

About 1100 words

7/27/92  
Sent

## PHEASANTS IN THE GRASS

As conservation reserves come back, so do the pheasants.

Our leading character has two long legs and is seldom to be caught sleeping. The biped I have in mind is named David King but my description applies equally to the pheasant, so take your choice. Neither the man nor the bird is among life's casual onlookers. David is the only physician in a town that is not quite small enough to allow him any leisure, so instead of wasting time abed he works nights in the hospital and spends a few daylight hours hunting the tall grass, portable telephone in belt holster. I am proud to have introduced him to a bird which is related to him by temperament.

It was fate, sort of. Dr. King bought his first shotgun just as ducks were getting scarce and pheasants were pulling out of a long decline. Like many other wildlife species, the ring-necked pheasant depends on undisturbed grasslands, and that kind of habitat had been shrinking for some twenty-five years throughout the bird's North American range. The stage was set for recovery in 1985, when Congress authorized the Conservation Reserve Program--CRP for short. Farmers began to seed large areas in



grass that could not be grazed or mowed. Pheasants responded to their opportunity. David King and I responded to the pheasants.

Our first hunt together was in 1987, late in the season, on a farm seeded under the new program. We turned loose David's yellow Labrador retriever and my six-months-old German shorthaired pointer. Stiff wheatgrass wore them out before they could run down a rooster.

We retreated to a brushy creek-bottom between fields--the kind of place that hunters have come to associate with pheasants, if only because little else has been available for a generation. The brush was dense at human eye-level but relatively open down where the Labrador and shorthair pup were working. They found a few hens but no cocks. That's the trouble with cover that is easy to work. Its roosters are usually skimmed off early in the season.

When David and I returned in 1988, however, we found the fields full of pheasants. Tall grass makes ideal nesting cover and produces great quantities of the insects needed to feed chicks. Every hen on that farm must have raised a big brood.

Mind you, the hunting was a sporting proposition. As opposed to naturally seeded prairies, the CRP acres had been planted in rows just far enough apart to serve as pheasant racetracks. Furthermore, the wheatgrass had grown so high that the dogs could not work birds and see us humans at the same time. Under these circumstances, David found it best to keep the Labrador at heel for retrieves and occasional tight-sitting birds. The pointer, now eighteen months old, was able to hold running roosters--



sometimes--till we got in position to shoot.

The problem was that David and I had to keep track of the pup by sound. The solution was a beeper-collar. Its running-signal kept us in touch as we walked along, or jogged along, or wobbled behind puffing. Some of the trails took us for hundreds of yards but, at the end, we would hear the beeper switch to a point-signal somewhere down in the grass. Then we looped in from opposite sides, trying to be prepared for a flush in any direction. One or the other of us would get a shot--unless David's portable telephone picked that moment to ring.

If all this sounds hyperkinetic, I have conveyed the right message. Complaints about the tall grass have been filtering in from gunners accustomed to more compact covers. If you insist on an orderly, slow-moving hunt, you can wind up cursing CRP pheasants and their vast, amorphous habitat. If, on the other hand, you are willing to weave along with David and me, grasslands offer the best kind of chaos.

When we returned in 1989, the clumps of wheatgrass had filled out and given the birds more places to hide. They had abandoned entirely the stream-bottom brush between the fields--evidence that ring-necked pheasants are, as the biologists say, genetically adapted to tall grass. It sheltered as many pheasants as I had ever seen on a farm of that size, even during the good old days in Nebraska and Pennsylvania.

By 1990, the population had started to change in a way that puzzled us. Of six cocks that David and I shot, only two had short spurs. The other four were old roosters between 3 pounds 2



ounces and 3 pounds 8. We were glad to see that pheasants in CRP could reach such impressive weights, but we were puzzled by the scarcity of young birds. Under normal conditions, they would have made up most of our bag.

In October of 1991, there were almost no young of the year on the farm, and we saw roughly three times as many hens as cocks--the sort of female/male ratio that we would have expected to find at the end of a season, not the beginning. I kept assuring David that, with so many breeders around, we would find progeny in time--but we didn't.

After a morning with no shots, we paused in the shade of a wooden granary, gray and abandoned. David climbed a rickety ladder to the top. A great horned owl flew out of the old building. I went up for a look. What David and I saw was a floor carpeted by feathers from pheasants of both sexes, with no sign of remains from other prey species. There were many tail-feathers from half-grown roosters, but no fully grown tails. The owl had evidently specialized in taking young birds.

I almost wished that we had not discovered what happened to the class of 1991. I had wanted to believe that no predator would seriously impact game-bird populations in good habitat. A generation ago, even biologists preached that gospel. Recent research has been less optimistic.

Fortunately, it is clear that humans do not diminish pheasant populations by shooting only roosters. David and I hunted the rest of the farm all afternoon, and two cocks finally held till we got within range -- one of them with tail-feathers



over 26" in length. Both were trophies. In its way, the hunting was still better than on places nearby.

A population of game birds cannot maintain itself long without raising young, however. We are anxious to find out how the CRP pheasants are doing in 1992.--Datus Proper



Al  
Sent

July 26, 1992

Mr. Slaton White  
Field & Stream  
2 Park Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Dear Slaton:

Thanks for your letter of July 25, and for your help with both of the articles you sent. I'll get a shortened version of "Managing Eden" to you in a couple of weeks.

A short, revised version of "Pheasants in the Grass" is enclosed. I kept it to length you wanted. Think I got rid of all the stuff that made trouble -- such as my dog's name. (I understand the problem with having the same canine character in lots of stories, especially if he's not funny.)

As you'll see, I did some rewriting to make the story track better in its shorter form. There is a new ending. In the middle, I inserted a couple of how-to paragraphs, because hunters new to CRP are having trouble. It does happen to be pointer cover.

Hope this is useful.

When you've been back a couple of days, I'll call you about the idea on complex hatches. You'll also have "Fishing the Geology" ere long.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Pheasants in the Grass," Revised



10/92

## FASTER PHEASANTS FOR STOCKING

■ The desirability of smaller, wilder, faster-flying pheasants is growing, according to Bill MacFarlane of MacFarlane Pheasant Farm Inc., Janesville, Wisconsin, one of the nation's largest pheasant hatcheries (800,000 chicks were scheduled for spring 1992.)

In 1989, after lengthy negotiations and red tape, MacFarlane imported 500 eggs gathered from wild pheasant nests in Jilin Province, China, where a small-bodied, very wild, fast-flying pheasant is the native species.

In 1990 and 1991, MacFarlane bred the imports; he is now using the new strain to produce lighter, faster-flying pheasants for sale to shooting preserve operators. In addition, the State of Wisconsin has entered into a joint project with MacFarlane to produce a lighter, faster-flying bird for the state's pheasant stocking programs.

"These small Chinese pheasants are very similar to the wild type that established the original populations in South Dakota and Iowa," MacFarlane declares.

With wilder pheasant chicks becoming commercially procurable, and more good pheasant habitat available due to crop reduction programs, a great opportunity exists right now to repopulate areas where pheasant numbers are low due to the agricultural excesses which caused enormous habitat losses during the years when Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz was pressing farmers to plow and plant "from the road ditch to the porch." For information regarding availability of the new small Chinese pheasants, contact MacFarlane Pheasant Farm, Inc., Dept. FS, Box 646, Janesville, Wisc. 53547, telephone (608) 752-4403.

For a nationwide list of shooting preserves, contact Walter Walker, Secy., North American Gamebird Breeders Assn., Dept. FS, P.O. Box 2105, Cayce-West Columbia, S.C. 29171, telephone (803) 796-8163.

we actually shoot," Clint notes. "We really can't count how many escape being shot and survive in the wild, but that is also a considerable number."

When he was a boy growing up on the farm, Clint's family took in hunters each fall. The guests paid for room and board and hunted on land the Smiths

owned or leased. "It was all wild bird hunting, and the folks that came to stay with us became friends of the family. We looked forward to having them return each fall," Clint recalls.

When the farm became theirs, Clint and Deanna elected to recreate those happy days by farming for pheasants instead of for cash crops, and by operating a unique shooting preserve that guaranteed exceptional wild bird hunting. In South Dakota, where wild pheasant hunting opportunities abound, the Smiths knew that people would not pay to shoot the fat, slow-flying, put-and-take birds that shooting preserves were using in areas where fewer wild bird hunting opportunities existed.

"We set out to offer the best wild bird hunting opportunity people could find," Clint recalled. "To do that we had to learn how to produce large numbers of birds that experienced hunters honestly cannot tell from wild ones."

For information about the Smith's hunting opportunities, contact Dakota Expeditions, Inc., Dept. FS, Rt. 4, Box 109, Miller, S.Dak. 57362, telephone (605) 853-2545.

Not used

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Article scheduled for 10/92 issue.  
Please call Jean McIlwain with corrections ASAP.  
(800) 227-2724 or (212) 779-5296



Conservation Reserve Program—CRP for short. Farmers began to seed large areas in grass that could not be grazed or mowed. Pheasants responded to their opportunity. David King and I responded to the pheasants.

Our first hunt was in 1987, late in the season, on a farm recently seeded to CRP grasses. From a distance it looked like a waving field of grain. Up close, however, the grass was full of wild oats, which are not really oats but an agricultural pest. We turned loose David's yellow Labrador retriever and my brown German shorthaired pointer.

Unfortunately, the ground cover overwhelmed dogs and hunters, so we retreated to a brushy creek-bottom between the fields. The willows were dense at human eye-level but relatively open down near the ground where the Labrador and shorthair were working. We never had a chance to shout "Cock!" that day, though it was the kind of cover that many associate with pheasants—if only because little else has been available to a generation of sportsmen.

When David and I returned to the same farm in 1988, the weeds were gone, squeezed out by a dense growth of wheatgrasses. The hens must have been hard at work too, because in one year a land of few pheasants had become habitat for numerous well-grown offspring. Hunting them was a sporting proposition, mind you. As opposed to naturally seeded prairies, the CRP grass had been planted in straight rows. The spaces between the rows were wide enough to serve as pheasant highways but not wide enough to make passage easy for the dogs. In short, the habitat encouraged the pheasants to run, and they did—sometimes for hundreds of yards. Our solution was to keep the Labrador at heel and let the shorthair follow scent, hoping that some of the cocks would hold for a point at the end of their trails.

By 1989, the clumps of grass had filled out and given the birds more places to hide. They had abandoned entirely the stream-bottom brush between the fields—evidence that ring-necked pheasants are, as the biologists say, genetically adapted to the tall grass. The grass sheltered as many of them as I had ever seen on a farm of comparable area. It was like the good old days in Nebraska and Pennsylvania.

But by 1990, the predators had dis-

covered what was going on in the new grasslands. When we drove by the farm, we admired a bald eagle sitting on one of the fence posts. We suspected that he was living on kills seized from more efficient raptors like the redtailed hawks and goshawks. Even so, we found hens all over the farm. The cocks were mostly in very tall grass on one distant corner.

We did well in that corner. David got two birds of the year and then an old cock. My long-spurred cocks weighed in at 3 pounds 2 ounces, 3 pounds 7, and 3 pounds 8. Such weights are often attained by pen-raised pheasants, but these were wild old roosters from wild ancestors and had never tasted such fattening foods as corn and soybeans.

It seemed odd, though, that four of the six cocks we shot in that corner were old birds. Roughly 70 percent of all pheasants die every year, whether or not they are hunted by humans. Under normal conditions, therefore, we would have expected to find only one or two old birds in a bag of six.

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Datus C. Proper



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But by 1990, the predators had discovered what was going on in the new grasslands. When we drove by the farm, we admired a bald eagle sitting on one of the fence posts. We suspected that he was living on kills seized from more efficient raptors like the redtailed hawks and goshawks. Even so, we found hens all over the farm. The cocks were mostly in very tall grass on one distant corner.

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Fortunately, it is clear that humans do not diminish pheasant populations by shooting only roosters, and David I made little impact even on them. We hunted the rest of the farm all afternoon, though. Two cocks finally held till we got within range--one of them with tail-feathers over 26 inches in length. That bird may have been two-and-one-half-years old. Both were trophies. In its way, the hunting was still better than on most farms nearby.--Datus C. Proper



April 15, 1992

Mr. Duncan Barnes, Editor  
Field & Stream  
2 Park Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Dear Duncan:

I'm not sure whether I'm wearing out my welcome for bird stories. Can you handle one a year on pheasants?

The enclosed has a people-angle, though the man involved is too young, bright, and exhausted to sound very colorful. The real hero is the CRP grass -- a success-story, for once.

Maybe I need to travel someplace far from home and write about local characters I don't have to live with. That great stuff by Babcock, Rutledge, and Ruark had to be 75% fiction.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Pheasants in the Grass"



About 1900 words

Datus Proper  
1085 Hamilton Road  
Belgrade. MT 59714  
(406) 388-3345

## THE BEST KIND OF CHAOS

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Our first hunt was in 1987, late in the season, on a farm recently seeded to CRP grasses. From a distance it looked like a waving field of grain. Up close, however, the grass was full of wild oats, which are not really oats but <sup>a weed.</sup> ~~an agricultural pest~~. We turned loose David's Rex, a yellow Labrador retriever, and my Huckleberry, a brown German shorthaired pointer pup. Rex investigated the possibilities with vast good humor, tongue collecting weed seeds, but had never hunted anything other than ducks. I had shot a few pheasants over Huck, but not in such ground-cover. At age 6 months, he lacked the muscles to catch running birds in dense, stiff grasses.

We retreated to the only cover on the farm that we were competent to handle -- a brushy creek-bottom between the fields. The willows were dense at human eye-level but relatively open down near the ground where the Labrador and shorthair were working. When a bird flushed, I shouted "Hen! Hen!" and David half-mounted his gun, for practice. He said that he had not realized how fast a pheasant could fly. He was not sure that he would be able to get on a rooster even if one appeared. After a half-dozen flushes, however, he was calling "Hen!" before I could



get the word out. Nothing wrong with his reaction-time.

I hoped to send a legal bird in David's direction, but neither of us had a chance to shout "Cock!" that day. Perhaps other hunters had been through the brush before us. It was the kind of cover that many associate with pheasants -- if only because little else has been available to a generation of sportsmen.

When David and I returned to the same farm in 1988, the weeds were gone, squeezed out by a dense growth of wheatgrasses. The hens must have been hard at work too, because in one year a land of few pheasants had become habitat for numerous well-grown offspring. Hunting them was a sporting proposition, mind you. As opposed to naturally seeded prairies, the CRP grass had been planted in straight rows. The spaces between the rows were wide enough to serve as pheasant highways but not wide enough to make passage easy for the dogs. In short, the habitat encouraged the pheasants to run, and they did -- sometimes for hundreds of yards. Our solution was to keep the Labrador at heel and let the shorthair follow scent, hoping that some of the cocks would hold for a point at the end of their trails.

It worked -- when Huckleberry's humans did their share. He could not see us through the tall grass while he was trailing so we made it our job to follow him, one of us on either side. We walked along, or jogged along, or wobbled behind puffing till we heard the pup's beeper signaling a point somewhere down in the grass. Then we got a fix on the sound and looped in from opposite



directions. By the time each of us was twenty yards from the signal, we knew that one or the other would get a shot at any cock that flushed. If you have been through this, you know how the tension builds up. David's eyes had the correct pheasant-hunter's gleam as he homed in.

The birds flushed low and fast from places where we seldom happened to be focusing. David was, moreover, handicapped by a gun with a full choke. Two of the cocks he hit caught the ragged fringe of his pattern, and both came down running. I had been hearing, for years, that a full choke would either kill a pheasant or miss it cleanly, but the opposite turned out to be the case. Huck saved the day by trailing the winged birds and retrieving them.

I give you these details because complaints have been filtering in from gunners accustomed to more compact covers. In big, featureless fields the birds can give you the run-around forever. It follows that the dog must stay with the birds and the dog's human must try to stay with the dog. If you insist on a tightly-controlled, slow-moving hunt, you can wind up cursing pheasants and their amorphous habitat. If, on the other hand, you are willing to weave along with David and me, grasslands offer the best kind of chaos.

By 1989, the clumps of grass had filled out and given the birds more places to hide. They had abandoned entirely the stream-bottom brush between the fields -- evidence that ring-necked pheasants are, as the biologists say, genetically adapted



to the tall grass.

David was experienced by then, and Rex had learned what he was best at: marking falls by sight. His size helped him to see over the wheatgrass. Meanwhile, David and I noticed that Huck was trailing cocks rather than hens when he had a choice. With the dogs using different tactics, we were prepared for whatever the pheasants did, and they tried everything. The grass sheltered as many of them as I had ever seen on a farm of comparable area. It was like the good old days in Nebraska and Pennsylvania.

By 1990, the predators had discovered what was going on in the new grasslands. When we drove by the farm, we admired a bald eagle sitting on one of the fence posts. We suspected that he was living on kills seized from more efficient raptors like the red-tailed hawks and goshawks. Even so, we found hens all over the farm. The cocks were mostly in very tall grass on one distant corner. When we finally found them, they were as reluctant to flush as the hens -- probably an adaptation to being hunted from the air by the raptors.

We did well in that corner. David King was carrying a new shotgun bored for pheasants -- cylinder in the first barrel, modified in the second. More important, he had learned how to start maneuvering into the best position for a shot as soon as a dog hit scent. Some folks never get the hang of that. Finally, David was in physical condition to support the dogs over long distances. Something was always happening -- a cock down, a dog looking for it, a point in the distance, a hen rising from the



grass -- and the time flew too. My notes describe the effect as "hyperkinesis," meaning, in medical terms, "pathologically excessive motion." David's only complaint was that it was all over too soon.

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By 1991, there were almost no young cocks on the farm. Of the 20-odd roosters we saw, all but 1 or 2 were more than a year old, heavy of body and long of tail. Most flushed wild. We saw roughly three times as many hens -- the sort of male/female ratio that we would have expected to find at the end of a season, not the beginning. With the hens we could not be as certain of age, but all were fully grown and fast-flying. I kept assuring David that, with so many breeders around, we would find progeny in time -- but we didn't.

After a morning with no shots, we paused in the shade of a wooden granary, gray and abandoned. The dogs sprawled. I sprawled. David King said that he did not dare sit down lest he



outsleep Rip Van Winkle. To stay awake, he climbed a rickety ladder to the top of the granary. A great horned owl flew out of the old building. David came down and sent me up the ladder for a look. What I saw was a floor carpeted by feathers from pheasants, with no sign of remains from other prey species. There were many tail-feathers from young cocks, but no fully grown tails. The owl had evidently specialized in young of the year.

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When we slumped in the truck, I commented that David had been staggering for the last hour, maybe because of sleep-deprivation. He in turn asked if I had hurt anything serious, such as my gun, during a couple of falls. We were bragging, like teen-age boys comparing tackles after a football game. The dogs were hurting more. Huck's eyelids were red from abrasion and Rex was limping on all four feet in turn, which is not easy.



Back home, my wife had lots of sympathy -- for Huckleberry. She massaged his legs and let me nurse my own cramps, despite my best whining. David called to report that Rex was too sore to walk, which meant that the big Labrador had to be carried outside to water the lawn. I don't suppose that David had spent so much time around the house in years. He was pretty sure, though, that patient would recover in time for next Saturday.