

Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse

Tympanuchus Phasianellus Columbianus

Description: There are 2 races of sharp-tailed grouse found in Colorado, the plains sharptail and the Columbian, also known as Mountain sharptail.

Sharp-tailed grouse weigh in at around 1.5 pounds. They have distinct black V-shaped marks on the breast feathers. Compared to other grouse in Colorado, sharptails have a frosty appearance due to white spotting on the body and wing feathers. The conspicuous white spots on the wing feathers are an easy way to distinguish sharptails from dusky (formerly known as the blue grouse) and sage grouse.

Feathering occurs to the base of the toes. Both sexes have inconspicuous crests, and the head and upper body parts are extensively patterned with barring and spotting of white, buffy, tawny brown, and black. The breast and flanks are intricately marked with V-shaped brown markings on a white or buffy background.

Range: Sharp-tailed grouse are doing well in Colorado as compared to other portions of their range. This can be attributed somewhat to mine reclamation efforts (revegetation using up to 20 different seeds of grasses, forbs and shrubs) and the presence of CRP* fields within their range. Click on thumbnail below to see distribution map.

Habitat/Reproduction/Diet: This species uses the high mountain shrub-grassland community and associated edges. Sharptails are most commonly found in high elevation grassland areas interspersed with serviceberry, chokecherry, oakbrush, sagebrush, snowberry, and aspen. Shrubs and small trees play an important role in sharp-tailed grouse ecology, especially in winter when they provide both food (see photo of grouse in "budding" tree) and cover. Weed-grass types and cultivated crops (wheat and alfalfa) may be utilized in spring and summer. Where available, birds may associate with drainages lined with willows or other riparian shrubs. Unlike sage or dusky grouse, sharptails may utilize agricultural fields and feed on waste grain and associated insects.

Like sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse breed on leks or traditional strutting grounds. Sharptail leks are typically located on knolls or ridge-tops. An average of 14 birds display and breed on an area of around 100 feet in diameter. Males begin displaying in late March or April. Sharptails can be seen on lekking areas with 100% snow cover. During the breeding season, males exhibit orange eyecombs and purple air sacs which form an integral part of the courtship ritual. Sharptail males "dance" by stomping their feet and running in a circle to attract females. After breeding, females build a ground nest in grass or near shrubs. A typical clutch is 10-12 eggs and the hen incubates for approximately 23 days. After hatching, the chicks are tended by the female. Broods are largely dependent for 6-8 weeks and then disperse.

In late fall and winter, the birds form small flocks and are dependent on shrubs for food and cover. As is common with other grouse species, snow roosting is an important means of thermoregulation during the winter months. In spring the males head toward the leks and the cycle begins again.

*CRP fields - CRP stands for Conservation Reserve Program. This is ground that the Federal government has paid landowners not to farm and to place in a permanent (10-year) grass cover.

Hunting Tips

Property Regulation Change for Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse

Grassy Creek/Twenty Mile STL

The Colorado Division of Wildlife has made a change in regulation on the Twenty Mile/Grassy Creek State Trust Land concerning grouse hunting.

Beginning with the 2009/2010 small game hunting season, there will be restricted access for small game hunting on weekends and Labor Day through the scheduled Columbian sharp-tailed grouse season. Hunting on weekends and Labor Day is by permit only. A maximum of eight hunters will be allowed daily. A maximum of four hunters is allowed per permit.

Permits are free and may be applied for by contacting the Steamboat Springs Service Center at PO Box 775777, Steamboat Springs, CO 80477 or by calling (970) 871-2855.

Applications must be postmarked or hand delivered to the Steamboat Springs Service Center by **July 1 annually**. Permits will be issued by drawing, and successful applicants will be notified by mail. Permits must be on person while hunting the properties to verify compliance. Permits are not required Monday through Friday, except on Labor Day.

This change in Wildlife Commission Regulation was initiated due to the high numbers of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse hunters using the Twenty Mile/Grassy Creek property and the decline in Lek attendance by grouse over several years.

Make sure you are hunting sharptails in an area which is open for hunting.

71% of Colorado's sharptail range is on private land. If you are not hunting on public land, make sure you have permission to hunt.

Sharptails are usually found in small groups. Look for grass in association with a food source (berries, mast) and a water source.

The opening of the season is usually fairly warm and oftentimes the birds will be found near stock ponds at certain times of the day. Sharptails will also be found on the tops of broad flat ridges. They prefer open areas with gently rolling terrain. These birds seldom venture onto steep slopes or into narrow drainages.

Best place to hunt: The transition zone between 6500 and 8500 feet where sagebrush rangelands interface with mountain shrub and aspen communities. Sharptails tend to hold for a point when in heavier cover.

What to look for in flight: When flushed, sharp-tailed grouse often cackle; they fly rapidly. In flight the white underparts are obvious, as is their whitish and elongated tail.

Season: Please refer to the [Small Game Season dates](#) page.

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