

THE WESTERN CAPERCAILLIE - by Graham U'ren

Saving the Capercaillie

I have been a member of the RSPB for longer than I can remember. Twelve years ago, I was given the chance to become a founder member of the Friends of the Capercaillie, a group within the RSPB Scotland which raises money for research and conservation programmes designed to arrest the decline of the Capercaillie population in this country.

In the 1970s there were some 20,000 birds in the pine forests of Scotland. The numbers then steadily dropped to about 1000 over the next 30 years, habitat pressure probably being the main cause. At an estimated 1200, the current population has stabilised but the range has shrunk and there are no signs of an immediate significant revival. However, the RSPB is certain that without this programme, the bird would be heading for extinction in this country. Much has been achieved, especially at the Society's huge Abernethy pine forest reserve on the northern slopes of the Cairngorm mountains and through the growing cooperation of other forest owners, public and private.



Slovenia 1999 prestamped wildlife postal stationery with special cancellation, with a cock capercaillie in pine forest habitat.

Creating a Collection

It was not long before I realised that an interesting collection from my bird stamps could be put together to tell the story of the capercaillie. However, I had in mind something modest - the Gibbons 2003 edition of "Collect Birds on Stamps" listed 33 stamps of the Western capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* and one of the Black Billed Capercaillie *Tetrao urogalloides*, most of which I had. I had no idea just how large the project would become once I started to search intensively to find covers, cancellations and other related material.



Left - Liechtenstein produced the first capercaillie stamp in 1946. Right - an unadopted essay for the 1911 Liechtenstein definitives issue which would have been the first capercaillie stamp 35 years earlier.

This project was significant for me as it was to be the first involving serious research for the write up and ordered presentation of any part of my chaotic collection. I have been collecting, or should I say accumulating, bird stamps for most of my working life - as preparation for retirement, I would tell myself. Well, that time had arrived!

I now realise that there is a sizeable step to be made to turn stock books and packets of bird stamps and interminable check lists and file notes into a coherent and satisfying collection and that all serious thematic collectors face a challenge in designing a structure for their collections and displays. It took me a year to organise this quite small part of my overall collection. It was not just deciding the different sections for evolution and taxonomy, range, description and behaviour, human interactions, conservation, capercaillie in art and local and military posts that took the time but the finding of material to fill gaps and to create a balance in presentation and text both overall and on each individual page.

Over the winter of 2015-16, I grasped the nettle and mounted and wrote up the collection and was staggered to find myself several months later with 60 pages. These included 260 items (a few of them non philatelic) with 510 images of the Western Capercaillie. There is still only the sole issue for the Black Billed Capercaillie, from Mongolia.

Above all, my knowledge was greatly expanded by the special covers and cancellations that turned up relating to the capercaillie as an icon of both hunting and of conservation right across Europe from Spain in the west to the Yenesei valley in the east which divides Russia and the territories of the two species.

The resulting album caught the attention of the RSPB and featured in one of its newsletters.



RSPB Friends of the Capercaillie newsletter 2016

A Systematic Study of the Western Capercaillie

My collection starts with a section on the Taxonomy and Evolution of the species, referring in passing to the four species of the genus Tetrao, or forest dwelling “wood grouse” - Western Capercaillie, Black Billed Capercaillie, Eurasian Black Grouse and the Caucasian Black Grouse.



This marginal block from a sheet of the 1968 Pro Juventute stamp shows the name of the Capercaillie in the languages spoken in Switzerland.



Left - the European Black Grouse (T tetrix). Right - the Caucasian Black Grouse (T mlokosiewiczii)

One of the earliest stamps came from the remote inland Russian Republic of Tuva and the 1950s stamp may in fact represent a hybrid of the two capercaillies which are found in this marginal area between the two species of capercaillie.

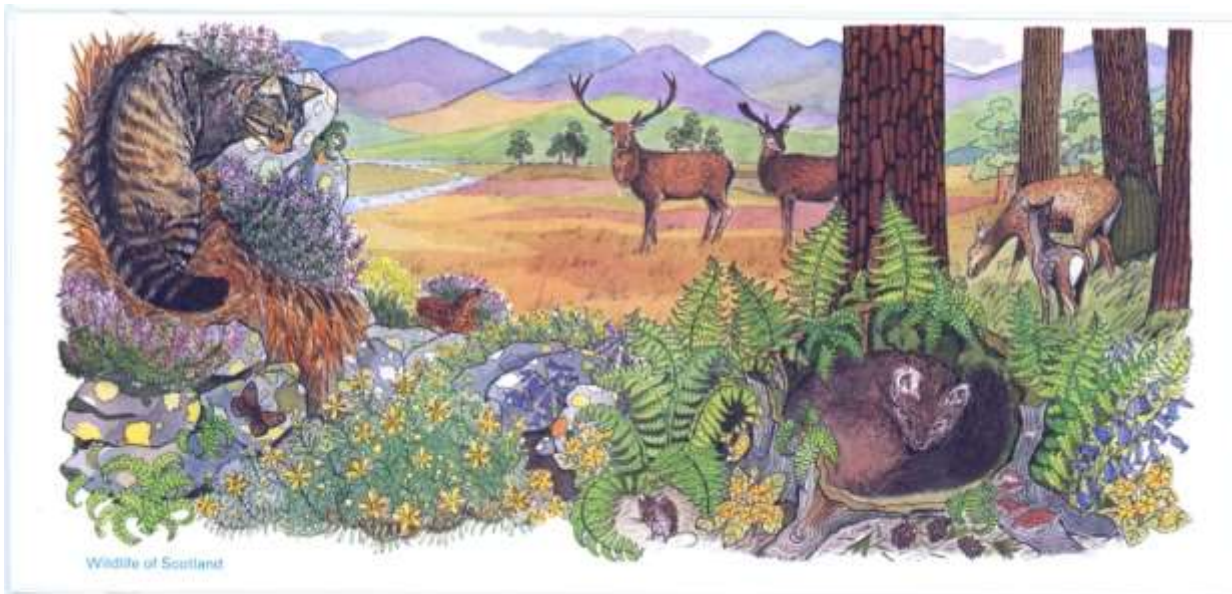


Left - Mongolia 1961 tete-beche triangles of *T urogalloides*. Right - Tuva 1934 tete-beche triangles of a capercaillie sp.

As far as the range of the bird is concerned, it is most common in the vast Boreal forests of Scandinavia and western Russia. However, there are remnant populations on the forested slopes of most of the main mountain ranges of Central Europe from the Cantabrians to the Rhodopes in the south and from the Cairngorms to the Carpathians further north. Of the 34 countries in the range of the Western Capercaillie, 28 have to date issued stamps showing the species.



Capercaillie stamps and cancellations from Spain, Bulgaria and Poland.



Apart from local issues from the Scottish islands, there have been no postally valid stamps from Great Britain illustrating the capercaillie, to date. The 1980 airletter featuring the Wildlife of Scotland, however, includes a hen capercaillie in the undergrowth in the left middle ground (*above*).

The name capercaillie derives from the Scots Gaelic *capull coille* meaning “horse of the woods”, from a time when the bird was far more common in this country. However, it was reintroduced in Perthshire in the early nineteenth century, after extinction as a result of overhunting.

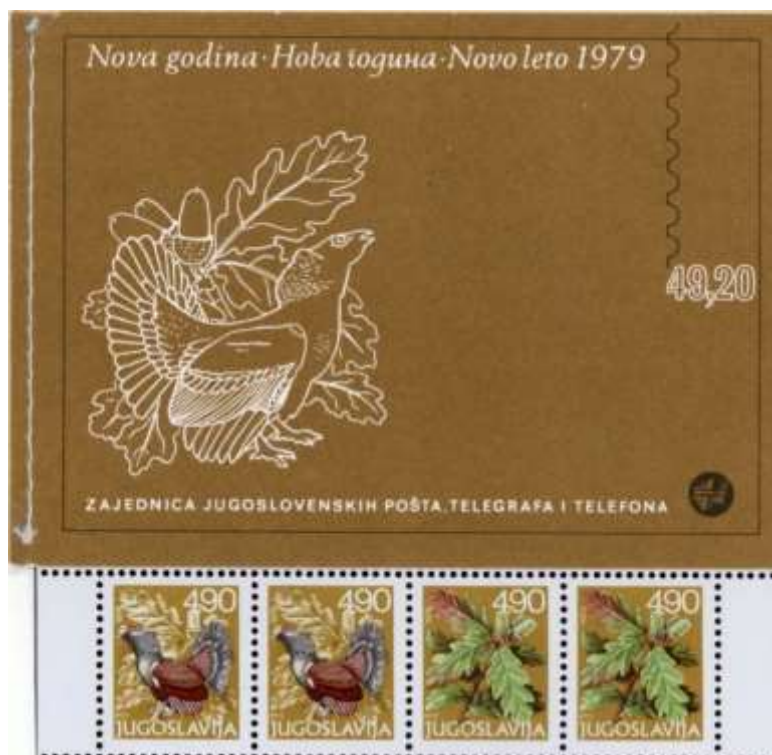
Description and behaviour

In describing the bird, the 2013 miniature sheet (*below*) from Bulgaria speaks for itself. The cock is a third larger than the hen and is one of only a few male birds (some other grouse, ruff, bustard, cock of the rock, musk duck, birds of paradise etc.) which uses its size, plumage and aggression at a lekking ground to contest for the right to mate with the local females. It is mainly black with a fan tail which it spreads when

challenged, with a pattern of white spots, a bristling beard and a red eyebrow wattle to show off. The females, on the contrary, are smaller and well camouflaged for their role in rearing the chicks under cover of the forest undergrowth. As sedentary birds they are adapted for the cold with dense plumage and feathered feet and they are clumsy fliers.



Capercaillies mostly inhabit mature pine forests with clearings and ground cover of heather and berry bushes such as blaeberry (bilberry), juniper, cowberry or cloudberry, which yield fruit, shoots and caterpillars in the spring for nourishing the chicks. The winter staple for the adults is a survival diet of pine needles. However, the bird is found in other habitats in the more southern ranges, such as beech, oak and holly forest.



This 1979 booklet and part pane from the former Yugoslavia shows the capercaillie in an oak woodland habitat.

Hunting and Conservation

The relationship with humans has been dominated by hunting and latterly by conservation. Among stamp issues and postmarks, there is a marked change in emphasis from the 1970s onwards as the previously celebrated magnificent gamebird, which adorns many of the castles of central Europe as an example of the taxidermist's art, became a symbol of global conservation instead.



One of several first day covers produced for the 1965 German Youth Fund stamps, featuring game birds and even a slaughtered bird in the cover illustration.



Iconic image of a cock capercaillie from the 1959 Austria issue for the International Hunting Congress.



This 1967 official shooting card from the 600th anniversary of the Koblenz Schutzenfest uses a capercaillie as a target.

In latter years, however, the bird has been an international symbol for conservation and sustainability across Europe, as shown by the recent Serbia issue and the stamp and special cancellation from Romania below.



The national parks of Europe and Russia, in particular, have featured the capercaillie in stamps, cancellations, covers and postal stationery as symbols of their conservation aims and of the particular programmes for protection of the capercaillie where it occurs. The Bavarian national park and the Sumava national park respectively constitute the great Bohemian Forest astride the border between Germany and the Czech Republic and are the subject of capercaillie stamps and cancellations (*below*).



The Hartz mountains of central Germany were favourite hunting grounds for the wealthy and aristocratic in the nineteenth century with many hunting lodges, some incorporating the name of the bird in German - auerhahn. Today, the national park bans hunting in some parts but still licences it in others. Despite the vast areas of forest habitat in Russia, there are also large national parks and reserves with strict conservation policies for the capercaillie and other species.



Contrasting commemorations from 1948. Left - a 1948 cancellation from Hahnenklee in the Oberhartz, then a popular hunting forest. Right - a first day cover and cancellation for the 1992 Russian stamp commemorating the Prioksko Terrasnyi reserve just south of Moscow, founded for conservation in the same year, 1948!

Local and Military stamps

Apart from the Scottish islands, other areas in Europe which have produced local stamps featuring the capercaillie, include Sweden (Mulsjö and Gastrikland) and they also feature on the stamps of at least one private postal firm (Citipost).



Above - a block of local post stamps of 2002 from Mulsjö in Sweden in the heart of the southern forests.

Finally, one of the more unusual occurrences of the capercaillie on stamps is the WW2 Swiss air force welfare issue for the Flieger KP17 parachute unit. Not only was the neutral country's air force not known for its combat action, especially after a stiff warning from the German High Command after downing a German aircraft at the start of the war, but the capercaillie can hardly be considered to be the most agile advertisement for any airborne fighting force.



Above - two examples from covers sent from Swiss airbases of the capercaillie welfare stamps for 1939 and 1940.