

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I read with interest John Turner's recent article, "The Ruffed Grouse on Long Island: Extant or extirpated?" (*The Kingbird* 72 (4): 322-330). I've seen Ruffed Grouse in Hunter's Garden, Suffolk County, too, possibly Hugh McGuiness's bird as cited in your article, as back in those days, we were a tight-knit and small group of enthusiasts, all birding and communicating pretty closely and actively together on Long Island.

Beyond Long Island, it is worth noting that Ruffed Grouse is now pretty much gone from the majority of the lower and mid-Hudson Valley region (*Kingbird* Region 9). When I was growing up in northern Westchester County (1970s-1980s), Ruffed Grouse were actually pretty common, even in suburban settings. I grew up in an area of one-acre zoning in Chappaqua, and I saw them in my yard with some regularity, especially in winter, under the bird feeders, acting like chickens in a barnyard, waiting to be fed!

They were quite common breeders in powerline cuts, and notably at Ward Pound Ridge Reservation, places where I spent a lot of time birding in my youth. As well, they were pretty widespread and common in their distribution across the greater Hudson Valley in general, and not too choosy in habitat needs and preferences during that time period of my youth.

Today, I live in Millbrook, northern Dutchess County, where Ruffed Grouse are only very occasionally reported. There are likely a few breeding pairs that are

hanging on in the county in the undeveloped and wild, densely forested higher elevations of Dutchess. It seems that they continue on in greater numbers in the Catskills, and in even greater numbers in the Adirondacks and Tug Hill regions, to the north.

However, as you point out in your article, the species does not require dense, deep, high elevation forest, but rather prefers second growth hardwoods with open areas of low, dense deciduous undergrowth, what you might find in a logging area after a few years of regrowth, or as I mentioned above, powerline cuts—a favorite haunt for the species. And we have plenty of that habitat in my region to this day. So, why the great decline away from intensely developed Long Island?

I've heard any number of theories on the reasons for their demise across the state, none of which really make sense to me. I do not assign these sharp declines to habitat loss, fragmentation, pesticides, forestry practices, feral cats, rats, etc. There are still vast tracts of very suitable habitat throughout the state, where there are few domestic or feral predators, no intense development, no pesticide application, and no Ruffed Grouse in all that perfectly suitable habitat for the species. All of the reasons for the precipitous decline make no sense to me, except for one. Populations of widespread and common species of wildlife do not “collapse” over 20 years' time from feral cats or housing developments. I've always felt that it had to be rapidly spreading disease.

What makes the most sense to me is what I overheard on a Metro-North train one day, when I was commuting home from Manhattan. Two gentlemen seated ahead of me were speaking about their hunting exploits. The topic of Ruffed Grouse came up pretty quickly.

The gentleman who brought up the grouse topic identified himself to the other as president of the Ruffed Grouse Society. He very confidently stated to the other gentleman that his society had been researching the reasons for the Ruffed Grouse's demise throughout much of its range through scientific lab and field research. and the answer to the puzzle was West Nile Virus. West Nile Virus was wiping out the grouse population. That makes total sense to me. If you think about it, the species has declined or disappeared altogether in lower elevations near human populations, but not so in wilderness areas of deep forest, in higher altitudes like the Catskills, the Adirondacks, and the Tug Hill Plateau. And that is because the carriers of West Nile are largely absent in those areas: crows. The virus was identified in humans in 1999, which likely spread from wildlife populations, where it existed and spread some time before 1999 and the then-ensuing human epidemic. This all would coincide with the time period of the Ruffed Grouse's precipitous decline.

I'm convinced that the man on the train was 100% correct, as, to my thinking, it is the most reasonable and logical answer. I just thought I'd pass along my opinion on this matter, for what it is worth. Thank you again for writing such a complete and well written article for *The Kingbird*.

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