

The Secret Life of the Ruffed Grouse

To the uninformed observer, a ruffed grouse leads a pretty boring life that mostly involves long periods of sitting quietly on the woodland floor.

But look closely and the grouse's habits—where it chooses to live, how it finds mates and how it's affected by environmental changes—could be an important factor in how Minnesota's forests are managed in the future.

That's why Lorelle Berkeley ('99—B.S., ecology, evolution, and behavior) is tracking the grouse so closely. She's in the middle of a four-year project focused on grouse's habitats and mating habits. She's videotaped many hours of grouse life at the Cloquet Forestry Center to see exactly why grouse choose the locations they do. She and her assistants also survey the birds' territory, population trends and reaction to environmental variables such as weather.

Her project's underlying goal is to inform policy and management decisions about both forest and wildlife management in northern Minnesota. Some conservationists would prefer a strategy of establishing more conifers and fewer aspen trees, in an effort to return the forest to what it looked like 100 to 150 years ago. Because grouse prefer aspen forest as habitat, such a decision likely would affect the game bird's population, and that possibility concerns hunters and wildlife managers alike.

Berkeley is a Ph.D. student in natural resources science and management and holds the Leigh H. Perkins Fellowship in Wildlife Management.

She wouldn't be able to complete the research without the Perkins fellowship, she says. "It's really hard to



Photo courtesy Lorelle Berkeley

Lorelle Berkeley, right, and her team of field assistants—Travis Flatt, Michael Ingrassia, Natasha Gruber and Teresa Drury—track the movements of the ruffed grouse at the Cloquet Forestry Center.

get funding for game bird research." Most organizations are more interested in funding research on endangered species, and the ruffed grouse isn't in that category.

Leigh Perkins, Sr., retired chairman of the Orvis Co., has long been a supporter of the Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology. He also contributed to the establishment of the Gordon Gullion Endowed Chair in Forest Wildlife Research, which is named for the late professor and world-renowned expert on ruffed grouse. The Perkins fellowship is awarded to an outstanding student who works with the Gullion chair holder, currently R.J. "Rocky" Gutiérrez.

Perkins says he supported the Gullion Chair and the fellowship because of his lifelong interest in wildlife issues and because of his close friendship with Gullion, who led the Cloquet forestry wildlife project for 32 years. Perkins was awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree from the College of Natural Resources in 2001.

Berkeley says her research will involve one more year of in-field data collection, but the hours of tape already collected will prove invaluable. "We'll have good data, and I hope that we can lend some insight on why the grouse behave the way they do." —Becky Beyers



Photo by David Hansen