

**Blue Grouse, *Dendragapus obscurus***  
Sawmill Mountain, Ventura County

**Observer:**

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**Date of Observation:** 2 Aug 1992 **Date of Writeup:** 4 Aug 1992

**Description:** I flushed fairly large (chicken-sized) bird while on a backpacking trip in Mt. Pinos area. I was eastbound; the bird flushed with very loud wingbeats from bushes about 90° relative, circled behind me and disappeared from view at about 225° relative. The head, dorsal surface of the body, and wings appeared mottled in no particular pattern, but gave the overall impression of a medium-brown plumage. The tail was fanned as the bird banked; the dorsal color extended about halfway down the tail (presumably the uppertail coverts), beyond which the tail was a uniform dark brown, with a narrow, white (or pale) terminal band. The underside of the bird was not seen.

**Note:** Very similar wingbeats were heard from a bird I flushed a few hundred meters N of the summit of Grouse Mt. (about 2600 m elev.) the previous day, but I did not sight that bird.

**Habitat:** Relatively open mix of Jeffrey Pine and White Fir of all sizes, interspersed with a few shrubs and many low, flowering plants, a little over 2600 m elevation.

**Identification:**

The bird seems to have been a female Blue Grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus*) based upon its size, head and body coloration, and tail pattern. The large size, and lack of contrasting patterns on the head, would exclude any of the local quail; and the tail pattern (not to mention habitat) would exclude any Ptarmigan. The lack of banding in the subterminal portion of the tail would exclude Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*); the pale terminal band on the tail would exclude the northerly and easterly races of Spruce Grouse (*D. canadensis*), which have a "chestnut" (NGS) or "robin rufous" (Boag & Schroeder) terminal band. The female of the southwesterly race of the latter bird (*D. c. franklinii*) has a white terminal band, but also has white tips on the feathers of the uppertail coverts, which I am sure I would have seen on the fanned tail had they been present. The lack of gray coloration in the plumage seems to rule out a male Blue Grouse. Two inconsistencies remain: 1) the tail of Blue Grouse is variably described as "dark" (NGS) or "black" (Farrand) with a gray tip. I think it likely that my impression of dark brown tail with white or pale tip is an artifact of the effects of the early morning light and my sunglasses. 2) The terminal bands on the tails pictured in both NGS and Farrand are wider than the band on the bird I saw. Bent describes the terminal band of the subspecies expected here (*D. o. howardi*) as "averaging wider" than that of *D. o. sierrae*, which is separately described as "narrower" than that of the nominate race. Without knowing the range of subspecific and individual variation, it is not possible for me to judge this feature.

**Observing Conditions:**

Time: approximately 0750.

Exact location: on trail between Mts. Abel and Pinos, approx. 1 km SW of peak of Sawmill Mountain. Topographical map indicates trail is in Ventura County in this area, even though Sawmill peak is in Kern County.

Distance: bird was 7 to 8 m away when flushed.

Duration of observation: about 4 sec.

Sun: early morning sun in back of me for most of bird's flight.

Wind: none.

Temperature: estimated 15° to 20° C (had been 13° C at 0615 at 2500 m elevation).

Optical equipment: sunglasses (gray tint).

Familiarity with species: I have some familiarity with both sexes of the western races of Ruffed, Spruce, and Blue Grouse, and much observing experience with the various species of Quail in North America.

Other observers: other person in hiking party was not wearing his eyeglasses at the time.

**Literature Consulted:**

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**Distribution:**

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