

Big Sky Journal
JANET Feb,
AND THE '88
GROUSE 98

BY DATUS PROPER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN O. WILLIAMS

*There is a passion for hunting,
something deeply implanted in the human breast.*

—CHARLES DICKENS

We were bouncing along an old lumber road, flanked on the left by a cliff and on the right by clouds with gaps through which a brave person might have looked down a thousand feet. Not me. I concentrated on wash-outs in the shoulder while David King craned his neck upward, picking out ridges where blue grouse might live. It would have been a logical way to divide responsibility, him scouting and me staving off disaster, except that David was in the driver's seat.

Our companion on this day was Janet, who raised the level of our discourse, and possibly of our terrain. I would not have felt compelled to climb quite so high and might have restrained David from doing so. Janet, however, was a New York television producer, so naturally David wanted to show her the best of Montana. She was wiry and quick—up to the hike.

The ruts under our tires squirmed downhill into a meadow where sun gilded prairie grass. David parked his truck there, jumped out, and trotted to the tailgate for dogs and gear. My gait was closer to a wobble—no



*A pair of well-earned
blue grouse, above.*

*The author's dog, right, a
German shorthaired pointer
named Huckleberry.*



2 7

"THE BIGHORN," TOM MONTGOMERY says, "gets beautiful light, although it's not an inherently beautiful river."

A photographer who also happens to be interested in catching fish, Montgomery found himself beginning and ending his days in darkness, loading and unloading the boat with a miner's light strapped to his forehead. The necessity of fishing from start to finish gave him a look at a single, small stretch of water as it existed in all conditions: before the brooding storm, after the early snow shower, just as the boat became islanded under a pocket of light.

It happens that the finest times to photograph—often the finest times to fish—tend to be when the weather has driven the largest slice of weekend fishermen back to their Winnebagos. *Baetis* and rainstorms out of the mountains, brown trout and fog off the water, the Bighorn is most alive when there are fewer people to see it. Fortunately for the rest of us, Tom Montgomery has been one of those people. BSJ



A late October storm on the Bighorn, just upstream of the Little Known Rapids.



The author hunting early season blue grouse in the hills outside of Livingston, the Absaroka mountains in the background.

reflection on his skill at the wheel, mind you. I would bet on David to win if he should ever enter his pickup in our local race-a-wreck oval, which I earnestly hope he won't because he is a physician, and the valley can ill afford a crash with him in it.

David is as skinny as me. He got that way by working sixteen hours a day, sleeping four, and then going hunting for blue grouse, which are a vertical species. They climb on foot, like us humans, but then commute down mountainsides on wings, faster than anyone can drive. Even Dr. King.

Janet liked the dogs—David's Rex, a portly yellow

Labrador retriever, and my Huckleberry, a wiry brown German shorthaired pointer—but they ignored her. I tried to explain that they were social animals around the fireplace but workers out here, with an intensity of focus that a television crew might envy.

It was Janet who kept her distance when we uncased our guns. David tried to show her mine, made in London in 1896 by a James Woodward who, as craftsman, was the equal of Antonio Stradivari. You would agree if you could examine a Stradivarius and a Woodward side-by-side with a jeweler's loupe. Janet reacted as if David had tried to hand her a rattlesnake.

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We started hunting where evergreen alpine smells merged with sage and grass creeping up from below. In between the two worlds was a bottom lit by aspens from which the sun's energy was just starting to fade. We may have told Janet that we were following the creek to water our dogs, but the luminous leaves had something to do with our route.

Janet could not know what to expect from our hike, but the rest of us did, slow men and fast dogs, building up merit with each step. A perfectly true-to-life account of this day, or any other day of real hunting, would contain thousands of words of walking for every syllable of shooting.

I am talking about an extremely simple matter: the pursuer cannot pursue if he does not integrate his vision with that of the pursued. That is to say, hunting is an imitation of the animal.

— JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

Rex covered the brushy bottom while Huck searched the meadow—a good division of labor for the wrong reasons. Rex liked to hunt close to us humans, and Huck liked to hunt where Rex wasn't. The adrenaline part began when Rex snuffled in the brush, out of sight. We heard the sound of wings and skidded downhill, trying to keep our feet ready. (Not everybody knows this, but you shoot with your feet.)

Rex pushed out a bird in front of David, and another flew straight away from me—not the big blues we were expecting, but late-hatched ruffed grouse, too small. Four or five more flushed and bored into the woods, one at a time. I mounted the Woodward with its safety-slide on, blocking the firing pins. I imagined exactly when I would take each shot, and where each grouse would come down in a flurry of brown feathers and leaves of chokecherry. It was easy, with only my lust engaged.

One bird lit in a lodgepole pine

and another dived under a thick mat of juniper—a good defense against goshawks, but not against bird dogs. Huckleberry was on scene by then, and pointing. I pulled him away. But I imagined a dinner-bird in my game vest, warm against the small of my back, better than aspirin for the spinal crick which, I guess, every hunter comes to know after enough time afoot. (It is a reminder of our original sin: standing up.)

Our dogs would remember the new covert without thinking, but David and I paused to fix its landmarks against the time when leaves would fall, and the young ruffed grouse would grow a full set of wits. We knew that they would remain in the vicinity, unlike blue grouse, which nest in the bottoms with ruffs, fly like them and taste just as good. Early in the fall, however, blue grouse make the backward migration in the west, hiking to winter quarters at high altitude.

We followed the blues, or imagined that we were doing so. In reality, they had left no tracks, and we humans could not know their trails. Even the trickle of water we followed had to be deduced, hidden as it was by thick turf. A line of willows and alders kept us on track as the clouds thickened, gray walls closing in and moving with us.

Rex joined us humans, but then Rex is a cuddly dog, if you can imagine a tawny teddy bear the size of a lawn tractor. Huckleberry, on the other hand, was a dark blur appearing and vanishing in the mist. His job, he reckoned, was to find birds wherever they might be, and my job would then be to reach his point before Rex could get involved. If sleep-deprivation is David King's slimming secret, then Huckleberry is mine. His faith pulls me on.

Occupied continually on work which he loves, healthy in mind and body, always in close contact with nature, the hunter lives a joyful and virtuous life and goes



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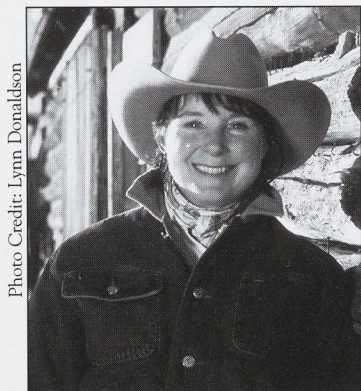


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straight to paradise when he dies.
—Prologue to "THE MASTER OF GAME,"
circa 1405

Janet was keeping with us, springy of step as Huckleberry. A hundred-pound person may have felt less gravity than us bull moose.

Near the top of the ridge, our heads entered the sun while our feet remained in a cloud stretching flat on both sides of us. Distance became audible again, starting with the whistle of a bull elk on a high knob farther along our route.

Let me leave you with a picture of this savanna in the sky, because no other place will have taught you what to look for. Big male blue grouse live in blue distances—exactly the places we humans find sublime. You could call this parallel evolution, or you could call it spooky. Imagine, for example, that one day, after years in a grimy city, you meet a gatekeeper who allows you a choice of places in which to recover. You pick spacious openings through which you can see three blue ranges, one after another, floating on a cloud. Soil tilled by pocket gophers is soft under your feet and knee-high grass springs from it. The Douglas firs that frame your view are ancient and cork-barked, with no limbs for the first fifty feet.

Nobody is making places like this anymore, but somebody is still cutting them down. I have visited the big trunks at a lumber company before they turned into trophy houses. The annular rings were knife-edge narrow, coming from those cold ridges with little precipitation in summer, when trees want to grow. The high, arid west is not like the humid country on both sides of it. Out on the wet Pacific coast, you could cut down a thirty year old fir and find growth rings half an inch wide. In a place like that, you could do real commercial tree-farming, with a sustained yield. In Montana, it takes 250, maybe 400 years to grow a big fir, with a forest fire every few decades

to thin the competition. That's eight to thirteen generations of humans. Forever.

We encouraged Janet to look while she had the chance. The old firs on blue-grouse ridges are caught between axe and fire. Indiscriminate logging would remove them. Doing nothing would put them at risk too, because years of fire-suppression have allowed fuel, in the form of small trees, to grow thick. Selective logging would be expensive, but if the small trees are not thinned, the next fire could burn too hot.

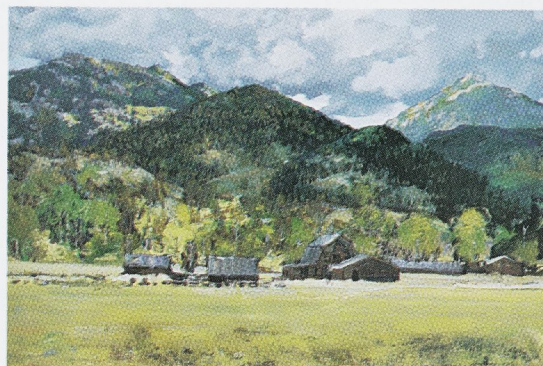
When we found no road through the grass—not even a snaky track of motorcycle—David and I both broke our guns to be sure that we were loaded. Something must have been watching us, because we heard a shower of fir needles and wings going whortle-whortle-whortle. The bird was diving much faster than we could swing, but we shot anyhow, and then watched our first blue of the day plunge into the layer of cloud. Perhaps it landed among the ruffed grouse in the creek-bottom or the sharp-tailed grouse on the bench. Perhaps it kept right on gliding out to the sage-grouse flats. You never know with blues; they have learned to use more diverse habitats than any other western biped, except humans.

Both dogs sniffed around under another giant fir, but the birds that had left scent were no longer on the ground. Somewhere up high on a limb, we guessed, bright beady eyes were watching us. I tried to flush the grouse with my owl hoot and David did a coyote assembly-call, but nothing happened and we felt foolish. Our audience might have applauded, at least.

This, surely, was the best of all possible arenas. The grouse had us humans to divert them, and we had the cloud world to walk upon. I said, just blurting it out, that this was where the angels land, and then I was grateful that Janet did not laugh.

In an open spot below the ridge, Huckleberry, the pointer, started on

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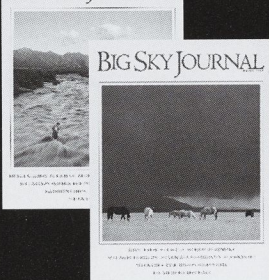
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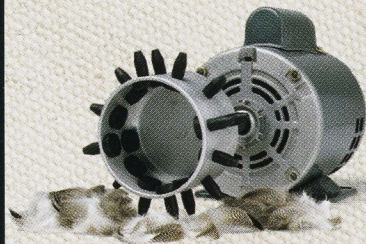
a scent-trail. Rex, the Lab—less experienced but catching on—cut in front of Huck and tried to find the grouse first. Huck paused, sniffed around, and led off over the ridge. Rex saw Huck still apparently on a bird and came along. Both dogs disappeared, whereupon Huck lost Rex, galloped back and pointed. He had, however, fooled us humans as well as Rex, and while we were looking in the wrong direction, our grouse slipped out from under an arrowleaf balsamroot and dropped off the ridge. I shot ten feet over its back. (Most game birds rise, and a hunter gets used to swinging the gun upward through the line of flight. With blue grouse plummeting off a ridge, you have to swing down, fast. Part of your brain won't go along with it.)

On the next scent-trail, Huckleberry fainted again, but Rex ignored the diversion this time, charged ahead, and flushed two big, young blue grouse, one after the other. David missed the first and almost got the second. They were long shots.

We took a water-break then, dogs on the cool earth and humans on a gray log so big that Janet had to boost herself up. Above us stood a living fir of the same diameter, thick with needles—winter food and shelter for blue grouse. Around our feet, grouse whortleberries dried on their stalks, concentrating flavor. We ate a few, and David asked why I had not given Huckleberry the correct name, botanically speaking. I asked him to suggest a good, sharp, one-syllable call-name derived from Whortleberry.

We moved toward the summit, David and I a gunshot apart, and Janet behind us, not wanting to watch. In a grove of aspen clones with red leaves, Huckleberry hit scent and started to point, but his grouse flew onto the low limb of a fir. I volunteered to throw the stick and watch David disgrace himself, but he's the better pitcher. His second toss rattled the limb on which the bird perched. It flew over my head.

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A QUIET PLACE OF VIOLENCE: HUNTING AND ETHICS IN THE MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS

\$25.00

By Allen Morris Jones

The editor of Big Sky Journal, Allen Jones spends a year hunting and fishing in the Missouri Breaks, creating an ethic of hunting that E. Donnall Thomas, Jr. has called "a rich, complex work."

Signed by the author.

1-800-417-3314

Another dropping shot. I'll never learn to make one.

The top of the knob was studded with whitebark pines, which produce seeds that grouse and grizzlies like even better than whortleberry raisins. Huck was working scent when, from a distance, came a thumping sound as much like bear as bird. A grouse had flushed from a high limb and was weaving through firs near David. He missed. The bird came on toward me, and I took it as an incomer with my tight-choked barrel, using perfect form. When the grouse failed to get the message, I pivoted smoothly (for me) and fired my open barrel too. Our trophy bird continued in fast flight with slow strong beats, chuff, chuff, chuff, and was swallowed by the layer of cloud. I stared downhill after the grouse, hoping that it would reconsider my offer of a place on the mantel, and the ridge drifted off on its cloud, cut loose from the world. I don't know what gave me vertigo—my pivot or that great virtuous bird dropping out of the sunlight.

Having educated the grouse on their skyline, and vice versa, we humans followed them back downhill toward the real world, paying no attention to our dogs. That's when Rex got up a last grouse where no grouse should have been. I got up my gun. The bird swept downslope past me at forty yards with gravity on its side, fast as a falcon's stoop. I swung and squeezed the trigger without thinking. The grouse plummeted on, dead in the air.

The bird Huckleberry brought was a yearling cock. I smoothed its perfect plumage, saw no spot of blood, and handed our game to Janet. She would not touch it. We got back to the truck and eased in, creaking, and she asked us to put the grouse where it could not fall on her during our bumpy ride back to the world below the clouds.

We were not teasing, understand. The grouse was one thing to her, opposite to us. Corpse and food. Death and life. New York and Montana. **BSJ**



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Ms. Lilly Golden
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Dear Lilly Golden,

Thanks for sending me Marjorie Sandor's book. If you talk to her, tell her she's welcome to fish here any time. Maybe she'd like to try bird-hunting, which is one step deeper into nature.

Thanks also for inviting my contribution to On Killing. My piece is more story than essay because I wanted to show readers what's going on, rather than telling them.

There is a pitfall. Rural Americans know that all life lives on other life (the words of Joseph Campbell, I think). But urban Americans learn about death as something sensational (from movies and TV).

My regular hunting buddy, for example, came to Montana from Connecticut. Trout showed him a different reality, and a couple of dogs led him further. He's in the story. But the woman in the title still thinks that hunting is about killing. (This is non-fiction; I couldn't have made it up.)

Couple of questions:

1. Will you have a story on fly-fishing? lie in wait for mayflies, and humans stalk the trout. Double-hunting.

2. Have you seen José Ortega y Gasset's Meditations on Hunting? He is, as far as I know, the only major philosopher to deal with hunting, and his essay might be short enough for you to include. He concludes that "... one does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted."

Yours,

Enclosed: "Janet and the Grouse"

Text 1735 words
Sidebar 290 words

Datus Proper
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ABOVE IT ALL

Blue grouse look down on us.

We were bouncing along an old lumber road, flanked on the left by a cliff and on the right by clouds with gaps through which a brave person might have looked down a thousand feet. Not me. I concentrated on wash-outs in the shoulder while David King craned his neck upward, looking for the ridges where blue grouse live. It would have been a logical way to divide responsibility, him scouting and me staving off disaster, except that David was in the driver's seat.

The ruts squirmed downhill into a meadow where David parked his truck, jumped out, and trotted to the tailgate for his gun. My gait was closer to a wobble -- no reflection on his skill at the wheel, mind you. I would bet on David to win if he should ever enter his pickup on our local race-a-wreck oval, but I earnestly hope he won't because he's the only physician in town and the citizenry can ill afford a wreck with him in it. He is also the only citizen skinnier than me. He got that way by working sixteen hours a day, sleeping four, and then going hunting for blue grouse, which are a vertical species, commuting down mountainsides faster than anyone can drive. Even Dr. King.

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All of us knew what to expect, slow people and fast dogs, building up merit with each step. A perfectly true-to-life account of this day, or any other day of real hunting, would contain thousands of words of walking for every syllable of shooting.

The adrenaline part began when Rex snuffled in the brush, out of sight. We heard the sound of wings and skidded downhill, trying to keep our feet ready. (Not everybody knows this, but feet are what you shoot with.) Rex pushed out a grouse that dropped to David's first barrel. Another bird flew straight away from me, easy to bring down in a flurry of brown feathers and yellow leaves of chokecherry. Four or five more grouse then bored into the woods, flying fast but one at a time, and too close. We watched them go. One lit in a lodgepole pine and another dived under a thick mat of juniper -- a good defense against raptors, but not against bird dogs. Huckleberry was on scene by then and wanting to point. I pulled him away.

Our two dinner-birds were not the big blues we were

expecting but ruffed grouse of the year. I felt mine in my game vest, warm against the small of my back, better than aspirin for the spinal crick which, I guess, every hunter comes to know after a few thousand miles afoot.

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Near the top of the ridge, our heads entered the sun while our feet remained in a cloud stretching flat on both sides of us. Distance became audible again, starting with the whistle of a bull elk on a high knob farther along our route.

Let me leave you with a picture of this crest, because no other game bird will have taught you what to look for. Big male blue grouse do not live in anything that looks like cover. They live in blue distances -- exactly the places we humans like best. You could call this parallel evolution, or you could call it spooky.

Imagine, for example, that one day, after years of grimy cities, you meet a gatekeeper who allows you a choice of places in which to recover. You pick a savanna in the sky -- spacious openings through which you can see three blue ranges, one after another, floating on a cloud. The Douglas firs that frame your view are ancient and cork-barked, with no limbs for the first fifty feet. Soil tilled by pocket gophers is soft under your feet and knee-high grass springs from it. Nobody is making places like this anymore.

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Perhaps it landed among the ruffed grouse in the creek-bottom or the sharp-tailed grouse on the bench. Perhaps it kept right on gliding out to the sage-grouse flats. You never know, with blues; they have learned from every other member of the grouse family.

Both dogs sniffed around under another giant fir, but the birds that had left scent were no longer on the ground. Somewhere up high, we felt sure, bright beady eyes were watching us. I tried to flush the grouse with my owl hoot and David did a coyote assembly-call, but nothing happened and we felt foolish. Our audience might have applauded, at least.

In an open spot below the ridgeline, Huckleberry the pointer started on a scent-trail. Rex the Lab -- less experienced but catching on -- cut in front of Huck and tried to find the grouse first. Huck paused, sniffed around, and led off over the ridge. Rex saw Huck still apparently on a bird and came along. Both dogs disappeared -- whereupon Huck lost Rex, galloped back, and pointed.

This bird, caught under an arrowleaf balsamroot, had to rise a few feet before dropping off the ridge. It was a shot I knew how to take. Huck rushed to fetch me a yearling blue grouse cock, twice the size of the ruffed grouse in my vest. Rex arrived and sniffed around at feathers on the ground.

Huckleberry then pushed his luck, trying the same feint again. Rex ignored the diversion this time, charged ahead, and flushed two young blue grouse, one after the other. David missed the first but got the second and Rex retrieved, wagging his tail

so vigorously that his hindquarters wagged with it.

We took a water-break then, dogs on the cool earth and humans on a log high as a throne. Above us stood a living fir of the same diameter, thick with needles -- winter food and shelter for blue grouse. Around our feet, grouse whortleberries dried on their stalks, concentrating flavor. We ate a few and David asked why I had not given Huckleberry the correct name, botanically speaking. I asked him to suggest a good, sharp, one-syllable call-name derived from Whortleberry.

We moved toward the summit separated by a couple of gunshots -- enough to keep the dogs from duplicating effort. In a patch of aspens with unusually red leaves, Huckleberry hit scent and started to point, but his grouse flew onto the low limb of a fir. I volunteered to throw the stick and watch David disgrace himself, but he's the better pitcher. His second toss rattled the limb on which the bird perched. It flew over my head. I missed with the first barrel, held lower, and saw the grouse come down with my second shot.

The top of the knob was studded with whitebark pines, which produce seeds that grouse and grizzlies like even better than whortleberry raisins. Huck was working on scent, and I wondered what he knew that I didn't.

The thumping came from a distance, sounding as much like bear as bird. A second later, I recognized the sound as wings flushing from a high limb and weaving through the pines near David. He missed with two shots. The bird came on toward me and I

took it as an incomer with my tight-choked barrel, using perfect form. When the grouse failed to get the message, I pivoted smoothly (for me) and fired my open barrel too. Our trophy bird continued in fast flight with slow strong beats, chuff, chuff, chuff, and was swallowed by the layer of cloud.

That grouse was heavier than any pheasant and perhaps eight or nine years of age. David and I had heard of blues as old as six-point elk, but neither of us had seen one before.

I stared downhill after the grouse, hoping that it would reconsider my offer of a place on the mantel, and a dizzy thing happened. The whole ridge floated on its cloud, cut loose from the world. I don't what gave me vertigo -- my clumsy pivot or that great virtuous bird dropping out of the sunlight.

(SIDEBAR)

A Trophy Bird

Everything you've heard about the blue grouse is true. It winters in the mountains, nests in the valleys, and wanders out to the prairies. It feeds on everything from grasshoppers to fir needles. It hangs out with ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, sage grouse, spruce grouse, and the occasional ptarmigan. No other gallinaceous (chickenlike) bird has so many different habitats and behaviors.

The blue grouse is also widespread, ranging from the Yukon to southern California and from Vancouver Island to the eastern outriders of the Rocky Mountains. If America had been settled

from the west coast, this would be the most celebrated of upland birds. Montanans already hold it in high esteem -- though they may not use its official name. As the biggest of white-meated grouse, the blue is generally known as dinner.

Prime time for hunters is early September, when the season usually opens. Birds of the year may still be in the creek bottoms, and the weather will be mild up high if you want a big one for the taxidermist. Trophy blues are as hard to find as elk -- though much easier to pack out.

If you can, hunt with a dog that makes long downhill retrieves and needs little water. Use at least an ounce of hard shot in size 7, $7\frac{1}{2}$, or 6. Wear a skeleton game vest but carry a compact rain-shell for mountain storms. And alternate pairs of boots so that each blister gets a day off.

Finally, hunting from a vehicle is not fair chase, and may you get indigestion if you try it. When hunted on foot, blues are as quick to learn as ruffed grouse -- even a little quicker, some say -- but neither species has any natural defense against shooters on wheels.

name means tree-loving

If young blues look like ruffs, the old boomers look like sage grouse, which are in fact closer relatives.

Over the centuries, though, spring run-off had carved out a little valley too steep for cattle.

on the real world below, dark and drizzly.

they don't match our culture/ fit our expectations

the boomer

Had no idea he liked bird-hunting till I corrupted him.
Introduced him to his perfect match.

Somewhere along the way we reached the lumber road where it had doubled back. It was still a one-sided proposition, cliff and infinity separated by a few feet.

gullies that might divert us to sky-diving.

nobody is tough enough to follow up blue grouse

For both dogs, this was the worst work of the season, in any conventional sense, but it left the sharpest memory.

Humans unconsciously reconstruct this landscape, when given a chance.

Price of admission high.

Firs of the same size were still standing, thick corky bark scarred by centuries of lightning, fires, and insects. Logging companies call such trees unhealthy because they are [weeds?] past their years of fast growth, like David and me.

We were, at least, performers in the best of stadiums.

It is certainly not practical, because that elk would

provide a great deal more meat for your family.

No one has been improving on nature up here.

we had little chance of spotting grouse that could hide from goshawks.

I noticed David's hand on his belt, checking his bear-squirter.

Unlike the ruffed grouse, which varies in little but color, the blue has regional variations in habitat [] -- which leads me to suppose that it has had longer to adapt to local habitats. It grows bigger than any other grouse except the sage grouse, which may in fact be the closest relative. Big males blues even look like sage grouse and have a mating display that seems related. The young, on the other hand, can be hard to distinguish from ruffed grouse without binoculars.

Blues also have a striking range of behaviors. The first half of their scientific [] binomial [] (Dendragapus obscurus) means "tree-loving," and so they are -- especially in winter. In September, which in my area is the best month for hunting, I have also found them far out on the prairies. Populations are high, in some years,