

October 3, 1952

Mr. W. T. Cox,
Commissioner of Conservation,
Old Capitol Bldg.,
St. Paul, Minnesota

Dear Mr. Cox:

Although the ruffed grouse will probably never again be shootable game in Iowa, we have as you doubtless know an aesthetically and scientifically valuable remnant of the species in the north-east counties of our state. This remnant we hope to keep as a permanent part of our fauna in what environment we have left which is suitable for the birds or reasonably can be made so.

The management of the ruffed grouse, of course, is not to be thought of wholly in terms of protection or the preservation of natural habitats; the fact that it is a species exhibiting cyclic fluctuations even under virgin wilderness conditions complicates exceedingly our efforts at conservation. Nor are our problems simplified by the barriers of unknowns which continually confront us when we try to plan an intelligent management program. Manifestly, before we can do anything that really counts, we must have some knowledge as to the nature of our problems and as to the tools with which we have to work. Unless our endeavors are based upon research instead of mere opinion and unorganized, undigested, and often questionable fragments of data, we can hardly look for perceptible improvement over the results obtained in the past by the hit- and - miss and rule-of-thumb methods which have made so many of our conservation measures ineffective, if not actually detrimental.

By research I do not mean the indefinite accumulation of facts supporting points already adequately substantiated. The ecology of the ruffed grouse, however, presents baffling enigmas of tremendous consequence, and progress made is of necessity slow and hard-won; concerning this species we are far from likely to have overly many data on the majority of the significant life history questions before us. Indeed, our knowledge of these matters is

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so scant that we can scarcely piece together a passable picture of the grouse cycle in its most superficial aspects. Science has managed laboriously to extract a few sound facts from the nebulous unknown, and these are just beginning to lead somewhere.

May I comment a bit on the work of Dr. Green and Mr. King? Dr. Green's researches on tularemia are so widely known as to need no mention. If the periodic grouse die-offs are due to disease - and the available evidence strongly indicates that they are - Dr. Green, with his ability and background in wild life disease investigations, is certainly the man to handle this particular phase of the study. He cannot be expected to do everything, however.

Separate from and of an entirely different nature than Dr. Green's bacteriological researches, Mr. King's field studies and census work impress me as constituting an integral part of the whole grouse-cycle research movement. Regardless of who does it, the kind of work King has started needs to be done, or the final ecological equations to be derived from this and kindred studies will be sadly out of balance. I'm taking the liberty to express myself on this subject in view of the likelihood of the University being forced to discontinue the ruffed grouse field work this fall because of lack of funds.

Dr. Green's study ought to give us invaluable information upon the role of disease-causing organisms during the next grouse die-off which will soon be on the way, if it isn't now. If his work is not beset by unforeseen misfortune, I am as confident as a scientist dares to be that at the culmination of the coming decline he will be in a position to say with some certainty what did it. He may be able to say more. There are some highly significant questions nevertheless, which I doubt can be answered unless field and census work contemporaneous with his own special studies is carried on. I don't see how correlations can be made between infection foci and grouse and rabbit population densities - a question of extreme practical application in management. I don't see, for example, from whence will come adequate answers to questions pertaining to discontinuity of grouse range, variations in severity, duration, and time of occurrence of cyclic mortality and so on. It is virtually an axiom in wild life research that problems so far as possible should be checked both in the field and in the laboratory; neither the field nor the laboratory approach reaches full effectiveness without the other.

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At the very least, censuses in strategic areas during the cyclic crisis should be conducted. The peak is almost upon us, according to the signs, and from now to its culmination and decline is the most important time of all that representative population figures should be secured. Should advantage not be taken of the present cycle, conservation would have to wait no less than the length of another (about ten years) for information urgently needed now. And for vital information on a phenomenon profoundly affecting three of Minnesota's choice game birds - ruffed grouse, sharp tailed grouse, and prairie chicken - ten years is a long delay, particularly if there is any way of avoiding it.

Why should I be so concerned about Minnesota's grouse? Aside from an interest in wild life generally supposed to be proper in a conservationist and one professionally engaged in studies upon gallinaceous game among other things, I can see where the findings from the Minnesota grouse investigations may be of no slight utility to the Iowa program. Iowa's part in ruffed grouse investigations I'm afraid must be rather incidental, if only on account of financial and personnel limitations. There is no valid reason why it should be otherwise; Minnesota has the start, the manpower, and far more grouse. If you suspect that I propose to sit back and let Minnesota do the work from which Iowa expects to profit, you are perfectly right. That is precisely what I propose to do and if such a thing as a letter will help to further that end - here it is:

Yours sincerely,

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Paul L. Errington,
Prof. Wild Life Research