

all about ❖❖❖

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CAPERCAILLIE

Tetrao urogallus

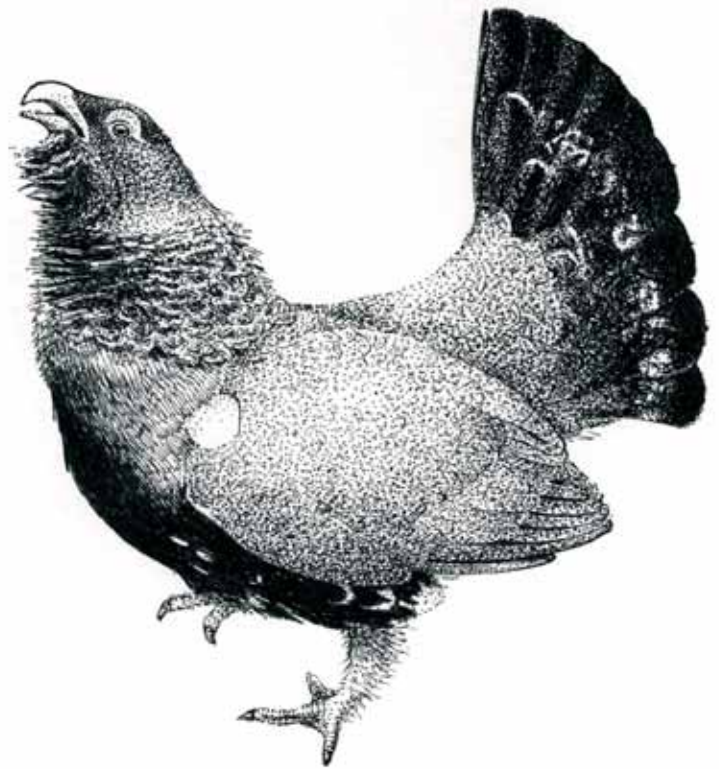
The male capercaillie is a huge bird (86cm tall) with blackish grey feathers and a fan shaped tail. He has a curved whitish yellow beak with a 'beard' of stiff feathers underneath.

The female capercaillie is smaller (about 62cm). Her feathers are reddish brown and grey striped with black which provides good camouflage when she is sitting on her nest. Nests are made by scraping a hollow on the ground at the base of a pine tree. This is sometimes lined with moss, feathers and pine needles. The hen lays 5–8 creamy coloured eggs with reddish brown markings.

Behaviour

In spring the cocks come together at a special site called a lek. They each perform a song and dance display to attract females to their particular stances and defend them against other males. The birds puff out their feathers and show off their fan tails. From time to time they jump into the air. The cocks make a

lot of strange noises including clicks, pops, wheezing and gurgling. They may approach each other in mock battle but it is unusual for them to really fight.



Sometimes, in part of a forest where there are not many other male birds, a capercaillie will attack anything that it sees as a threat including people, other animals or even cars.

Where do they live?

The capercaillie's ideal habitat is a native pinewood with space between the trees and plenty of plants growing on the forest floor, especially blaeberrys.

Capercaillie also live in man-made forestry plantations of Scots pine, larch and spruce. In poor habitats the birds can find enough food to survive but do not breed successfully. They generally do not do very well in wet areas.

Food and feeding

In spring and summer they eat the berries, leaves and stems of blaeberry and other forest plants together with the insects found among them. Insects are very important for young chicks. In winter when little else is available capercaillie eat Scots pine needles and cones. When these are not available they will also eat parts of other conifers, such as larch, spruce and Douglas fir, and deciduous trees.

The capercaillie's natural predators are the fox and wild cat. Crows take their eggs.

Capercaillie and humans

A major problem for capercaillies has been the destruction of most of their woodland habitat. Thousands of years ago a large part of the Highlands was covered by pine forests, but these have gradually disappeared. Trees were burnt as fuel, cut for timber and cleared for farming, especially grazing for sheep. It is also thought that changes in the climate had an impact on the forests. It became colder, wetter and windier which

made it harder for trees to regenerate naturally. Sheep and deer ate the seedlings of any trees that did regenerate which stopped them growing to replace those that had been removed. By the 1950s much of this natural forest had gone.

The loss of these forests meant the loss of many of those animals and plants that depended on them. In the case of the capercaillie the situation became so bad that over 200 years ago it became extinct in Scotland. However in Victorian times (1837) a landowner reintroduced the capercaillie to Scotland by bringing some Swedish birds to his estate in Perthshire. He started with 13 cocks and 19 hens and these survived and bred so well that after only another 25 years there were over 1,000 capercaillie on this estate alone. The birds spread beyond his land and were also reintroduced to other areas.

Capercaillie are still under threat

The number of capercaillie in Scotland has fallen from about 20,000 in the early 1970s to between 2,000 and 3,000 in 1991. Another national survey (winter 1998/99) suggested that the population has continued to decline. The capercaillie is a member of the grouse family and different species of woodland grouse are in decline in many parts of Europe, though the main cause of this is not known.

What is being done?

Many organisations, including the

Forestry Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage, are carrying out research to try and find out why the number of capercaillie is still falling and are try to manage forests to encourage successful breeding. This information can then be passed on to landowners so that they too can help the capercaillie by changing the way they manage their forests. Some Scots pine plantations have been made capercaillie reserves and in these planting is carried out in a way that suits the needs of the capercaillie. A growing number of people are working to protect those areas of native pinewood that remain and by doing so protect the capercaillie's habitat. These include landowners, foresters, community groups and conservation organisations. Many of the remaining native pinewoods are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or Nature Reserves which gives them extra protection.

The main threat to pinewoods today is over grazing by red deer and sheep which eat seedlings and damage trees. In areas where there are large numbers of deer no new trees grow to replace the old and the forest gradually disappears. One solution to this problem is putting up special fences to keep the deer away from young trees. Unfortunately a number of capercaillie have been killed by colliding with deer fencing. To help the capercaillie survive, fences need to be removed as soon as they have served their purposes. An alternative is to reduce the number of deer by shooting some of them, so that there is

no need to erect fences.

[Finding out more](#)

Scottish Birds

Valerie Thom. Collins. 1994.

The Birds of Scotland

Emilio Dicerbo. Lochar Publishing Ltd. 1991.

If you want to visit a pinewood a useful book is:

A Guide to Nature Reserves in Scotland.

Linda Bennet. Macmillan. 1989

[How you can get involved](#)

Contact groups of other people concerned about the future of Scotland's wildlife.

Check your library for information about groups in your area.

The Young Ornithologists Club (YOC), which is the junior section of the RSPB, produces a magazine and Scottish newsletter which includes information about environmental issues and give you the chance to help wildlife by taking part in projects and surveys.

Contact: RSPB, Dunedin House, 25 Ravelstone Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP

To find out more about visiting a forest, contact your local Forest Enterprise Office or local Countryside Ranger Service.

A poster of a capercaille is available free of charge from either Scottish Natural Heritage or the Forestry Commission: Scottish Natural Heritage, Publications Section, Battleby, Redgorton, Perth,

PH1 3EW.

Forestry Commission, 231 Corstorphine
Road, Edinburgh EH12 7AT.

Glossary

Camouflage

The way in which animals hide from their enemies by resembling their surroundings or blending in with them.

Habitat

The place in which an animal or plant lives.

Lek

A small area of ground which is defended by the male bird when it is attracting females to it for breeding.

Native pinewood

A natural or semi natural wood where Scots pine is the main type of tree.

Natural regeneration

Trees growing from seeds spread by wind, birds or other natural means.

Plantation

An area of planted woodland (often used to describe large areas recently planted, predominantly with conifers).

