

Adirondack Almanack  
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## Time Running Out for Spruce Grouse

BY PHIL BROWN

Imagine if the population of Adirondack loons had declined more than 50 percent over the past two decades. Imagine too that loons stood a 35 percent chance of vanishing entirely from the Park by 2020.

Wouldn't there be a public outcry from bird lovers and conservationists? Wouldn't the Adirondack Council, which features a loon call on its website, be demanding that the state do something to stop the decline?

Don't worry. The loon population appears to be stable. It's only the spruce grouse that is in danger of vanishing from the Adirondack Park.

I say only because the spruce grouse has not become the cause célèbre that the loon would become if it were similarly at risk. It says something that the most visible champion of the spruce grouse in recent years has been a herpetologist from outside the Park.

His name is Glenn Johnson, a biology professor at Potsdam State College. Over the past decade, he and his students have studied spruce-grouse populations and their habitat. Fortunately, one of his students, Angelena Ross, was hired by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and continues to research the grouse on her own.

This week, we see the fruits of their labor: DEC has issued a draft recovery plan written by Ross and Johnson (Ross was the main author). In it, they propose importing grouse from elsewhere, probably Canada, to supplement the population and managing timber stands to improve grouse habitat.

They estimate that only seventy-five to a hundred birds are left in the Adirondacks. If nothing is done, the authors warn, the spruce grouse likely will disappear from the region. A "population viability analysis" indicated an 85 percent likelihood that the spruce grouse will be gone in a hundred years and a 35 percent likelihood that they will vanish by 2020--less than nine years away.

"Efforts to increase the species' abundance in New York must be undertaken to conserve the species and ensure its continued persistence in the state," the authors write.

Unlike the ruffed grouse, the spruce grouse is rare throughout the Northeast (it is common out west and in Canada). In New York State, it is found only in patches of boreal forest in the northwestern Adirondacks, mostly in the southern portions of Franklin and St. Lawrence counties.

In the 1800s, the spruce grouse was abundant in the Adirondacks, but much of its habitat was destroyed by the clear-cutting of spruce forests and the flooding created by logging dams. The Lows Lake dam, for example, flooded a water body known as Spruce Grouse Pond. Also, the grouse's lack of fear of humans made it an easy target of hunters and earned it the nickname "fool hen."

The clear-cutting, damming, and hunting have stopped, but the bird's numbers continue to plummet. One reason is that the grouse's habitat is fragmented, so subpopulations cannot expand or interbreed. But a bigger reason may be that forest maturation—especially on the forever-wild Forest Preserve—has diminished the suitability of the grouse's remaining habitat.

Ross and Johnson say mature forests lack the understory foliage that spruce grouse prefer for nesting. They recommend manipulating timberlands in selected places to create the habitat that grouse need. Because this requires cutting trees, it cannot be done on the Forest Preserve. Rather, DEC would need to work out agreements with private landowners.

The document also calls for releasing at least thirty spruce grouse at two or more sites—assuming the imported birds are genetically compatible with the Adirondack variety. Most likely, the grouse would be captured in Ontario. Given the downward population trend, the authors say the reintroduction should take place as soon as possible after the genetic analysis is done and "well before 2020."

The draft plan can be downloaded from DEC's website by clicking [here](#).

The public has until March 1 to comment on the plan. Questions and comments can be sent to [fwwildlf@gw.dec.state.ny.us](mailto:fwwildlf@gw.dec.state.ny.us). Put "Spruce Grouse Plan" in the subject line.

Walk into an Adirondack gift store, and you're likely see images of loons on everything from coffee mugs to calendars to throw pillows. Perhaps it's time we gave equal time to the spruce grouse.

Phil Brown is the editor of the Adirondack Explorer newsmagazine. Click [here](#) to read his story in the Explorer on the risks to the spruce grouse and other boreal birds in the Adirondacks.