

## Sharp-tailed Grouse



On their dancing grounds in spring, it's relatively easy to tell the difference between male and female sharp-tailed grouse. Males are doing the dancing. Females are watching.

In fall, differentiating male sharptails from females isn't quite as easy, but if you know what to look for, the differences are obvious.



*Hunters who send in wing envelopes are also asked to pluck some feathers from the top of a sharptail's head. There's a good reason for that.*



*These sharptail head feathers came from envelopes sent in by hunters. Female feathers (left) exhibit an alternating buff-black striping pattern. Feathers from a male (right) are all black with a buff-colored border.*

Male head feathers are black with a buff-colored or tan outside border. Female head feathers exhibit alternating buff and black stripes.

If head feathers don't do it, look at the central tail feathers. The tips of these tail feathers look similar, so you need to pull them out, or pull back the feathers that cover much of the tail. Central tail feathers of a female sharptail carry buff-black markings similar to those of their head feathers. Male tail feathers have more white in them, and the striping or markings aren't as consistent.

When you examine an entire grouse tail, you can also judge the bird's sex. On a male, the feathers running either direction from the center are white and/or light gray. On a female, those same feathers are often mottled with buff/brown markings.

The accompanying photos show these characteristics. If you know what to look for, it is sometimes possible to judge the sex of a sharptail as it flushes, by whether the tail is brown or white.



*Central tail feathers from male and female sharpshinners. The coloration of these feathers is an indicator of sex. The four feathers on the left came from females. Note the alternating buff-black horizontal striping. The four male tail feathers on the right show more white, and the striping pattern is more vertical and not as consistent as on female feathers.*



*Pulling away feathers that cover a grouse's tail reveals another way to tell males from females. The feathers on either side of center on the female (left) are mottled. The same feathers on a male (right) are white on the ends and silvery-gray closer to the body.*

Aging sharptails is similar to aging other grouse species. If the number nine and 10 primaries are still growing – look for the bluish quill, you're likely to see this early in the season – the bird is an adult. If primaries seven and/or eight are growing, the bird is likely a juvenile.

If the quills of all primaries are hard and white, that means they've stopped growing. If that's the case, the appearance of the outer two primaries reveals age. If those feathers are pointed and frayed, the bird is young-of-the-year. If those feathers are rounded and smooth, the bird is an adult.



These close-ups of the outer primaries of two sharptails attest to the occasional difficulty of determining whether a bird is an adult or juvenile. The outer two primaries appear similar. Both outer primaries on the wing in the center photos above have smooth tips, indicating an adult bird. But look closely at the number nine (second from right) primary in both photos.

Citation:

<http://gf.nd.gov/hunting/private-land-open-sportsmen/id-guide>

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