

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

UNUSUAL RUFFED GROUSE BEHAVIOR

by Tom Pirro

On April 9, 1997, I spent my lunch break birding at a public boat ramp on the Nashua River in Groton, MA, along Route 119. I was entering the woods to bird when I heard scratching among the leaves. I looked down and saw a Ruffed Grouse fifteen or twenty feet away. I don't often get such a close look at grouse, at least not while they're still on the ground and my heart is not up in my throat.

I stopped to watch it, assuming it would discover me and flee. Not today! It began to approach me, so I stood still again, assuming it had not discovered me yet. When it came within about five feet, I made a slow movement, figuring it would fly, but instead, looking directly at me, it approached to within one foot and investigated me.

About five minutes had passed. At this point I took a few steps to the left; the bird moved the same direction. Then I stepped right; it went right! At this stage I figured I might as well talk to it; so I asked if it wanted to look for Rusty Blackbirds. Apparently it did, because as I proceeded slowly into the wooded swamp, it followed me for a hundred yards. While following, it would not walk directly behind, but through the underbrush beside my path. When I stopped, it came within one foot of me again. I gently reached to it, and the grouse only stepped back to maintain the one-foot distance.

After fifteen minutes, I had to return to work, so I strolled back to my car. Once again the grouse followed along, about ten to twenty feet behind and coming within a foot when I stopped. A quick reach for it, not to touch it or harm it but to observe its reaction, caused it to "flutter" in the air to waist height, settling right back down without retreating. The grouse followed me back across a dirt parking area to my car. Twenty-five minutes after I met the grouse, I got into the car only to see the grouse begin to approach me while I was in the driver's seat! I got back out and led it away so I wouldn't inadvertently run it over. Then I then got back into the car, started the engine, and drove slowly away. Guess whom I saw in the rear view mirror? It followed the car for 100 feet; I then outran it so it wouldn't follow me into the busy street.

I've birded since the mid-1980s and have come across Ruffed Grouse literally hundreds of times. I've seen Spruce Grouse and Willow Ptarmigan in Alaska, which can be quite tame. But I've never witnessed anything close to this. Might the bird have been fed by nearby residents, coming to view humans as food sources rather than threats? Could it (I hope not!) have confused me with a potential mate?

I assure you, I've not added one bit of fiction to this story. I kept track of the distances walked, and the total time that passed was about half an hour.

The bird followed me again on April 14, and again, more briefly, a month after that. It displayed much the same behavior on these later occasions. Regrettably, though, WE never found any Rusty Blackbirds.

Tom Pirro lives in Gardner, MA, with his wife Sharon and 7-year-old son Ian. A birder since the mid-1980s, he does most of his birding close to home: his Gardner life list is closing on 200 species. Tom has a B.S. in Fisheries Biology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and is currently employed as a buyer for a printing company in Groton, MA.

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