area between the “normal” tree-sized pitch pine forests typical of the Pine Barrens and the Dwarf Pine Plains, when I first heard it—a male Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) drumming to the north. To the group’s delight the Ruffed Grouse drummed several more times before becoming silent. I wasn’t surprised by the drumming bird, having flushed a grouse on a trail just a little northeast of where we currently were a year before. I had no way of knowing it, of course, but this unique muffled drumming sound, carried to our collective ears through the Pine Barrens understory, was to be my last experience with the species on Long Island. This, despite scores of hikes in the intervening years through the Pine Barrens and other parks and preserves on the South Fork and other forested places on Long Island.

In pre-colonial Long Island the Ruffed Grouse was undoubtedly a common bird. One of the earlier references is in J. P. Giraud, Jr.’s *The Birds of Long Island* (1844), where he notes: “On Long Island it is quite plentiful, inhabiting generally the middle portion of the island, particularly the chain of hills known as the “Spine,” which, from its formation, is best adapted to its habits.” Presumably, the spine the author is referring to is the Ronkonkoma Moraine which runs lengthwise through the middle of Long Island from Lake Success to Montauk Point.

Roy Latham, the great Long Island naturalist from Orient summarized the species’ status in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries in *The Ruffed Grouse on Eastern Long Island* (Engelhardtia 1972):

The Ruffed Grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*, was scattered over most of the eastern half of Long Island in 1900 and common in certain sections. In 1870, the Ruffed Grouse was common on the North Fork east to Mill Creek, between Southold and Greenport. The Ruffed Grouse was in the Moores Woods area of Greenport during the Civil War period. Moores Woods was an attractive area for grouse, and they ranged eastward from there through the north woods of East Marion to Dam Pond. There are no known records for Orient. Three Ruffed Grouse were shot on Nichols Point, Shelter Island, during the winter of 1897. The last Shelter Island record I noted was one on Mashomack Point in October 1905. The Ruffed Grouse was not uncommon north of Calverton in the 1920's. On 28 May 1923, I saw a nest there alongside a pine branch partially buried in sand and dry leaves. Grouse were frequent east to Aquebogue in 1900.

In my notes of 1925, I wrote that the easternmost record of the Ruffed Grouse in "recent years" on the North Fork was in the swamp on the south side of Deep Pond, Laurel, on 29 September 1912. In my notes for 1929, I recorded that the Ruffed Grouse was uncommon in the Northwest Woods and in the pine, shrub-oak country from East Hampton to Fresh Pond, Montauk. I also noted the following: 26 June 1927, a single bird Baiting Hollow; 9 June 1928, pair seen in an old wagon trail in thick woods, Hands Creek, Three Mile Harbor; 7 April 1929, one flushed on the old Indian village site one mile west of Sag Harbor, Noyack; 16 June 1929, grouse with a brood of eight young in an old sandy cart path, Pine Neck; 9 July 1929, old bird seen with two young, North Sea.

E. H. Eaton, in *The Birds of New York* (1910), doesn't make specific reference to Long Island when discussing the species' status and distribution in the state, generally noting: "The Ruffed grouse was formerly common in every county of New York from Staten Island to Mt. Marcy but is now rare in the more thickly settled districts, and is probably extirpated from Richmond, New York, and Kings counties." He adds: "In the wooded portions of the State, grouse are much more abundant than in the settled areas, but even there they are most often found about the burnt tracts or recently lumbered districts, where there is both an abundant cover and a more plentiful supply of berries, tender plant shoots and insects than in the depths of the forest." And concludes: "In settled districts they are rapidly becoming uncommon, as their native coverts disappear, and are now found principally in the wooded swamps, gullies and hill slopes."

Early evidence of the bird's declining status on Long Island is hinted at in Griscom's *Birds of the New York City Region* (1923), in which he states the Ruffed Grouse is "Now an uncommon local resident" recorded in Mastic and in Laurel on the North Fork.

Cruickshank (1942), in his *Birds Around New York City*, noted that "On Long Island it is nowhere a common bird, but individuals are annually reported from the Montauk peninsula, the Riverhead region west to the Carmans River and occasionally as far west as Northport, Deer Park, and Belmont Lake State Park."

John Bull, in his *Birds of the New York Area* (1964) noted that "The Ruffed Grouse is an inhabitant of forest clearings and cut-over tracts of extensive second-growth woodland. It is equally at home on the mountainous ridges of northwestern

New Jersey and in the pine-oak barrens of eastern Long Island.” Bull followed this up in his *Birds of New York State* (1974), similarly observing: “It is equally at home in the higher Adirondack and Catskill mountains, and also at sea level in the pine-oak barrens on Long Island.”

In the “Marine-Region 10” chapter of Susan Drennan’s *Where to Find Birds in New York State* (1981), she states that Connetquot River State Park contains “...the only significant population of Ruffed Grouse on Long Island...” In 2022, this statement is interesting on two fronts—1) there have been no reported sightings from this site for several decades; and 2) it is difficult to believe that this state park was unique at that time in possessing the only significant population, given the much greater extent of undeveloped woodlands to the east, from which subsequent sightings have occurred, including several located in the Pine Barrens.

Still, Drennan’s statement about the state park being significant for Ruffed Grouse is bolstered by comments from Bob Giffen, who was the Trout Hatchery Foreman from 1966 to 1973 when the property was the Southside Sportsmen’s Club prior to its acquisition by the state. He provided the following comment to the author in a recent personal communication:

Great to hear from you! There were only native populations of Ruffed Grouse at Connetquot River. They were rarely hunted in my time there. I ran into them often when I was in the right habitat. I did hear them drumming and on several occasions ran into a mom bird playing the broken wing act and saw the baby grouse. Boy did they blend in, it was difficult to see them even if I knew I was looking right at them. I hope this helps....Good Luck....”

Regarding the distribution of Ruffed Grouse, S. W. Eaton and K. C. Parkes write in *Bull’s Birds of New York State* (1998): “Found in forested areas of the state from pine-oak on eastern LI to timberline on Mt. Marcy.” Parkes notes that “Bailey (1941) described a subspecies *helmei* based on a series of 40 old specimens from Miller Place, Suffolk Co. The native Ruffed Grouse of LI are rumored to have suffered near or total extinction, but grouse from other populations have been introduced from time to time.” He goes on to say: “Specimens examined by Parkes strongly suggest that *helmei* was not a LI endemic but also inhabited the Hudson Valley, between the highlands on either side.”

The two state breeding bird atlases offer interesting and more detailed data as to the status of Ruffed Grouse on Long Island. In the first New York State Breeding Bird Atlas (1980-1985) the Ruffed Grouse was reported from 25 blocks on Long Island, 22 of which were from the wide expanses of the central Pine Barrens. Breeding was confirmed in nine of the blocks, eight of which were located in the Pine Barrens. Twenty years later, however, in the 2000-2005 Breeding Bird Atlas, the Ruffed Grouse had experienced a precipitous decline on Long Island with only one block reporting the species. This block, too, is in the central Pine Barrens in what appears to be the eastern section of the Manorville

Hills, a 12,000-acre contiguous pine-oak forest situated on the Ronkonkoma Moraine.

The decline of Ruffed Grouse on Long Island, evidenced by the second breeding bird atlas (Post 1998), is mirrored in other parts of the state. The species was detected in 2,579 census blocks compared with 3,152 blocks in the first atlas, a decline of 18%. The lower Hudson River Valley stands out as one example, where it was detected in several dozen fewer census blocks in the second atlas than in the first atlas. Declining Ruffed Grouse populations have been observed in several other states.

Kingbird Region 10 Editor Shai Mitra (2004) drew explicit attention to the challenges facing Ruffed Grouse, as well as other ground-nesting forest birds, on Long Island:

Concerns were voiced again for many species of woodland breeding birds on LI. Species as diverse as Ruffed Grouse, Broad-winged Hawk, Whip-Poor-Will, Veery, Black-and-white Warbler and Ovenbird share many ecological attributes: their populations depend on woodlands of at least modest size and integrity; they are being reported from fewer and fewer sites on LI; and their remaining LI populations are probably undervalued in conservation planning. Indeed, given the plethora of environmental concerns on LI and the extent to which Regional priority falls to maritime-nesting species, it seems difficult to muster much will to preserve our surviving patches of mesic deciduous woodlands, such as those in East Hampton's Northwest Woods. Admittedly, LI's second-growth woodlands are smaller, less diverse and less critical to most species' statewide and global status than are the extensive woodlands upstate, but this rationale undervalues their Regional significance. It is disheartening to think that many once widespread and numerous woodland breeders will probably survive on LI only in a few small relict preserves, if at all. Critical analysis of the just-completed Breeding Bird Atlas will lend quantitative insight into geographical trends for these species on LI. In the meantime, the qualitative prognosis, based on perceptions of LI's most experienced naturalists, is not encouraging.

Wildlife managers took notice of the decline. Because of the growing scarcity of the species, and the recognition that the population could not be sustained in heavily populated areas as long as hunting continued, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) closed the hunting season for Ruffed Grouse on Long Island in December of 1998. Ruffed Grouse are still hunted in other regions of the state.

In an effort to develop a more complete picture on the status and trend of the species here over the past several decades the author reached out through the statewide Cornell University's Birding Listserv to birders/naturalists to gain their observations and sightings of Ruffed Grouse on Long Island. Numerous responses were provided; some are included below:

1) Larry Penny: *"Have only seen 5 in 41 years here. I saw a pair near the north end of old Northwest Road in the spring of ca. 1990. The last I saw was in Montauk on the parkway near the entrance to the radar site in the state park there in the early years of this century. In all my 75 years of living on both Forks I've seen 5, never on the North Fork. Never heard one drumming."*

2) Steve Biasetti: *"This is an easy question to answer, as I only have two records for the species on Long Island:*

7/23/95 (Maple Swamp, East Quogue/Flanders) - I flushed a few ruffed grouse from the huckleberry shrub layer while hiking on the Paumanok Path between the south end of Pleasure Drive and the north end of Spinny Road.

6/8/01 (Bald Hill Wetlands near Suffolk Community College) - While walking along the trail a short distance north/west of County Road 51, I was surprised by a hen ruffed grouse as it tried to distract me from at least one peeping chick."

3) Hugh McGuiness: *My last record on LI was from Hunter's Garden. I can't remember the year, but it may be the May 5, 1992 record I have on ebird.*

Author's Note: The account Hugh mentions was a Spring 1992 Region 10 account in *The Kingbird* (42 (3): 203): *male heard drumming at Hunter's Garden, Eastport 5 May (HMG).*

4) Byron Young: *I am not sure if this will be of any assistance to you. My last, first and only observation of a ruffed grouse on Long Island occurred around 1976 on S. River Road in Riverhead. The bird was in the middle of the road and definitely was a ruffed grouse. I keep hoping to find another ruffed grouse along this stretch of road but to date no such luck. I am not aware of any recent observations. At that point in time I was still learning about Long Island and was not keeping records of my birding observations.*

5) Mike Wasilco: *I know they were already quite rare when I began working for DEC on Long Island in 2001. I did manage to see one, once, along Hotwater Street near Toppings Path (Eastport area) in probably 2002 or 2003. I only heard of one or two other sightings since. I left Long Island in 2006, so not sure what may have been seen since then.*

It will take a bit of digging for me to try to find the exact date of the sighting. I do know it was during the January deer season though, which is why I was driving along those roads.

6) Robert Paxton: *I can comment on Ruffed Grouse numbers on Long Island as reflected in the Montauk Point Christmas Bird Count, of which I was a participant between 1967 and 2011 and a co-compiler from 1974 to 1993. The count began in 1920, and has been conducted continuously since then, except for a few gaps mostly (maybe entirely) during World War II. There were five reports of single Ruffed Grouse over the years: in 1958, several times in the 1970s, and*

the last one on December 20, 1980. I am reasonably certain that there have been no further reports since 1980.

I have forwarded your message to the present compiler, Angus Wilson, in case he is aware of a more recent record, but I doubt it.

Our five reports came mostly from the vicinity of Fresh Pond, in Hither Hills State Park, and once from Gardiner's Island. There was never more than one bird at a time. This Christmas Count was not very thorough in the early years; I suspect that Ruffed Grouse were regular on the east end before the 1950s. On the basis of the results of the Montauk Christmas Bird Count, I would say that Ruffed Grouse have been extirpated from that area of eastern Long Island since 1980.

7) Bob Adamo:

5/14/79 - 2 birds, Yaphank Woods, Yaphank.

4/08/81 - Bird yes, no further info.

12/19/81 - Bird yes, no further info.

5/06/91 - Riverhead, possibly Red Creek Area, Flanders.

5/05/09 - Field, near woods, close to Radar Tower, opposite Calverton Grasslands, n/s Route 25, T/o/R.

4/30/11 - Rocky Point RCA Property, with Tom Moran.

Information on the status of the Ruffed Grouse is contained in many past regional compilations of *The Kingbird*. There are a total of 884 accounts for the Ruffed Grouse in *Kingbird* archives. Some of them, relating to Region 10 reports, are included here. Particularly informative are records from Gil Raynor, a well-known birder, naturalist and scientist who worked at the Brookhaven National Laboratory and lived in Manorville. These illustrate a definite decline over the period 1963-1974.

Fall 1963: "Quite common this year at Manorville and Upton" (GR); "Population on L.I. appears to be up this year" (IA). (KB 14 (1): 61)

Winter 1963-64: "apparently a high point of cycle. Seen frequently at Manorville and Upton; max 12 together, Dec 22, Manorville and five, Jan 6, Upton" (GR). (KB 14 (2):123)

1965: "Apparently down somewhat from peak of last two years but many observations of one to seven at Manorville and Upton thru season" (GR). (KB 16 (1): 61)

Winter 1973-1974: "GS Raynor reports low numbers on central LI." (KB 24 (3): 165)

Other accounts from *Kingbird* Region 10 reports include:

1967: six, Dec 26 CCCC (Central Suffolk Christmas Bird Count: KB 18 (2): 116-117)

Summer 1981: *Ruffed Grouse* were still in low numbers in Central Suffolk, but broods were found in East Manorville 24 June and Manorville 28 June. (KB 31 (4): 266)

December 1982: *Two Ruffed Grouse* were found on the C. Suffolk count, normal for this area. (KB 33 (2): 146)

December 1983: *Two Ruffed Grouse* were found on the C. Suffolk count, normal for this area. (KB 34 (2): 141)

1990: *BNL 5 May (James Osterlund)* (Brookhaven National Laboratory: KB 40 (3): 206)

1991: *along Rt 104, Quogue 6 May (BA, JR)* (KB 41 (3): 220)

1993: *one Brookhaven National Laboratory 1 Jul (JR)* (KB 43 (4): 351)

These illustrate how detections had become few and far between by the 1990s. The last reference in a *Kingbird* Region 10 report that might imply that the authors were not surprised was Schiff and Wollin's simple, "Some reports Suff." for Summer 1995 (KB 45 (4): 331). It would be another decade before the last reports trickled across the pages of S. S. Mitra's Region 10 reports, conveyed with increasing concern and urgency regarding the importance of documentation:

Flanders 20 May 2007 (J. Kuhlman); details desired as species has not been documented on LI in several years. (KB 57 (3): 278)

This same record was mentioned again in the next issue, along with the following commentary from Mitra, who, over more than a quarter century of field work in Suffolk County, has never seen the species:

Veteran observers have suspected for years now that Ruffed Grouse has been extirpated from Long Island. A belated report from East Quogue on 20 May [2007] is intriguing, but reached us without details. Given the significance that a proven record would hold, observers are encouraged to collect as much documentation as possible and to consider all possibilities, including young turkeys (which can fly when still very small), female pheasants, and the bewildering variety of exotic gamebirds that are encountered at large from time to time. (KB 57 (4): 352)

A Ruffed Grouse flushed by hunters in the central eastern LI pine barrens [18 Jan 2008] adds to a handful of credible reports of this once common species, now nearly extirpated from LI. A detailed description or photo verifying the continued existence of this species in our Region would be most welcome. (KB 58 (2): 202)

reported Calverton, SUFF 5 May [2009] (BA); photos or full details of any record would be greatly appreciated. (KB 59 (3): 298)

Sadly, not only has the long-sought verification not emerged, but the reports themselves have ceased entirely, for more than a decade now.

E. H. Eaton, who expressed concern about the future of the species in New York State as long ago as 1910, during an earlier period of scarcity, noted:

If the Ruffed Grouse is to be preserved in the more thickly populated districts the sportsman must abandon hunting it in these localities, and reserves of several thousands of acres with suitable food and cover should be established in various localities to serve as strongholds and propagating centers for the species. The Ruffed Grouse is our finest game bird and it will be a disgrace if it be allowed to go the way of the Heath hen and Wild turkey.

Due to the NYSDEC closing the season on “thickly populated” Long Island two decades ago, hunting has been “abandoned” and through the passage of the 1993 Pine Barrens Protection Act “reserves of several thousands of acres exist.” (The Core Preservation Area consisting of various types of wetland and upland forests, fields, and other natural communities alone is nearly 55,000 acres in size. The adjacent Compatible Growth Area which contains some development provides approximately another 50,000 acres). Thus, the two main concerns expressed by Eaton have been heeded but it appears to be a case of “too little too late”, although perhaps focusing on the grouse’s decline in abundance in the Pine Barrens misses the main point of the story. It may be that the Pine Barrens was never the preferred habitat for the species and it became the species’ ‘stronghold’ on Long Island by default.

Why the decline and likely extirpation of the Ruffed Grouse from Long Island? A definitive explanation may not be possible, as extirpation of species from a region is often not clearcut but rather a complicated story, often involving a number of interrelated factors. Still, it is reasonable to assume that habitat loss (through both development and vegetational succession) and fragmentation was a leading cause, as the species struggled to survive in increasingly unsuitable, compromised, and hostile habitat. Besides the direct impacts to habitat from development, the Ruffed Grouse being a ground nesting species brings additional risk as pet and feral cats and suburban friendly wildlife such as opossums and raccoons proliferate in and adjacent to development. The pressures facing Ruffed Grouse here are similar, as are their declines, to those facing the species in other parts of the state as well as throughout much of the Northeast.

Their continued presence in various tracts of land here on Long Island might yet be documented. Use of remote recording stations placed throughout the Pine Barrens and other parks and preserves, set to record during the breeding season when male grouse are drumming, might be helpful. Another approach might be to utilize birders to conduct Ruffed Grouse drumming surveys, employing methods and protocols currently used by NYSDEC throughout the state; these surveys take place in early May.

It has been more than a decade since the last Ruffed Grouse has been sighted by a birder knowledgeable of its field marks, and much longer still since a

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specimen or photo has been obtained. This complete absence of sightings or records across intensively and extensively birded Long Island strongly suggests that we very likely have already lost the Ruffed Grouse as part of Long Island's avifauna. As scientists are known to say, it is "impossible to prove a negative"; i.e., in the case of the Ruffed Grouse to definitively prove it no longer exists on Long Island since the "absence of its evidence does not mean evidence of its absence". Still, the Heath Hen (the Atlantic Coast subspecies of Greater Prairie Chicken, *Tympanuchus cupido*) was extirpated by the middle of the Nineteenth Century, and now, nearly two centuries later, the evidence suggests that the Ruffed Grouse has met the same fate.

If true, both Leopold and Eaton would have been quite displeased with this "disgraceful" outcome.

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