Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

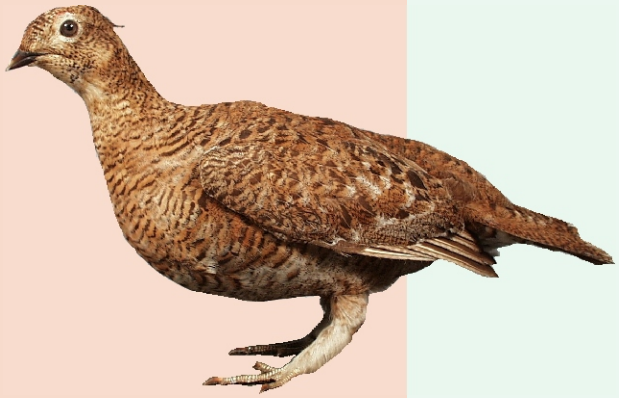
READING MUSEUM SERVICE

RED GROUSE Z95

(Lagopus lagopus)

Description

The red grouse has a plump body, a short tail and a lightly hook-tipped bill. It is reddish-brown, with its legs and feet covered in pale feathers. Birds breed in the UK in the uplands of the north and west and are resident all year round, travelling very little in their lives. Most birds (90%) stay within 1 mile of their place of birth, though occasionally they wander further afield. For example, a flock was once observed flying from mainland Scotland to Orkney, a distance of about eleven miles.



Unlike pheasants, all the red grouse in Britain are wild. They are prized by hunters partly because of this - their fast, jinking flight and wily nature making them a challenge. On the other hand, the high moorlands which are their natural habitat are carefully managed to try and maintain their numbers. Heather is their main food source and on managed moorland one-tenth to one-fifteenth of the vegetation is burned annually on a rotational basis to provide the birds with a balance of old and new heather.

Despite these practices the population is perhaps in decline because of disease, the loss of heather moorland due to overgrazing and the creation of new conifer plantations. The British population is estimated at about 250,000 pairs with around 1,000 -5,000 pairs in Ireland, but the birds are now absent from areas where they were once common. Many predators feed on grouse and there is controversy as to what effect these have on grouse numbers. In the past gamekeepers relentlessly killed animals they thought were grouse predators and, although many such practices are now illegal and have declined, birds of prey are still illegally trapped and poisoned. For example, in Scotland up to one in six hen harriers are killed each year to protect grouse.

What does it eat?

The red grouse is herbivorous and feeds mainly on the shoots, seeds and flowers of heather. It will also eat berries, cereal crops and sometimes insects.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

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Vital Statistics
Eggs: 6-9
Incubation: 19-25 days
Fledging: 12-13 days
Maximum recorded lifespan: 7 years
Length: 37-42 cm
Wingspan: 55-66 cm
Weight: 650-750 g
UK breeding population: 250,000 pairs



UK Distribution



Did you know ...
The grouse hunting season begins on 12 August - the 'Glorious 12th'. During the First World War Lord Lovat tried to have this date moved to 5 August, because of the shortage of able bodied men to act as beaters, as they were all in the army. This was condemned as an attempt to preserve aristocratic recreation while ordinary soldiers were dying and his bill was defeated, amid shouts of 'We want to shoot Germans, not grouse'.

Breeding
The birds begin to form pairs during the autumn and males become increasingly territorial as winter progresses. The male courtship display involves the cock advancing towards the hen with a mincing step and his tail fully fanned and erected, wings dropped and neck stretched out as much as possible.

The nest is a shallow scrape up to 20cm across which is lined with vegetation. About six to nine eggs are laid, mainly during April and May. They are oval, glossy and pale yellow with dark brown blotches. The eggs are incubated for 19 to 25 days, the chicks can fly 12 to 13 days after hatching and are fully grown after 30 to 35 days.