A different drummer

Studying the ruffed grouse at wildlife academy

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Gutting a game bird to check its stomach contents is rather tame for a seasoned hunter but it might be pretty wild stuff for a group of teenagers.

That is, unless those teenagers are enrolled in a Wildlife Leadership Academy to learn all they can about an important game bird in Pennsylvania, the ruffed grouse.

Jackie Rosenberger, 15, completed her second WLA course, “Pennsylvania Drammers field school,” which took place June 21 to 25 at Powdermill Nature Reserve in Westmoreland County.

Last summer, Rosenberger learned about whitetail deer in a similar school.

Rosenberger is the daughter of John and Paige Rosenberger, Chambersburg. She discovered the academy through reading Pennsylvania Outdoors newspaper.

WLA is a summer program of Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education. It is open to youth ages 14 through 17. “I applied online,” she said. “You download the applications and submit essay” to be chosen for a session.

Each program accepts 20 students, who are divided into teams for the field school.

Dissecting a ruffed grouse was part of each team’s education. It’s not something every teenage girl wants to do on summer vacation.

“For me, it was not very hard. I’ve never been ...

I’ve always had a strong stomach,” Rosenberger said.

In their grouse’s stomach, her team found some catkins (tree seedlings), pebbles, which the birds eat to help digest food, and unidentifiable plant leaves.

Through studying the organs, students learned how grouse interact with their environment.

“One thing that really surprised me was the size of its eyeballs and its ears,” said Rosenberger. “I mean, you pull back the feathers and their ears are just huge holes covered up by feathers - they’re like quarter-sized.”

According to a post-session essay she wrote, the ruffed grouse became our state bird in 1931. They are chicken-like birds weighing about 1.5 pounds average.

Rosenberger's essay offers information about the birds' seasonal habits.

Grouse can survive winter snows because of structures on their feet: “Pectinations cause their feet to be like snowshoes, enabling them to walk on snow without sinking. An amazing feat is the grouse’s ability to dive into the snow and bury itself.

Some may spend whole nights under the snow, which is a great way to hide from predators. Their nostrils also contain little feathers inside them to prevent snow from being inhaled into the lungs.
Typically in winter, grouse find enough food in treetops."

A particular mating habit of male grouse - drumming, or a rhythmic beating of its wings - is something familiar to Rosenberger.

"I love to hear the drumming of a grouse on a cool morning on the first day of fishing season in northern Pennsylvania. In fact, that time period falls during the peak of breeding season, also the best time to hear the grouse drum.

Drumming is the main way males attract hens.

He will also drum to announce his presence in an area or warn other males to not cross the line over into his territory.

"... Drumming sites are normally fallen logs, but any elevated surface would work, such as a mound of dirt or a rock. A tree will usually be present on one side of the drumming site to prevent avian predators from swooping down."

Cooper's hawks, the bane of songbirds at our backyard feeders, is also the major predator of grouse, said Rosenberger.

Most die before one year of age, victims of such predators as great horned owls, bobcats, coyotes and foxes.

Leadership

In addition to wildlife study, students took part in activities that taught leadership and communication skills, enabling them to teach others about conservation issues.

Rosenberger said she has career plans to study or manage wildlife, particularly mammals or birds.

She has already made connections through some of the WLA biologists. She also plans to continue studying through WLA.

"I'm going to be part of this academy, they have one for exploring outdoor careers," she said. "Next year, there's going to be a school for brook trout and I plan (to attend)." Although she's never hunted grouse, Rosenberger is anticipating the possibility of doing so in a few months.

"The team I was in won top team award and that award may be a grouse hunt, we don't know. They said it will take place in winter," she said.

To learn more

On the web:

http://www.PICEweb.org

Questions: Contact Michele Kittell at mkittell@piceweb.org

Technical work: Participants dissect a ruffed grouse at Wildlife Leadership Academy in June.

Jackie Rosenberger/Courtesy

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