

Honorable Mention Writing – Age 10-13
Harold Eyster – Chelsea, MI

Searching for Spruce Grouse

It was a cool, breezy morning, the last day of the annual “spring fling” at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory in the upper peninsula of Michigan. As I walked out to Lake Superior, I saw that it was blanketed in fog, and the small bit of the lake that could be seen sparkled with the reflection of the rising sun. It was very pretty.

Two Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus*) flew over. I reached for my binocs, but realized I had left them in the car, so I walked back to the car, grabbed them and ran back out to the point. But, when I got there, all the fog was gone. I was amazed how fast the fog had disappeared, for I had only been gone for about five minutes. And now the sun was shining in full glory.

There wasn't much in terms of waterbirds at the point, just a couple of Horned Grebes (*Podiceps auritus*) swimming around quite far out in the lake and one low flying Common Loon (*Gavia immer*). Then someone came and said that there was a female Spruce Grouse (*Falci pennis canadensis*) nearby.

All weekend I had looked and looked for Spruce Grouse, on roadsides, in bushes, and in small jack pines, but, to no avail. Finally, on our last day I might see one! So a group of us walked (or rather ran) over to where she was supposed to be. At first we could not see anything. Then we saw a bit of movement, and a stocky, medium-sized, chicken-like bird stepped out into the open. It was an adult female Spruce Grouse. She was mostly brownish-gray with strong white barring on her underside, and lighter barring on her back, a black tail tipped with a thin rufous band, distinctive of the Taiga population. She started eating Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*) needles. She acted so fearless, it seemed as though she did not even know we were there. We all got stunning views. I stayed and watched her for about half an hour. I could not draw fast enough, because I saw her do so many neat things. Since she was only about four feet away there were amazingly fantastic views. I never thought I would get to see a Spruce Grouse this close, and get such good looks at one. I was amazed how complex the feathering was. Even though it was mainly just a bunch of browns, blacks, and whites, it was really quite beautiful. Then she walked up to me and made a low, soft cooing sound, in her throat “oooo-oooo-oooo-oooo” “oooo-oooo-ooooog-oooo oooo oooo oooog.” She was only about two feet away now, and looking straight at me. I was able to take some excellent pictures. I thought that she might have a nest nearby and was trying to get me to leave. So I did.

While I was walking back to the Point I saw a small (three inches by three inches) heap of scat. It was about the same shape and color of the scat of the wild turkey, but not nearly as big, about $\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $\frac{1}{4}$ inches so I guessed that it was probably from a Spruce Grouse, but why were they in a little heap like that? I asked someone why it

was in a little heap, and he said that in the winter, grouse make themselves a hole in the snow to sleep in, and that's why it is found in heaps.

I am going to stop writing this now, because I hear some sort of baby bird calling outside and I cannot resist the temptation of grabbing my binocs, running out the door, and finding out what kind of baby bird it is.

So if you ever want me to stay inside for a while, don't leave the windows open!

References:

The Sibley Guide to Birds. David Allen Sibley.

Birds of North America. Kenn Kaufman.