

# What's in a Grouse Name?

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Spruce Grouse male by Michael A Schroeder

Although it has been 150 to 250 years since most North American species of grouse were first described, we are still having problems deciding what to call them. When Lewis and Clark first observed the Greater Sage-Grouse in 1805, they used numerous names to describe them including 'mountain cock,' 'cock of the plains,' 'prairie cock,' 'fowl of the plains,' 'long-tailed heath cock,' 'long-tailed grouse,' 'large pheasant,' 'heath hen,' 'prairie fowl,' and 'prairie hen' (Moulton 1986-1993, A history of the Lewis and Clark Journals). Their names for Greater Prairie-Chicken, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Ruffed Grouse, Blue Grouse, and Spruce Grouse were equally as varied. Lewis and Clark can be forgiven. After all, they were the first to provide detailed descriptions of the Blue Grouse and Greater Sage-Grouse. Neither species had an English name before their expedition.

All grouse now have 'official' names, thanks to a check-list of North American birds that is regularly published by the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU). The AOU generally attempts to select common names that reflect tradition, morphology, distributional consistency, and even political correctness. Despite the AOU's efforts, many grouse are still openly referred to by multiple names. For example, Johnsgard (1983, Grouse of the World) lists 'brush grouse,' 'pintail grouse,' 'prairie grouse,' 'prairie pheasant,' 'speckle-belly,' 'spiketail,' 'sprigtail,' 'white-belly,' and 'white-breasted grouse' as some of the names used for the Sharp-tailed Grouse. I have regularly heard 'sharptail,' 'prairie hen,' and 'prairie chicken' being used for the same species.

One of the reasons for confusion is that 'official' names are often changed. During the 1980's, the name for the 'Greater Prairie Chicken' was changed to 'Greater Prairie-Chicken' with the addition of a hyphen. Although the hyphenation of prairie-chicken seems to be a relatively minor change, it has been the source of widespread consternation and defiance. Other changes have been easier to understand because of evolving interpretations of grouse taxonomy. For example, when the 'Franklin's Grouse' was determined to be a subspecies of the 'Spruce Grouse,' it was renamed 'Franklin's Spruce Grouse.' When the Gunnison

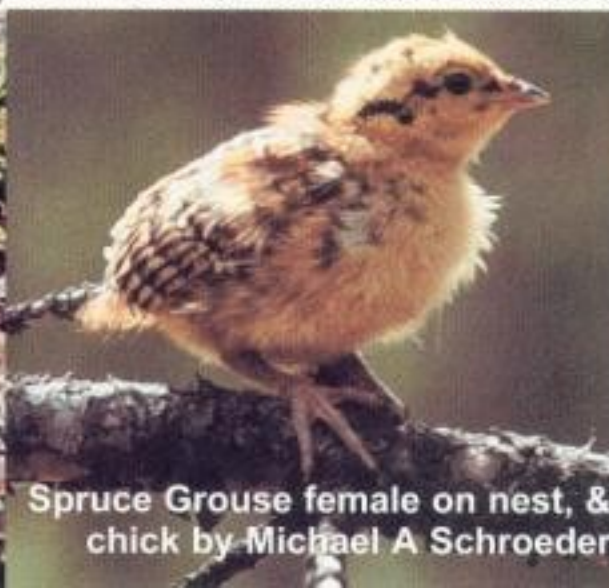
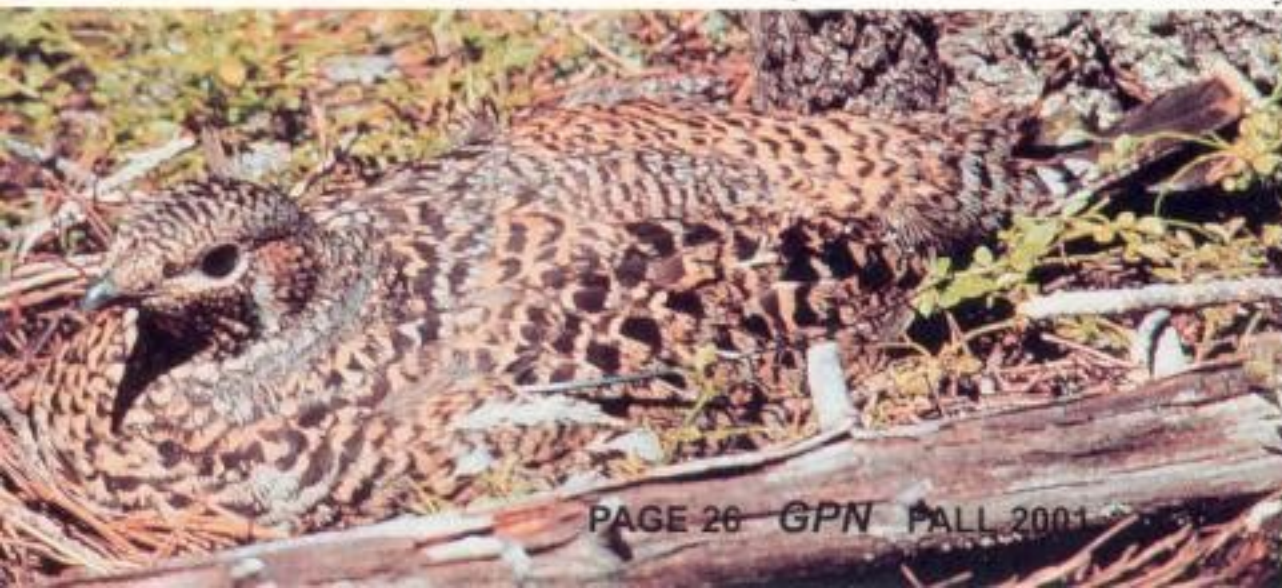
Sage-Grouse recently was determined to be a unique species, the name for the remaining sage-grouse was changed from 'sage grouse' to 'Greater Sage-Grouse'. Even this type of name change is not without controversy; many want the new name to be 'Northern Sage-Grouse.'

These name changes and controversies are not likely to end anytime soon. Numerous geneticists are currently studying grouse with the promise that there may be additional changes in taxonomy, and consequently in grouse names. For example, research by R. J. Gutiérrez and others (Wildlife Biology, Volume 6, Pages 205-211, 2000.) has indicated that the Blue Grouse may actually be 2 species. This change will seem like *deja vu* because the Blue Grouse **used** to be considered 2 species (Dusky Grouse and Sooty Grouse) before they were combined.

Every species of grouse has a 2-part scientific name in addition to its common name. The scientific name reflects the unique characteristics of each species as well as its systematic relationship with other species. Because scientists use these names to communicate with other scientists, regardless of differences in language and location, you might expect these names to be more consistent. However, the Franklin's Spruce Grouse illustrates that even the scientific names are difficult to track. The scientific name was changed from *Canachites franklinii* to *Canachites canadensis*, to *Dendragapus canadensis*, and to *Falcapennis canadensis*. Gutiérrez and others (2000) are now recommending a change back to *Canachites franklinii*.

Although name changes may be frustrating, the diversity of names also reflects our fascination with grouse.

the species to their respective cultures. In 1804, Lewis and Clark first learned about the Greater Sage-Grouse in conversations with a French trapper near the confluence of the Cheyenne and Missouri Rivers and with Mandan Indians at their winter camp in North Dakota. Despite the language differences and the lack of an AOU-sanctioned name, they had no problem understanding what a sage-grouse was before they saw one. Consequently, they were well-prepared and excited about their first observation, which came in June 1805. We can only hope that the excitement of seeing grouse in their native habitat will continue to make any controversies about names seem insignificant by comparison.



Spruce Grouse female on nest, & chick by Michael A Schroeder

Virtually every native language has unique names for the endemic species of grouse, illustrating the importance of