



Photos: Roy Valitchka

Gretta the Grouse on Valitchka's workbench, left, and on a wood pile. Gretta's behavior, while rare, occurs because the grouse sees people as neighboring grouse.

# Gretta, the stubborn grouse

By Roy F. Valitchka

Anything can happen at maple syrup time when a stubborn grouse takes over.

In spring 2023 I was met at the gate to our Little Maiden Lake cabin by a grouse commandeering the center of our gravel road. I gently warned the bird that I might run over it and make a feather mess if it didn't vacate the premises.

Nothing, nada.

I slowly turned into our cabin area looking for damage. To my astonishment, it was walking alongside the truck as if to greet me. The grouse stood its ground as I unloaded my gear and entered the cabin.

Odd, what's going on here?

A little later as I walked the 50 or so yards from the cabin to our sap shack, there it was again, keeping pace with me about 10 feet alongside in the woods.

My experience was just the beginning.

Gretta, our resident's new name, showed up at the end of the gun deer sea-

son, and in January while my son, Scott, was at the cabin isolating from home due to COVID.

Our land borders 87 acres of national forest near the spring-fed Little Maiden Lake at Lakewood in northern Oconto County. Gretta picked us out of all the 33,000 acres available.

As Scott opened the overhead garage door to remove a snowblower, Gretta flew in. She alighted on the work bench to observe. Then she moved to a perch on our summer float tubes.

When Scott attempted to close the garage door, Gretta left her new perch on the door header. She flew as Scott roused her and beat a retreat as she almost collided with the float board at the other wall, then took a sharp turn and flew off to the woods. Goodbye for now, or so we thought.

I was cleaning up after dinner and taking compost to our bin when I saw Gretta rustling in the forest duff a few feet away. I talked to her asking what she was doing there. Gretta ignored me and went behind

our woodshed and appeared on the cabin lawn greeting me.

Gretta also made an aggressive pest of herself. When a surveyor and partner came to lay out some lines, Gretta followed at their heels. She began pecking at the heels of friends as they loaded their vehicles to leave, and dive bombed several vehicles on the cabin road. Gretta propelled herself from the border woods, banged into the side of our pickup truck and spread her wings over the windshield.

A town team working on a land variance attempted to lure Gretta closer with bread crumbs. But she was standoffish and refused the offer, remaining her customary 5-foot distance from people.

Enough! Time to do some research. Here is what we learned from good friend Dick Nikolai, retired WDNR wildlife biologist. It is comprehensive.

This type of phenomenon rarely occurs. The grouse sees you as a normal part of the competition and thinks you are a neighboring grouse. So the grouse walks away from you at that safe distance. Its



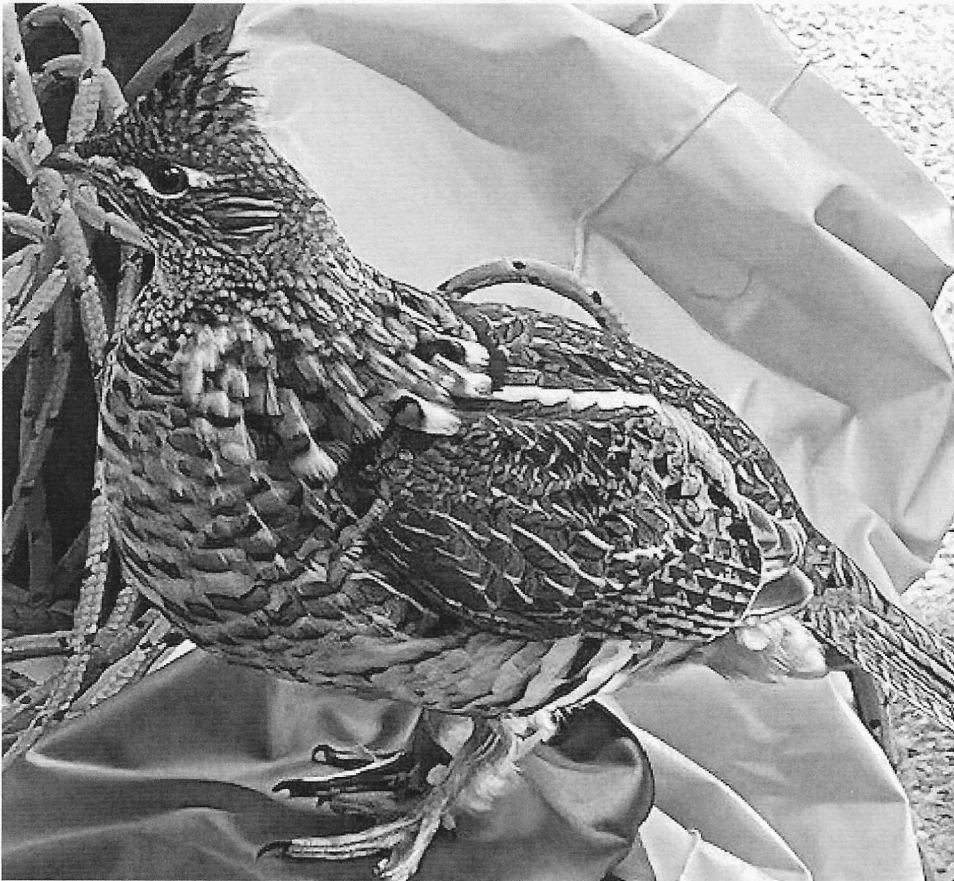


Photo: Roy Valitchka

Gretta the Grouse sits on Valitchka's summer float tubes.

# Grouse: Odd behaviors rare

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hormones indicate competition but you did not challenge it and the bird thought you were a foe not challenging it because it was dominant.

Now comes outsiders like our friends who walk away or toward the grouse. Gretta's hormones are getting more concentrated so she becomes more aggressive. When people or other grouse become submissive, Gretta wants to make sure they know who is the boss for breeding purposes. So she picks at their heels in defense of her territory. Gretta thought our friends and relatives were grouse in her territory, so her reaction was to defend. She was just reacting to the object (herself) mirrored in vehicles with mirrors or shiny bumpers and wanted this aggressive grouse to move on.

The aggressive behavior came to a close around the end of May. But it can also show up in the fall. For instance, I was deer hunting on a friend's property in October when another grouse challenged

me as I parked my car. He came forward and flew up against it. When I stepped out, he again challenged me. Ultimately, the hormones combined with the amount of light that the grouse sees triggers its reaction.

This behavior can occur with many other species, too, such as turkey, red-winged blackbirds and bear. How they respond depends on our reactions. But it does show that we need to think of where we are when it comes to wildlife.

Will Gretta show the next time we are North? Not sure, but we will miss her antics and control of our piece of woodland.

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*Roy Valitchka has been a WWOA member for 10+ years, joining after retiring from a 45+-year newspaper career. His family owns 90 acres of land bordering Little Maiden Lake in Oconto County and he is also a member of the Publications Committee.*

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