Hunting with Maggie, an English setter, Joyce Ziegler loves it when the bird dog points the grouse or woodcock, even if she doesn't always hit the bird. (Ziegler photo)

IRON COUNTY—Michigan's ruffed grouse season opened Saturday, Sept. 15.

This year's grouse hunters can still expect to see a fairly good grouse population in the Western Upper Peninsula. The adjacent woodlands of Wisconsin are a good indicator for U.P. grouse numbers.

An annual report by Brian Dhuey of the Wisconsin DNR indicates that grouse drumming counts in their northern area decreased from about 2.3 (2011) to 1.7 (2012) drums per stop.

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Wisconsin DNR's 2011 ruffed grouse brood count had indicated a 23 percent decrease. This areas grouse cycle peaks typically reach their high point during years ending in a zero.

Michigan DNR Wildlife Division is not currently collecting directly comparable data. Michigan collects flush count data from volunteers.

Last year's Michigan 2010/11 report indicates an increase from 1.5 (2009) to 2.0 (2010) flushes per hour for the Upper Peninsula.

This year's Michigan DNR Report for 2011/12 is not yet available.

A brief Michigan DNR 2012 report does however state, "Grouse populations are cyclical, typically rising and falling over a ten year period. Indications are that we are coming off a peak."

The Michigan DNR statement continues, "Drumming surveys indicate that grouse populations are high" and "favorable brood conditions last spring should help this year's reproduction."

Michigan's surveys indicate that woodcock are in a long term decline due to decreasing habitat quality. Hunters can expect the same results that they experienced last year.

The Upper Peninsula woodcock flush rate was about 0.9 flushes per hour in the 2010/11 report.

Both grouse and woodcock hunters typically look for stands of aspen and other "forest early successional habitat" according to Al Stewart of the Michigan DNR.

"I personally find woodcock in early age aspen stands (5 to 10 years old) in the early woodcock season. These birds often move to older age aspen stands as the season progresses. Woodcock favor habitat that is near water, such as streams, reservoirs, or swamps. Grouse like varied aspen age classes with a mixture of heavy cover mixed in.

"We hunt with an English setter and love it when she points the grouse or woodcock, even if we do not always hit the bird. During the early grouse season if you flush one grouse, you should always be ready for multiple grouse flushes, since the grouse broods are still together.

"It is a great time to be in the northwoods, especially as the fall colors peak prior to leaf fall. The

odds for grouse hunters improve somewhat during their annual dispersal period as it corresponds with leaf fall, although they still are quite elusive for wing shooting."

Bird hunters who worry about their shooting percentage usually do not start hunting before leaf fall progresses.

It is a good practice to check the grouse's crop located in the bird's neck. Typically the crop holds their undigested food like buds, seeds, leaves and berries; giving you an idea of what food sources to look for that may increase your chances of flushing grouse while you are hunting.

If the woods are dry, dog hunters should also carry water for the dog and themselves. Dehydrated dogs and hunters become lethargic just like running athletes.

If you need more information on grouse or woodcock hunting and regulations refer to the Michigan Hunting Digest or call Al Stewart of the Michigan DNR at (517) 373-1263.

View the online Wisconsin DNR Ruffed Grouse Drumming Survey or its Ten Week Brood Observations by accessing them at www.dnr.wi.gov .