

A "ruffled" grouse

BY TERRY POWER

"On the other foot" (the proverbial shoe that is) may have been my second choice for the title of this account. To begin with, and Walt Disney agrees with me on this - it's tough to be a bird. True, the sole human induced infliction for some birds is merely to become the subject of an interested observer. Others, however, fall victim to being caged, shot at, fresh frozen, Kentucky Fried or have their kind immortalized by means of a synthetic likeness known as a lawn ornament.

It is ironic, then, that it was the innocent - the watcher in this case, and not the hunter or the Colonel, who should be chosen to give up (or wear, depending on how you look at it) that aforementioned shoe. I'll get to the point.

Somewhere in the woods between Lewes and Bellview (part of my Breeding Bird Atlas square) I was plodding along a woods road. It was June 15, a warm, sunny Sunday among the hardwoods. I had come to the point when I looked only at those birds which insisted on being seen. Suddenly I was confronted by one which qualified.

About twenty feet to my left (I can't recall which faculty first alerted me to the danger), a very ruffled grouse had emerged from the herbs and was rapidly closing the distance - on foot. As the agressee, or so I thought, my first instinct was of self-preservation - run like hell. A stronger instinct (curiosity) prevailed, however, and I stayed around for the showdown.

Stepping backwards with my adversary in full view, I managed to keep the distance between us fairly constant at about ten feet. I backed off about twenty yards with the grouse in hot pursuit but moving in a zig zag pattern, hissing menacingly with head low, feather erect and wings unfolded (elapsed time: 10 seconds).

Abruptly, she turned into the woods away from her suspected brood, feigning a broken wing and crying like a hurt puppy. I refused to follow, at which point she stopped to monitor my progress. Moving up the trail some ten yards past the danger point, I slipped behind some bushes to set up surveillance. She found me out, clucking defiance.

Not to be outwitted, I moved off another fifteen yards and continued my vigil, hoping for a glimpse of ruffed grouse chicks. Only a few minutes later, mama grouse crossed the trail at the same point where I had first seen her and disappeared. I waited patiently but in vain for her to bring her brood into sight. Moving closer yielded only the muffled thumping of a grouse taking flight. I continued on up the trail.

Now the moral of the story? You can't always count your chicks even after they hatch. At least not in the woods near Lewes.

(Editor's note: The Southern Kings Wildlife Federation recently announced the winners of the Harvey Moore Scholarship and Terry Power was one of the three chosen. Congratulations!)

