

the landowner to meet these needs. A landowner who sells as little as 30,000 board feet of hardwood sawtimber on today's market can realize a net revenue of perhaps \$10,000.00. By placing one-half of this amount in a forestry fund, the forestry program for this property could conceivably be run off of the interest on the account. So

what if there is no timber to be sold? A modest investment of \$300.00 to \$500.00 per year could accomplish two or three acres of thinning annually, could plant hundreds of trees, or could result in the establishment of much wildlife habitat in the way of brush piles, creation of den trees and small forest openings, and construction and mounting of

bird boxes. That's peanuts against all those tax dollars saved annually.

Don't let the nay-sayers beat down farmland assessment. Hold up your end by investing in your forestry program.

Species Extirpation – Local Wildlife Extinction Southern New Jersey “Pine Chickens” Ruffed Grouse

Letter written by Director Bob Williams to Ms. Jeanette Vreeland, Chairman, State of NJ, Department of Environmental Protection, NJ Fish & Game Council dated March 7, 2008

Dear Ms. Vreeland:

This letter is a follow-up to my previous letter more than three years ago. Again, I thank you for your service to the mission of protecting all of our wildlife species and habitat in New Jersey.

You are probably aware that we once had a thriving population of heath hens, *Tympanuchus cupido cupido*, in the pine plains of southern New Jersey. This was a unique and wonderful bird that went extinct in New Jersey Pine Plains around 1870. Its last population on Martha's Vineyard went extinct in the 1930's. Concerns for events such as this, spawned the conservation movement at the turn of the last century. Federal and state wildlife agencies, as well as citizen conservation organizations were formed to insure the protection and conservation of our wildlife populations for future generations to enjoy and to sustain our own high quality of life.

This movement has brought us to this point in history with significant successes. One only has to look at our Bald Eagle program to realize our progress in protecting our wildlife populations. However, our great success does not allow us to look the other way with regards to our failures and problems. With the loss of the heath hen, our southern New Jersey forest still retained its last grouse species, the ruffed grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*. I mentioned this species in my previous letter, but my concern for this species has only risen since that last letter in 2005.

My personal view of this species is crystal clear: as a lifelong resident of southern New Jersey, I have spent my life recreating and making a living in these forests. Starting in 1958, my father began taking me into these forests. We had a cabin in the Forked River Mountain Region and a deer club in the heart of the pines, Chatsworth. In my experience, ruffed grouse could be found and we hunted them with English setters throughout NJDEP wildlife management areas such as Greenwood, Howardsville, Pasadena, Winslow, Glassboro, the Forked River Mountain area, Chatsworth, and state forests such as Bass River, Wharton Forest, and Penn Forest to name but a few. My father's recollection of hunting grouse goes back to the early 1930's. These forested areas have been retained and "preserved."

The 1984 NJDEP guide to wildlife management areas listed ruffed grouse as huntable or common on nineteen wildlife management areas in southern New Jersey. Ruffed grouse are a primary keystone forest species. Their presence indicates a healthy, diverse forest ecosystem. Many additional early, seral-stage species of plants and animals are also dependent upon habitats required by grouse.

I submit to you ruffed grouse are now extirpated from this southern Pinelands region. After one hundred years of regulation and protection, they may in fact be gone, only to follow the plight of the heath hen! All of this has occurred under the very cover of environmental regulations that were created to ensure **all** species would be protected on the landscape.

There can be no higher level of environmental concern than the extirpation of any species from any regional ecosystem – it truly is the canary in the mine syndrome. If one species goes down, we know it is likely others have or will follow. The intricate web of life is an ecosystem in fragile.

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There now needs to be a balanced approach to natural resource management. As an example, a private forest landowner is being asked to survey for a recently-listed velvety tick-treefoil (*Desmodium viridiflorum*), an early successional legume plant known also to be disturbance-dependent and once a food source for grouse. It is not likely a coincidence that both species are now in trouble. However, on the same woodland, the owner is required to survey for Cooper's hawks and barred owls. If these species are found, the landowner will actually be prohibited from enhancing habitat for the two early successional species, ruffed grouse and velvety tick-treefoil. This appears to be an example of a broken process that demands micromanagement of only one species at the detriment to many others that once occupied that space or are about to be extirpated by plant succession and or fire suppression activities. The existing regulatory process does not allow for the management of the total ecosystem over ecological time frames that ecological processes require.

The present laws or the execution of those laws does not allow for short term, adverse impacts to individual species **for very long term positive impacts for a whole suite of species or ecosystem**. In fact, if grouse are indeed extirpated under the current system, one may need to make the case that it now has a higher priority than Cooper's hawks or barred owls that now appear to be recovering species. But this would be wrong as well. The fact is, **all** species are critical, and ruffed grouse need to be restored to play their role in their relationship with barred owls and Cooper's hawks as an important prey source.

It is my view the ruffed grouse may now be gone from southern New Jersey and it is not likely there is any viable breeding populations remaining. The last one I saw was dead on the road in the vicinity of Chatsworth, Burlington County in the fall of 1985. I believe others may share my view. I read in an ornithological club's press release in December 2007 the following, "I think sadly that ruffed grouse has been extirpated from southern New Jersey and I am taking it off our checklist. I hope someone can prove me wrong." This was in reference to the Christmas bird count list. The Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan states ruffed grouse as "common in all upland habitats in 1980." I agree that was true up to the mid-1980's. I will be happy to be found wrong on this issue, if in fact, the birds can be found and are reproducing with a viable sustainable population.

I remain deeply concerned that our regulatory process is having severe unintended consequences. We have a forest management process that plays species against species and this is wrong. Micro management for species of concern when land conversion, i.e. development, is proposed, is likely appropriate. But when considering natural resource management on the landscape level, it can be extremely detrimental. Are we to accept that after one hundred years of conservation efforts our last grouse species has now been allowed to go the way of the heath hen? Are our children now only to see them stuffed and/or displayed in glass cases or on shelves in our state and county environmental education centers such as the one at the NJDEP Forest Education Resource Center in Jackson, New Jersey, or only to hear their drumming on the audio tape at the Batso interpretive center?

Modern science and research has brought us to a point that we know with natural resource management there has to be a balance. All species must be provided for. We cannot manage for the "flavor-of-the-month species" and call for litigation and legislation for some species and turn our backs on another because it does not catch the lead headlines in the newspapers or television. Our natural resources must be first managed for their sustainability and viability. Whether we can use them for a renewable resource is a secondary issue. This applies to all natural resources, whether it be a tree or a ruffed grouse.

I suppose I am simply asking: Where is the balance in all of this? Where is the balance when a species that appears to be in trouble or extirpated is still managed with hunting seasons and bag limits? This didn't work for the heath hen in the Pine Plains that was listed as the Pinnated Grouse in "Forest and Stream" in the year 1884 in a synopsis of the New Jersey game laws and was still listed with a definite open season October 15 to December 1, although it had apparently been exterminated for close to twenty years. Where is the balance when a listed endangered species appears to be more important than a game species? Eagles and grouse don't live on the landscape in a relationship that one is protected and one is hunted. They live in harmony with the habitats that exist. They live as intended by Mother Nature, and it's all of our responsibility to insure they are given equal consideration in our stewardship of this forest and all forests throughout their range. Game, non-game – it makes no difference. These are labels we have placed on them, and the species had no say in it!

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I see the balance as it once was in this forest – suitable habitat for the velvety tick-trefoil that provides feeding and foraging for grouse that in turn provides a prey source for Cooper’s hawks and barred owls and seeds in turn get dispersed across the landscape, a complete cycle of life. Species habitat differs on the same landscape, but in many cases, overlaps at some stage of a species life cycle. Our present process appears to prohibit this ecological approach to forest management.

I do not write this to assign blame but to express concern about a process I view as broken. I offer my opinion in hopes of finding solutions. I have no large number of backers or political connections. I simple am a concerned citizen suggesting political and bureaucratic leadership open their minds to issues and solutions – not gridlock and the “them against us mentality.”

I ask you to consider a resolution to remove ruffed grouse in the southern area of New Jersey from a hunting season until they are recovered on the landscape. In addition, I request that you consider the issue and consider a resolution to Governor Corzine or Commissioner Jackson to provide critically-needed leadership to move the issue of stewardship of all of our forest resources forward. As before, I remain willing to help and work with state government to find solutions – not gridlock.

My proposal for a public/private partnership was presented to former NJDEP Commissioner Campbell to begin to address this wildlife issue and the concerns for catastrophic wildfire, remains intact and available to Commissioner Jackson. It’s likely that proposal only found the round file with the previous commissioner. My offer to provide a field tour of private land management also remains open.

The Pineland’s Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP), a brilliant, forward-thinking document had it right in the beginning. On Page 48 of the preamble, the CMP states, “The richly patterned landscape is the product of interacting environmental factors, primarily soils, water, fire and human disturbances.” And it speaks specifically of the need for severe disturbances, such as forestry.

I view these four factors as the four legs of a stool that supports the Pinelands National Reserve Forest. We appear to have eliminated two of the legs (whether intended or not, i.e. fire and human disturbances) and global climate changes may effect a third, “water.” With two legs lost, the stool is teetering and as the situation with grouse may be telling us, the stool has already tipped over. With global climate changes, well, think for yourselves. Bottom line: our forests are in trouble and a judicious use of silviculture (May I dare say it – logging based on ecological disturbance regimes) and use of fire is the only hope!!

Most county bird lists now list the ruffed grouse as “O” (occasional), not even uncommon, yet list barred owl as rare. We could easily show you barred owls at any twilight meeting this time of the year if you like. Yet it’s not likely anyone can take us to a breeding area this spring and hear the drumming of a male grouse. Again, I ask you where is the balance in any of this? The ruffed grouse need to now receive an “E” symbol for extirpated as its cousin, the heath hen, has. Or worse yet, as some are now suggesting, be removed from all the bird lists – how sad indeed. A regal bird the ruffed grouse, and in some areas called “the king of the forest” . . . it deserves better! When you also consider this sub-population to be, on the coastal plain, the southern-most subpopulation and its behaviors different from its northern brethren, it like many species with wide geographical range probably had unique genetic characteristics that may now be gone.

We need a new day – a balanced, integrated landscape-based approach that lifts the regulatory burden so that it no longer view managing a forest or a wildlife population in the same light as a housing development and allows all components of the ecosystem to thrive for generations to come – not in a snapshot of time at a given point in time.

Regards,

Robert R. Williams, CF, RPF #341
Certified Forester
Registered Professional Forester