

Huckleberry does not need waking. I left him with a 19-by-41-inch welcome mat (heretofore dog-proof) as a cushion for his little snooze. Now Arachne weaving full-time till next season could not reassemble the mat. It used to have 25 tufts of sisal per square inch. That amounts to 19,475 tufts, each with 100 separate fibers. Huckleberry has separated and redistributed 1,947,500 sisal fibers, neglecting no cranny of the wagon. If, while gutting a deer, your knife has ever slipped and cut open the paunch, you know what the inside of my vehicle looks like. My wife's puppy has to be located by sound. He is asking where I have been and why I didn't take him along. I ~~am saying that~~ he is going to be sacrificed to Artemis without consulting Mom.

It is all my wife's fault, anyhow, that this pheasant season is a bust. She wouldn't let me get those older pups: not cute enough. Finally Jim McCue found Huckleberry for us, and he's cute enough to be a lady's pup, all right. Cutest little shredder-mulcher you ever saw.

With Huck, at least, I can use the the bell that Aunt Mary gave me. If you remember only one fragment of my counsel, look for a bell like this one. It is steel, 1 1/2" by 2" at the mouth. You may not have a maiden aunt who procured such an instrument of a shepherd when the world was young, but similar devices are still made and might work after their molecular structure has been aligned by, oh, a couple of thousand miles of jangling on a

vigorous dog. Consider yourself fortunate. It took centuries for Stradivarius violins to achieve their tone and cock pheasants still do not sit tight for them.

At his age Huckleberry should stay close to the boss, who will protect him from Harpies. Instead he shows heroic tendencies. He busts a meadowlark, nearly catches it for the first thirty yards, then chases it out of sight. He flash-points a hen mallard on the creek, flushes her, splashes down in the middle of the stream, lunges to the other side, and chases the duck out of sight. This is how both the pup and I learn that he can swim. His next conquest is a muskrat, which doesn't take as long to get out of sight, thank goodness. Life according to Huck is the chase at everything.

A half-acre triangle of abandoned land surrounds a boggy spring. The patch is tall with grass, thick with weeds, ~~clogged~~ with honeysuckle and home to one cock pheasant, who makes a noise that sounds like Keokuk when he hears us coming. This might mean that our ten miles is up, but I credit the bell on Huckleberry's collar. As we get closer the rooster cackles again and I'm sure. The bell doesn't sound like a pheasant to me, but when we use it, cocks on the ground ^{always} sit tighter ^{and sometimes} ~~but~~ hold conversations with us. ~~in the middle of the day.~~

My pup wriggles through the weeds too fast but on scent, and thirty feet from the far edge he points. Head high, tail up,

puppy foreleg cocked, baby-fat body tense. He vibrates but shows no sign of moving. The real thing.

was before
In A Rage For Falcons, Stephen Bodio explains why men fly them: "you are the bird." You are the pointer, too, following his nose to something beyond the grasp of mortals. The falcon's stoop takes first place but the point of an intense dog comes next, and there's no third place. I have wanted to shoot lots of pheasants but never as much as I want this first one for a pup who seems to be hunting a season too soon. There's going to be a flush, because the cock is pinned between us and a clear field.

Never count on a pheasant. This one may be so wet that he doesn't want to fly, or he may have been sent to try us. Anyhow, he runs out into the open. He's eleven feet long and iridescent against drab grass. Huck is too low in the weeds to see what's happening and I hesitate. Better wait for the bird to get in cover again or it will flush wild. My pup loses the body scent but holds point and turns his head slowly to me, brow wrinkled quizzically. Am I doing this right, boss?

You sure are, buddy. (Tell me now: do I know how to pick bird dogs or what?)

I see where the rooster enters a wood lot but Huck is not waiting for advice. He zips into the trees at the right place and I'm running as fast as I can, which is about forty miles an hour slower than my pup. Important to stay close: this is like a

grouse place, all trees and no ground cover, so the bird won't hold long.

Huck, thank goodness, is pointing again when I find him. We have fetched up against a sylvan pool, or perhaps it's the rain-swollen creek, but either way we have the rooster pinned. The pup breaks and the pheasant, which has grown to a length of sixteen feet, flushes across the water. The bird is too far away and half hidden by limbs, but I have to try. The rooster falls on the far side of the pool. Huck crosses the stream a second later, running on water. I hike up my shell vest and follow, keeping my powder dry but not the wallet in my hip pocket. Huck points where the bird landed. It's no longer there. Then, instead of getting his nose down and trailing, my wife's idiotic pup gallops away with his head high. I reckon he's after meadowlarks again but try to keep up. (Next year I will make my first million by selling a slimming pill, illustrating the ads with pictures of a hunter before and after the chasing season.)

In about three hundred yards Huck is pointing at a national monument: our nation's largest contiguous mass of thorns. His forehead is wrinkled again and it occurs to me that he doesn't know about retrieving anything except canvas training dummies.

Once during another ^{Odyssey,} epic, such a thicket saved the life but not the skin of John Waddingham, who had annoyed a buffalo. The bull tossed John in the thorns and spent half an hour trying to

get at him. After the buffalo gave up, my friend spent the rest of the day extracting himself from the thorns and concluded that, on balance, he preferred buffaloes. You need this information to grasp the importance of getting a pup's first bird. I peel off the vest, leave the gun, flop belly-down in a puddle and start crawling under the bushes.

One cannot, I suppose, blame a goddess on Mount Olympus for turning on the camcorder again, given an opportunity like this, but she might have left out the part with the woodchuck. He is sunning himself on a tree limb. Now the rodent scrambles down the trunk and charges me. (I trust that you have grasped the point about fiction making more sense than the things that happen to hunters.) Bashing by buffalo is bad enough but mangling by marmot must not appear on my tombstone, and ^{the thorns prevent retreat.} ~~there is no time to escape.~~ The woodchuck disappears down a hole at arm's length. You may have thought that was funny, Artemis, but yellow incisors at twenty inches didn't look so comical to me. Further, my ego is wounded. I have borne all this in a posture of minimum dignity, and my wife's pup has been pointing a woodchuck hole.

Young Huckleberry writes his own script again. As I crawl out of the thorns he crawls in, and if he disappears down that hole the woodchucks can have him. Instead Huck wriggles further under the thorns and emerges with two deep red scratches down his back. There is also a dead cock pheasant in his mouth. It isn't

as long as it looked flying -- maybe just seven feet -- but that's enough to hide much of a six-month-old pointer pup. Huck prances around on tiptoes with head in the air, just as he does when running off to bury my wife's best shoes. He doesn't retrieve, exactly, but he runs around me in diminishing spirals till there's nothing left to do but give me the bird.

I forgive Artemis even for the woodchuck. To Huck I promise a new pair of red Italian high-heeled shoes that he can bury and dig up as often as he wants. He has found something he likes better. His tail is saying that he wants to go chase another of these birds that smell good.

And so we do, after I clean the mud out of the old bell and give it a little wipe. When Artemis is cranky you persist until she changes her mind and when she's in a good mood, of course, you keep on chasing.

About 2400 words

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

THE CHASE AT PHEASANTS

The bird is myth, not science.

The drive to Mr. Colchis's farm takes half an hour longer than usual because the forecast was accurate, but pheasants don't don't worry about weather. People do. One friend said he'd come along except that he has family driving in from Keokuk for the holidays, and another ~~(who knows less of mythology)~~ ^{NEEDS introduction} merely reported what some lady on television said about a cold front. Hunters are human and pheasants are heros.

This drab decade is no place for a bird of bronze, orange, green, white, red, and olive -- a bird, moreover, that hides its three-foot length in three inches of bleached grass. Jason and

his Argonauts found the phasianos while seeking ^{the} ~~A~~ Golden Fleece and brought both back. If pheasants and fleeces now seem about equally scarce, it may be that you are rational. You will learn. Ours is the oldest and least rational of pursuits, dating from a layer below logic. The events that try us in the field are beyond fiction because fiction makes sense. I shall give counsel on dealing with the unexpected. The first point is that you must make sacrifices to ^{the} goddess of the chase, ~~with care~~, because ^{Artemis,} ~~once Artemis~~ ^{She} was ^{just} beastly to a ~~fellow~~ hunter who watched her skinny-dipping in a sylvan pool. Turned him into a buck deer, she did, and sicced his own dogs on him.

I spend a lot of time near sylvan pools so today I thank Artemis for the invigorating trickle of elements down my collar, and, ~~as a sacrifice, offer her my fleece, which if not golden is at least a nice pink and covered with goose pimples. Must remember, though, to brush more goo on my coat, which used to be wax-proofed.~~

In the station wagon are two German shorthaired pointers, one has-been and one might-be. Huckleberry is just six months old and has not grasped the meaning of life. That's the trouble with buying a pup: you have to feed him for a year before you find he's useless, and by then your wife is so fond of him that she won't let you offer him as a sacrifice, ^{just} ~~Huck~~ came along for the ride. ~~because she insisted.~~ Trooper hasn't been as sharp this

Especially so now
hungry of a fodder.

season as he was the previous twelve, but at least he knows what to do. Unfortunately, I can no longer use my magic bell on his collar. He is too deaf to hear me whistle when the bell is ringing. Without the bell he can hear the whistle whenever he wants to, which is once every day at chow time.

Trooper spends a great deal of time sniffing at bushes and piles of brush, none of which harbor a pheasant, and I have to wonder if his nose is getting as weak as his hearing. A rabbit sneaks out from one of those brush piles, hops across the field, and hides behind a tuft of grass before Trooper gets a whiff. This reminds me that rabbit marinated in white wine used to taste good. During Trooper's first twelve seasons I wouldn't shoot rabbits unless they flew.

My shot-pattern hits the rabbit's clump of grass -- right in the middle, if I do say so -- and things begin to happen. The script gets confused now so follow this carefully. First, there is a feeble thrashing around in the grass, as is to be expected of a rabbit on its way to the marinade, and I run to pick up dinner before Trooper arrives and eats it first. Second, the rabbit streaks off to the right, highly motivated rather than marinated. Third, a quail gets up from behind the tuft of grass and flies to the left, landing in a bramble patch. Fourth, I pick up another quail, dead, who must have been sitting where I thought the rabbit was. Fifth, we jog to the brambles where the

surviving quail lit. Sixth, another rabbit flushes from the brambles but Trooper is chasing this one, so it's safe. Seventh, the quail flushes and I let it go without a shot -- as an apology to the goddess for ground-sluicing the first one.

It is really she who should apologize. Instead of helping out, she has bought an Olympus camcorder and is videotaping a script of the Keystone-Cops variety, with me in the lead. Caprice is to be expected of goddesses but enough is enough. Perhaps she agrees because, where second-growth trees have covered an old homestead, Trooper and I find a six-pound, six-ounce puffball mushroom, our biggest ever and a good omen. Puffballs are delicious with pheasant, if you have a pheasant. ~~But~~ we haven't glimpsed the main course yet and won't, with Trooper wet and tired. I could use dry boots myself.

Artemis distributes pheasants to deserving mortals in accordance with a mileage chart. In heroic times we would see one rooster every half mile. The current rating is ten miles per bird, but that's an average. You can flush two in the first field and then you can walk from here to Washington without seeing another. The ancients refer ^{red} to this sport as "the chase at pheasants," which is the proper attitude. We efficient Yanks like to think we're hunting: a methodical search terminating in game for dinner. Trooper and I, we've been chasing. That means I'll have to wake up the pup and give him a try after all.

Revised (w/ deletion? in Shooting Sportsman)

About 2900 words

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

RUNNERS

My pup rested his head on the arm of my chair and watched my eyes till I looked up from work to say (not very sternly) "now cut that out." He did. Instead he wriggled his muzzle under my elbow and let me know that an ear-rub would be welcome. I rubbed with my right hand and typed with my left. Huckleberry nibbled at a flea-suspect that turned out to be the button on my sleeve. Then he ran to the vestibule and brought me a boot, for which I patted him on the head. I did not want the boot, but it was what he thought I wanted, so I wanted him to think that I wanted it. I was training him to retrieve.

On second thought, I did want the boot, and the one that went with it. I put both of them on. Huck was training me to keep my priorities straight. He encouraged me by standing upright and dancing around on his hind legs. He wanted to go hunting. He wanted it because it was in his genes. I wanted it because it was in my genes. The hunting game makes no sense, these days, but it still feels as if it ought to.

We drove to a nearby public hunting area that turned out to

have been heavily grazed. Birds could have survived only by moving into what passes for pheasant cover around here: any vegetation too sour or prickly for cows to eat. Huckleberry did not mind. He was eighteen months old and convinced, with the simple faith of a pup in his second bird-season, that he could find a pheasant anywhere. He ran with nose high along the line between thorns too thick and grass too thin, a moon orbiting my earth.

In a half-acre patch of snowberries and wild roses, Huck sniffed at a pile of feathers from a pheasant killed, probably, on opening day. Then he cast around and left the brush without hunting it thoroughly. I resisted the urge to call him back, remembering times in his short life when he had discovered a world invisible to me. He loped across a bare field, tentative. In its middle he stood on his front legs and did the cactus-dance, hind feet in the air. It was the opposite of the take-me-hunting dance. Huck knew how to avoid prickly-pears with his front feet, but he had found that his hind feet did not track in exactly the same places, so up they came. He had also worked out a choreography for other things that hurt, such as porcupines and skunks. He wanted to save time for what was good. He was on the trail of it. By now even a nose-blind human could tell that the chase was on.

Huck pushed through thick willows into the bottom of a slough cushioned with cattails. They were like the plush lining of a lady's purse. He trailed another two hundred yards, ran a

broad loop to get the wind right, and worked in my direction. Perhaps we could trap the bird between us. I lowered my weapon and charged. The pheasant ran out of the bottom and through the willow screen, flushing on the far side. I could not see it well enough to be sure that it was a legal cock rather than an illegal hen, so I did not shoot -- but it was acting like a rooster that knew about guns.

Huck came to heel and I trotted him in the direction the bird seemed to have taken. Three hundred yards away he stopped, nose high but turning from side to side, tentative. The air-washed scent must have been weak. He put his nose down, cast around for ground-scent, and followed it. He started to stiffen, changed his mind, trailed with two near-points, then pointed firmly at a clump of junipers. I tried to get far enough in front but the pheasant, with no ground cover to hide in, ran out and flushed far from both of us. It was indeed a cock, red wattles rampant, snowy ring resplendent below evergreen head, orange breast aflame, tail pennants flouting the idiot with a shotgun. This pageantry of the chase streamed off, almost out of sight. Just before it disappeared, I thought I saw it flare its wings and tip back to land. I marked the spot and heeled the pup to it as quickly as I could move without becoming too breathless to shoot.

* * * * *

Now, all gallinaceous birds (or at least all that I've hunted) are fast on their feet. The American quails -- including

the Mearns -- run when they learn that it is better for their survival than flying or sitting still. Ruffed and blue grouse are good runners; sharptailed and sage grouse are better. The gray partridge is an expert at ground-escape. So are the tinamous in Brazil, the francolins in Africa, the red-legged partridges in Iberia, and the red grouse in Ireland.

Pheasants just happen to play the game best of all. Their chosen habitat -- thick ground-cover -- lets them sneak as far as they wish without being seen. They are big enough to outrun all humans and some dogs. And above all, pheasants learn fast. Their extraordinary cleverness may not be intelligence, in the human sense; but whatever it is, the roosters around my place have more of it than the deer, mallards, and geese, none of which are slow-learners.

Brains let pheasants thrive on the outskirts of civilization, where other game cannot cope. We have them in most of our country -- excepting only the southeast -- and some of the hunting is best in the world. So what do we do? We complain. We object to the pheasant's energy, speed, and resourcefulness, to the way it tries dog and man. We look for an easier test to pass. An English friend tells me that his country is full of Americans every fall. They get no hunting, but they get all the shooting they are willing to pay for, at pen-raised birds driven overhead.

By comparison, hunting wild pheasants one at a time doesn't cost much, which reflects on your lifestyle. They run till you are all breathless, and at the end of each trail, your dog must

still hold them till you get within range. Even then you miss as often as not, maybe because you're excited. I wouldn't blame you for avoiding a sweaty proposition like this. Suppose you like hunting better than shooting, though. In that case you know already that your dog matters more than your gun -- even more than your boots.

By luck, I live in a valley with a bird-dog club run by hunters, and last fall we held a pheasant trial that provided some comparisons of real hunting-dogs -- which is not to say that it was real hunting. The pen-raised birds could not have survived in the wild. Most of them did run for short distances, however, testing the dogs' trailing abilities in some degree.

Of the three types of dogs in the trial, the spaniels were the most consistent, perhaps because they had been trained by methods suited to pheasants. The spaniels were all of a good size and shape, too. They were springers of field breeding, quick, eager, and fun to watch. We did not hold the trial in the kind of thick brush where spaniels are at their best, but if that is your kind of cover and pheasants are your game, a springer would be hard to beat.

Some of the dogs from the retrieving breeds seemed designed for a different game: sight-marking rather than scent-trailing, swimming rather than running. No one entered a Chesapeake. The goldens were not competitive, but they found birds and were fun to be with. The best of the Labradors were highly competitive, at least for thirty-minute periods. The heavy dogs might not have

lasted as long as the spaniels on hot days but would have been better in the skim-ice. The Labs were the best duck-and-pheasant dogs out there, if your priorities follow that order.

The pointing dogs varied just as widely. All were fast; all seemed to have good noses; and all held their points till the gunners were ready to shoot. Some had trouble locating the pheasants, perhaps because they had sneaked off. One dog, however, found, trailed, pointed, and retrieved his quota of birds about as quickly as his handler could move from point to point. That dog won the day, though not by much. A springer or Labrador could do it next time.

The differences between individual dogs in that trial were more important than differences between breeds -- more important even than the differences between spaniels, retrievers, and pointers. Maybe the choice boils down to a matter of temperament: your temperament. If you like to hunt long distances and long days, and if you are daft enough to be the soul-brother of a pointer, you can have one that will find lots of pheasants. Training it, however, will probably be a do-it-yourself job.

Conventional American training methods discourage a pointer-pup from trailing running birds. He may not be allowed to retrieve until he becomes rock-steady on point. He may be broken on pigeons or pen-raised quail that cannot run. If he encounters wild birds, he may not be allowed to follow. And if he gets his nose down to check ground-scent, the trainer may ~~be~~ object strenuously.

The trainer may be right, too. The merits of his dogs are probably judged in field trials of the traditional American type, using bobwhites that have not been out of a pen long enough to learn that they have legs. Trainers have worked out methods that fit. Don't misunderstand: the dogs in these contests are magnificent, but the game is not hunting. It is a competition between dogs pointing tame birds -- not between a dog/man team on the one hand and nature on the other.

Ground-trailing hurts a dog in most field trials. It makes him look less stylish, at least by the standard American definition of style. By anybody's standards, trailing slows a dog down. He may, till he gets the hang of it, push the birds too hard and bump some of them. You may not want to let your dog trail at all, if you spend most of your time in trials or on hunting preserves. And if you hunt where birds are abundant, you do not need a dog that can trail individuals for long distances. If, on the other hand, you hunt the public area where this tale started, you might want a dog that can stay with the only pheasant you'll see all week.

Lots of pointers can follow the scent that drifts into the air behind a running bird. This is the fastest and best way to trail -- when it works. Unfortunately, air-scent develops gaps when the trail is long. At that point, the dogs that succeed (or at least all I have seen) get their noses down to close the gaps with ground-scent. They get their noses back up when conditions

permit. They find birds that other dogs pass by. This, I think, is not just one more skill. It takes more brains and experience than any other task in upland hunting. It is harder than running fast and slamming into a point, harder than quartering the ground beautifully. Those things can be transmitted by genes or acquired during basic training. Trailing cannot. Some dogs never get the hang of it.

My notions on choosing, raising, and evaluating pups are shared by people who know more about dogs than me. My ideas on training, however, are so rustic that I wouldn't mention them at all, except that they were used for the few other pointers I have known that were good trailers.

You choose the pup by picking the right parents -- a sire and dam proven capable by some objective test: shoot-to-retrieve trials, for example. Don't believe us owners. Every one of us is convinced, not-very-deep-down inside, that he has the world's best dog.

You get the pup when it is about eight weeks old. (You can teach an old dog some new tricks, but not enough to catch up with an old cock pheasant.) You raise the pup in your house and love it like your child. It will adopt you so soon that the commitment will frighten you. And therefore, with luck, the pup will want to hunt with you instead of running off on its own. It will also develop whatever brains it has, like a human child exposed to abundant stimuli.

You judge the dog's intelligence like a child's too: by

seeing how fast it learns. Given the chance, a pointer-pup six months old -- a year at most -- should find birds, point them, hold them till you get there, retrieve those you shoot, and run them down if they are winged. (Learning to follow long trails will take more time.) The pup should also have enough sense to avoid porcupines and skunks, not to mention dog-fights. If it is a slow-learner, you will probably keep it anyhow, and in time find it a useful dog. But better genes are available for your next try. Affection for an individual does not oblige you breed a dynasty of dim-wits.

Training? Of course you drill into the pup the basic commands and behaviors that let you achieve control. (Most American pointers need plenty of that.) The yard-work, however, has little to do with hunting skills. You can have a beautiful, fully broken dog that is -- so its trainer tells you -- one of the finest ever seen. It may even have passed a hunting-test. But it may flunk pheasants.

A sheep dog needs real sheep to learn its trade, and a pointing dog needs real birds. The only method I know first-hand is this: You put the pup in cover with wild birds and let him figure them out. Instead of telling him how to hunt, you try to bring out the hunt that is in him. His ancestors knew how to trail and his genes may still have the code. If the instinct is weak, or if you have little opportunity to get out among wild birds, you could experiment with the methods used for spaniels and some "versatile" breeds of pointers. I have not tried those.

Huckleberry is a German shorthaired pointer, on paper, but he thinks he's a Yankee bird dog with no time for rabbits and such. The only thing I did right was to get him out among robins and meadowlarks, and then pheasants, partridges, grouse, and quail. When wild birds were nesting, we used bobwhites from a recall pen. They were a feeble substitute.

It gets down to the difference between training and teaching. You can train a pup not to make puddles on the floor and to come when you call him. You cannot teach him to hunt. You do not know where the birds are. He does. Before long he will show you. You may not often get an air-and-ground chase that zig-zags over a mile, but it happens. It was in the middle of happening when I interrupted the story.

* * * * *

After its third flight, the cock came down in scrubby pines and buffaloberries on the far side of an overgrown barbed-wire fence. End of the public area? We had run enough zigzags to use up most of it, but there was no sign of a boundary, no livestock, no cultivation. With cold blood I might have turned back anyhow, but this was the last pheasant in the world and Huck was on its trail for the third time. As I swung my legs over the fence, he followed scent for perhaps a hundred yards and pointed, head high. I circled in front to cut off the escape route. Before I got far, Huck broke again, running in long bounds. In the middle

of one of them he turned in mid-air and lit on point, body twisted. His tail was high, back-hairs bristling, eyes shooting fire. Bird close. Right here, boss.

I ran to the far side of the trees, trying again to cut off the escape route. The cock flushed wild. Crossing shot, a little too far. Rear trigger. The pheasant came down with its head up -- meaning that it would almost certainly run. Huck appeared instantly, having followed the flight line through the trees. He found where the winged bird had crashed, trailed it for thirty yards, and pounced on it.

The pup fetched, but not as promptly as he would bring me a mere boot. I watched benignly as he did the pheasant strut. The bird would have run out of bounds if he had not moved fast, would have flushed out of range if he had not pointed, and would have escaped with a broken wing if he had not trailed it for the fourth and last time. He had a right to show off.

(citation)

This article is drawn from the author's Pheasants of the Mind, a book published by Prentice Hall Press, New York, N.Y.

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

April 16, 1991

Mr. Bill Buckley
Box 149
Maine & King Streets
Oldwick, NJ 08858

Dear Bill:

Here is the pheasant article we discussed on the phone. It is part tale and part how-to. Don't know if this form fits your needs. If I've missed the bird, would be glad to take another shot.

The article can be said to have been drawn or excerpted from my book. The middle portion has been redrafted with much new stuff, however, and there are changes in every sentence of the opening and closing parts. In other words, this was written as an article rather than a chapter. (A copy of the book is enclosed. Please keep it to prepare yourself for the rigors of the Gallatin Valley.)

Illustrations: would you like to use drawings from the book? Those at chapters 3 and 10 fit the text best; the one at chapter 4 is a personal favorite. The artist is Eldridge Hardie (303-756-5662).

If you prefer photos of dog & me & pheasants, two pros here in the valley have some. You probably know Dale Spartas (406-585-2244) and Denver Bryan (406-586-4106).

I'm providing the phone numbers because of my experience with Field & Stream. They don't like me to play middle-man with illustrators. If you do, though, I'll be happy to oblige.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Runners"
Pheasants of the Mind

Follow?

About 2400 words of text

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

Field + Stream

Mostly from chapter 10, with a little of chapter 11
other chapters shown.

PHEASANTS GO TO EXTREMES

. . . but you can follow
them all the way.

From chapter 10,
much
changed.

On the last day of pheasant season, a pup named Huckleberry picked up scent near Porcupine Creek, where the willows grew tight-packed as quills. He followed the trail quickly at first, then slowed to work out a difficult pattern. That's when I caught up. Huck discovered that the pheasant had crossed to the other side of the stream-bottom, picking a place where I could not squeeze through the brush. The pup stayed on the trail while I jogged a hundred yards to find a crossing with enough room for a human.

By the time I got out of the tangle, Huck's beeper was making a signal that told me he was on point somewhere far away.

He had followed the bird out of the willows, around a field of stubble, and into a draw with enough grass to provide hiding-cover. Getting there took a thousand of my best heartbeats. Perhaps this bird would be a hen, but it steamed my glasses anyhow. Running, cleaning glasses, and watching a dog on point is more excitement than I need all at once.

* * * * *

Now, mostly
Pheasants go to extremes. They sit tight, flush wild, pose like lawn ornaments, fly clear off the farm, skulk in fields of tall grass, and shriek imprecations from the depths of fetid swamps. Pheasants do everything that is good for their survival and a few things that are good for their egos. What they do best of all, however, is sneak off when they hear you coming.

↓
Pheasants escape by running because they know more about us humans than we know about them. We cannot hear, see, or smell them on the ground, and usually we cannot guess which way they are going. I do not mean that they calculate the odds and decide on the best tactics -- though some individual birds may indeed be clever enough to do that. All are products of evolution. Their ancestors were adapted to civilization even before they reached America. In this country, they kept on evolving under pressure from the shotgun. We have now shot more than a hundred generations of cocks that flushed within easy range. A few still make that mistake every year on opening day, and get removed from

the gene pool. The long-distance runners live on and reproduce.

Chapter 9,
Condensed
There are ways to hunt the runners without a dog, even after opening day. You can walk linear cover -- hedgerows, abandoned railroad tracks, and the like. (Perhaps a cock will think that you are on his trail, lose his nerve, and give you a shot.) You can work other kinds of cover that attract birds to small areas, such as "rock breaks" in the middle of a harvested field. (A pheasant in there cannot sneak away unseen.) You can try to push birds from thick cover toward bare ground, and then kick the last clump of grass. You can wait for a snow heavy enough to cut off the escape routes. You can organize a drive, if you have enough friends and know of a place with a fair number of birds. All of these methods worked for me in the sixties, and sometimes even in the seventies. They still work in parts of the country (especially the Midwest) where birds are reasonably abundant.

Unfortunately, the latest research suggests that pheasant numbers in North America have fallen by about half since the early 1970s. They are not only smarter but scarcer. I simply cannot find them in most places, but Huckleberry can. Unlike me, he can follow a pheasant when it runs. A dog has the only sensor that works: a nose.

New
You can have a pheasant dog if you are willing to put yourself into the project. Money does not help much. Maybe it hurts, because if you have money, you probably do not have time,

Chapter 9
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and nobody else is likely to make a pheasant-dog out of your pup for you. You have to start by training yourself. If you choose a pup from one of the pointing breeds, you have to abandon most of what you thought you knew about hunting and learn it over from him.

Flushing dogs are less complicated. A springer or Labrador pup will fit in with your old group of hunting friends, doing things that make sense to humans: working close, sniffing the ground, probing brush, handling rabbits and birds alike. Be careful, however, to avoid fluffy spaniels bred for shows and big retrievers specialized in water-work. You need a small- to medium-sized dog adapted to long, hot, hard work in the uplands.

A flushing dog is bred to push out birds himself, as soon as he finds them. Clearly, then, he must work close to his human, and even so the shots tend to be difficult. Some hunters keep their flushing dogs under control by training them to sit on command. Such training is a substitute for the pointing instinct, but unlike the point it goes against the dog's nature. Most of my friends take an easier way out, letting their dogs know what is wanted and counting on them to help. A good flushing dog will try hard to do what the boss needs, even if it does not fit formal rules.

The pointing dog has this fundamental difference: he comes equipped with brakes, and when he finds a bird that will hold, he

slams them on. Almost everybody likes to see this, in principle. The point gives the hunter a better chance at a close shot and clean kill. Not everybody likes the qualities that go along with the point, however. A dog that has brakes is usually equipped with faster running gear, too. His game is stop and go -- opposites that depend on each other, like love and death. His speed and range may be too much for a human who wants to go slow. A pointing dog is a sports car rather than a family sedan. He needs attention. He gets in trouble. He may not fit your way of hunting.

chapter 10
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He fits mine. I hunt alone, mostly, or with one friend. We don't mind walking. We need a dog that searches wide, finds the only cock in a square mile, and then slows down to work out its trail. Most of all we want a dog that will point at the end of the trail, with no whistles or shouts that might cause a wild flush. Only a pointer is bred to do that.

chapter 1
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2
It happens, too, that young Huckleberry looks good while he's looking around. On point he is tension crystallized, emotion prolonged. When the season closes, I take him out anyhow, leaving the gun at home. Just watching him point birds is more fun than most things I can think of.

chapter 10
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You should know, however, that most pointing dogs are trained not to trail pheasants. My old Trooper was like that. He was a German shorthaired pointer, good at what he had been taught

to do. He was keen, steady, and equipped with an outstanding nose. (I knew that because he won field trials.) Over the years he found many birds for me. He would get the scent if it was there, point the pheasant if it would sit, and hold it if it could be held. If it ran, however, he would often lose it.

Trooper had been trained by the bobwhite's rules. Once the quail was our leading game bird as far north as the Catskills. Ruffed grouse and pheasants were late-starters, gaining status only in the late nineteenth century. The American pointing-dog myth is a bobwhite myth, though I don't suppose most people today think of it that way. The innocent bobwhite of the nineteenth century shaped our dogs, and the dogs shaped our field trials, and those trials became the game which most professional dog-trainers had to master. By now the sport is uniquely American -- more so than baseball. It is a great game, but wild pheasants won't play it.

Re-drafted I am using the term "myth" respectfully. Myths give us our most powerful rules -- the ones we accept as profoundly right, without thinking about them. Perhaps we hunters crave mythic guidance more than most people. And so, if we live in America (but not in other countries), we train our pointers in the good old American way. When they do a poor job of hunting pheasants, we blame the bird. Confounded roosters just won't behave like gentlemen's game.

Here is how not to get a pheasant dog. You start with a talented dog like Trooper. You never let him break point on his own initiative to work out a scent. You make him steady to wing and shot, which means that he remain^s on point even when the bird flushes and is killed. To reinforce his steadiness, you do not let him retrieve anything until he is a year or two old. It works. You get what is called (in a sort of Freudian slip) "a finished dog." Like old Trooper, he wins trials of the good old American kind and adapts to tight-sitting wild birds. For pheasants he is, if not finished, at least handicapped. He has spent his youth learning the wrong things.

chapters 10 & 11, re-done
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When Trooper's time ran out, my wife and I got another shorthair. The breed did not matter to me, but it did to her. She did not want long hair on the rug, which ruled out setters, and she did not share my admiration for English pointers. Her good will was important. The new pup, unlike Trooper, was to be raised in the house. I wanted him to grow up smarter than a pheasant, and kennels provide few stimuli for developing brains. I wanted Huck to get used to being on my team, too. Man and dog must often work together to surround a running pheasant.

We bought a pup from outstanding parents, and then we raised him to be a pheasant dog. We praised Huckleberry for retrieving anything. Anything. That included slippers, rugs, bags of groceries with the pickles falling out, long-dead muskrats, and

live, complaining gophers. I took him outside for half an hour most afternoons, and as he got on the scent of pheasants during our rambles, I encouraged him to sniff and trail. He started pointing wild birds when he was six months old. When I shot the first cock over his point, he perceived the meaning of life. From then on he followed hot air-scent at a gallop, nose high. It took him longer to get his nose down and follow weak ground-scent. He was not finished. He was started, on the real thing.

This is not to say that Huckleberry was self-trained. (A pup who can intimidate cock pheasants is most unlikely to agree with his human on every little thing.) He had to learn commands like "no," "come," "fetch," "heel, and "whoa." If I had realized quite how bold he was, I would have leaned on him even earlier.

Training, however, is no substitute for hunting. You can train a dog to avoid behavior that you do not want. If he has the right instincts, you can encourage him to intensify habits that are useful to you. You cannot teach him to hunt. You do not know the real game. We humans see cock pheasants in the air, or strutting over a field in the distance, and have to deduce the rest. Only a dog can sense every move they make. Only he knows their resourcefulness and strength, and he learns only by chasing them through cattails and cornfields, weeds and willows.

He should learn all he really needs to know in kindergarten. My friends and I shot about sixty pheasants during Huckleberry's

first full season, and I kicked up only one of them before he found it. Conclusion: a year-old dog can locate pheasants about fifty-nine times better than a human. Huck also retrieved all that I shot, except for one that came down on property where we could not get permission to follow. To make up for that, he brought me two winged birds that other hunters had failed to recover. This was better than I did even in the good old days of high pheasant populations.

NH Please do not take this to mean that hunting is about scores. It is not. It's about one man and one dog chasing one pheasant at a time, and earning the ones they get. This is never going to be called a gentleman's sport, because no one else does the work for you. You do not stand around while someone drives birds in your direction; you do not ride in a vehicle and dismount for a shot when the dog goes on point. Pheasants won't sit still for that. They take real hunting, not just shooting. They are not somebody else's myth. They are yours, in the making.

10 Early in the season, some birds sit tight in grass that is still thick enough to hide them. When the cover gets thin, however, many pheasants flush wild, no matter how well your dog hunts. If you want a shot, you try to keep up. You play the odds. You and your pup are like wolves running a herd of caribou to see if one of them is vulnerable. Call it fair chase. If predation were a hundred percent successful, you would not want to be a

part of it, would you?

During the chasing, you sweat. I recommend that you put an anti-fog solution on your glasses before every hunt. If you forget, you will be standing there like me, cleaning off your shooting-eye lens with a gloved finger and hoping that you are not about to miss the season's last chance.

* * * * *

New
The December bird that Huckleberry trailed and pointed was a cock. It held till I got close, but I was too flustered to shoot well. A fringe pellet angled the pheasant down into brush that looked thick enough to stop a weasel. With Trooper, that wounded rooster would have escaped, but Huck squirmed into the willows and found scent. He worked the bottom and ran down what he was looking for, an old rooster with eagle-eyes glaring at me, almost a survivor. My gun was open, by then; I had promised to quit if rewarded by a holiday pheasant that I did not deserve.

Huckleberry came to heel and followed me back to the truck. He looked puzzled. He'd made no promises and could not understand why anyone would quit when there were still pheasants to be trailed.

(citation)

(This article is drawn from Pheasants of the Mind, a book scheduled for publication November 1, 1990, by Prentice Hall Press.)

April 4, 1990

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

Dear Duncan:

Enclosed is the pheasant piece we discussed. It comes from a book titled Pheasants Of The Mind, scheduled for publication by Prentice Hall on November 1. I included stuff on hunting with pointing dogs, flushing dogs, and no dogs at all. This makes the article a little longer than usual. I'd be happy to shorten or redirect it if you prefer.

I will be out of the country (working on my next book) about May 5-30, but hope to send you something for the kids before then.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Pheasants Go To Extremes"

About 3000 words


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


POINTERS AND PHEASANTS

[Your wife ought to look like Mom and your dog ought to look like Rover. You knew that when you were very young, but you did not know that you knew it. You had a dog of the mind, conscious or unconscious, functional or emotional -- unless you were utterly deprived of Rovers, which is unlikely.] [Man's best friend may be man's most understated cliché. The dog is man's only friend, if friendship means anything. Your dog sees you as leader of his pack, not just the biped who brings food.]

→ We have been creating the dog in our image for at least ten thousand years and possibly twice that: longer than any other animal. We started, moreover, with another species that had evolved as a member of a cooperative hunting band, not one that stalked alone like the fox or cat. You may want to think that your dog is hunting pheasants for you. He thinks that he is hunting them with you. He does not reason well, but he perceives what you want before you understand it yourself. He also runs beyond your aspirations, and he knows something at which you can only guess: where the bird is. You and dog mesh. You are strong

in what he lacks, weak where he is strong. No other team has so little redundancy of skill, such economy of baggage.

The shared part adds no weight. You and your dog have the same emotions in the field. It feels odd to share things like that; uncomfortable, even, if you believe that only one of you has a soul. It happens only with man-dog working teams, and with hunters it happens in the last Edens. 

This continent still has them, if wide fields and wild pheasants are your idea of Eden. They are mine. I want sunburned grass, golden stubble, gray barns, red rose-hips, dogwoods turning purple, and miles to go before I sleep. Somewhere along the miles my dog will hit scent. It will run into his flared nostrils, stiffen his spine, and raise the hairs on his back. He will stop on point, one foot off the ground. His eyes will glare at something he cannot see. I won't see the pheasant either, but it will be there, hidden under tumble-down stalks. This is either the best-camouflaged of birds or the smartest. Smartest, I think. 

The ring-necked pheasant is big and tasty and improbably beautiful. It should be perishing in some remote wilderness, threatened by old-growth logging. Instead it prefers farmers' fields and thrives near the cities where we work. Do not / confuse wild with wilderness, however. Immigrants like the pheasant and brown trout are unremittingly, ineradicably wild, wilder than wilderness species. They refuse to go tame even when we fence them in. In a well-ordered society, they would be ranked among the basic human rights. Chasing pheasants and pursuing happiness are the same thing.

Pheasants and pointers mix like brown trout and dry flies, oysters and stout, vinegar and baking soda. They fizz in your skull. They make you forget promotions, projects, and your wedding anniversary (if, by bad planning, you got married in the fall). They make you look away from work, into a cup of coffee. In there you see your dog shivering on point. In front of him you see a wood lot, red and copper. At the edge there is a rail fence smothered in green honeysuckle. You take a step. A cock pheasant is suddenly in the air, heading for a gap in the woods. Your reflexes slow the blur, separate it from the background, slow the violence. The world narrows to a bird the color of autumn.

Thanks to a pup named Huckleberry, I chase pheasants with more success than I used to have, but that is citing practical results to explain wildly impractical pursuits. Huck makes no more sense than my fly rod; hunting pheasants is no more profitable than drifting a fly over a brown trout. The bottom line is in the mind.

Moments: fly floats on bright water; trout drifts up. Dog catches scent in midair, lands curved and tense.

Conflict: fly is delicate, trout wary, their meeting violent. Pointer bends the grass like a squall, stands like a snowdrift. Catches bird in desire, body innocent.

Myth: books, feathers, tales, history, art, science, and magic.

My myth does not include any specific breed of pointing dog.

I have worn out boots behind most of them, and a few of each have been good. It has been the same with people: a few friends in every new place, surrounded by masses from which to escape. I am not a revolutionary seeking to abolish the whole concept of dog breeds. As an organizing principle, however, it has been so trivialized that it is just a little better than none at all.

The worst mistake is to pick a pup just because it is cute, counting on your love to make it good. The next-worst trap is breedism. There is a lot of Huckleberry in this tale, not because he is a breed but because he finds my pheasants. He was bred for them, trained by them, and equipped with a body that is up to the job.

* * * * *

Dogs work their bodies harder than people, so dogs' bodies must be sound. Only one principle works: form follows function. Anything else, by now, looks ugly. It is a matter of culture shock. I started looking at cars in the 1950s, which was their baroque period. A nation that had once made beautiful vehicles started making them with chrome jowls, droopy eyes, atrophied muscles, short legs, and decorative excrescences. I bought a used Jaguar XK-120 coupe. It was a hawk among barnyard fowl, a protest against corruption. It was what my dog has to be now that I would rather walk than ride.

There is one other model: not my original dog of the mind but a discovery that is recent, for me. It is in a book by William Arkwright, who in turn found it in the Louvre. "The model," he says, "was evidently of high quality observe ...

the beautiful profile of the skull." [Editor: I have a plate of this drawing if you want it, and can suggest other illustrations as well.] The artist who drew my model dog was Vittore Pisano, called Pisanello, of the Veronese school. His is the first known image of a pointer. It lived before English pointers or setters, before the first covey of bobwhites was ground-sluiced by a musket, before the first ruffed grouse was knocked from a limb by a pilgrim's stick. Pisanello died in 1446, before Columbus sailed off to look for India in the wrong ocean.

What we know as the gun dog, then, came before the gun -- one of those accidents that bend events in unforeseeable directions. We gunners might never have had the discipline to develop the dog we needed. The original pointer's mission was to find birds, first, and then herd them into a net or hold them while the fowlers did their part. Imagine two men unfurling a long net and dragging it, afoot or by horse, over pointer and birds alike. It was the ultimate test of staunchness. It required a dog of opposing characteristics: drive and discipline, eagerness and steadiness. Human campaigners with that kind of talent become generals.

Some men of wealth owned fowling dogs. Lafayette, for one, brought "Spanish pointers" to this country in the days before wing-shooting. The explanation is to be found in the first book on American game, written by an anonymous author in 1783. "Netting," he said, "is entertaining, and requires excellent dogs."

Most fowlers, nevertheless, must have been professional;

there was a market to serve. The pointer would have been their business partner, standing between them and hunger. Fowling dogs developed in several European countries and took on different shapes. The Italian model that impressed Pisanello and Arkwright had small ears set high on the skull, the better to avoid snagging on thorns. It had a pronounced brow ridge, or stop, to shield the eyes. It had small jowls, one effect of which you can see in skin that is snug around the eye, protecting it from foreign matter. (Heavy jowls pull the skin down and leave a pink corner which serves as a scoop for seeds and twigs.) The tight jowls meant, too, that this dog would waste little moisture in drool.

Pisanello's model was visibly light-boned, probably small. The rest of the body must be guessed from its function and from other old Italian pictures. While I am guessing, I will assign a gender, because the dog of my dreams needs that. She would have been capable of walking miles to the fields, hunting all day, walking home, and going out again the next day. For this she would have needed a capacious chest, level back, long legs, and a long spine (relative to her weight). She would have had high-toed feet for a springy step. She would have been the kind of dog that was, on the one hand, shapely enough for Pisanello, and on the other what my Portuguese friends call "rustic": tough of constitution and able to thrive on table scraps. She was (as far as I know) of no breed whatsoever.

I suspect that we have not improved on the Veronese model in five or six centuries. A great deal of the fussing over breeds

has to do only with their upholstery -- and Pisanello's model already had the right coat (short for heat dissipation, flat to shed burrs, and white for visibility).

According to Huckleberry's papers, he is a German shorthaired pointer, but he does not look like what the Germans set out to breed in the nineteenth century. Older genes must have come to the surface. For a time, when he was a year old, his head could have been distinguished only by its color from Pisanello's model. My conceit is that he is an Original Veronese Fowling Dog.

None of this is meant to suggest that the right form guarantees good work in the field. Form is merely the external equipment to do the job with a minimum of physical problems -- a negative virtue. The positive virtue is function. It would not flow from form even if we humans could be trusted to pick the right one. We cannot. To call dog shows "beauty contests" is unintentional flattery. Human beauty contests at least produce winners who are not physically impaired. Their judge is informed by natural hormones. In dog shows, on the contrary, the standards are abstract, unguided by nature. Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. There were beholders who thought that the 1956 Cadillac was beautiful, too.

Look at the show-strain Irish and English setters. They have everything wrong that man can breed into a dog. In the field they are flat-footed, hip-crippled, stiff-backed, short-winded, overheated, ear-torn, eye-infected, and drooly-jowled. They are as hapless as the trout produced by fish hatcheries. We designed both that way.

* * * * *

In Pisanello's time, the market might have tested dogs for function. One that failed to make a living for the boss would not have been bred. Today, economics do not work. Most people looking for pure-bred dogs buy a paint job, an image, or long silky hair like Mom's -- anything but function. The real tests are competitive trials and hunting, with different limitations.

Hunting is the most relevant test. The problem is bias. Of ten people watching a dog in the field, nine will conclude that its talents are modest and the tenth, who happens to be the owner, will be convinced that he has a gem. He will, furthermore, tell you that he had a great pheasant season last year. He is right, if he enjoyed it. Pheasants can be hunted in more different ways than any other bird, and Rover's human has found one that both participants can handle. A human who can be objective about his best friend is either very experienced or a cold fish. Don't believe any of us.

Field trials are objective. They tell you not only which dogs find and retrieve birds, but which do it better than other dogs. It takes competition to do that. I prefer the products of competition, but many American hunters are radically dissatisfied with dogs of field-trial stock. One of the complaints is well known: our traditional trials select for wide-running dogs. With the right rules, this problem is manageable. The complaints have led to important circuits of shoot-to-retrieve trials for unmounted hunters.

There are, however, other problems that have not (as far as

I know) been widely discussed.

Some hunters are unhappy even with the products of foot-hunting trials. In any open competition among the major breeds, the winners are fast and energetic. They have had training to channel their energies. They have had experienced handlers. And they have been followed by humans who could do a bit of moving too, at least for half an hour. You might prefer a dog from one of the less-popular breeds or strains -- one whose line has been put through rigorous, relevant, independently-judged hunting tests rather than open competitions. The problem with such breeds is their persistent "miracle-breed" advertising. You might be led to believe that your pup will find more birds than other dogs. He is unlikely to be competitive, let alone miraculous, but he may be easier to follow around than a miracle.

Every breed is erratic, to say the least. English setters have useless show strains, cautious ruffed-grouse strains, field-trial strains bred to hunt on the far side of the mountain, and shoot-to-retrieve strains that produce pheasant dogs. The only thing that these strains have in common is a coat designed for collecting burrs. English pointers are a little more consistent: wives consistently refuse to let them into the house. And then there are German shorthaired pointers. They range from dogs that resemble the dragon in a Wagnerian opera to little rockets like Huckleberry. Did you ever see a dog who not only chases deer but catches them, and then tries to get them to play with him? I hope never to see it again.

Those are just the three breeds that win most of the

relevant field trials. Equally good insults are available for the others, but I'd rather persuade you to look, instead, for the traits a pheasant-dog needs. Look for intensity. (That rules out many grouse-strain setters and Brittany spaniels.) Look for a strain that can trail. (Continental breeds are more likely to have been tested for that trait, but some others catch on too.)

Look for a good nose and a strong desire to point. You can usually equip a pup with these things by choosing the right parents. (It is more than you were able to do for yourself, and look how well you turned out.) Never mind distinguished ancestors farther back in the lineage. Aristocracy is an appealing idea that seldom works for many generations.

It takes a smart dog to work pheasants. If his sire and dam never figured out that roosters run, porcupines hurt, and skunks smell bad, then look elsewhere.

Look for precocity. Huckleberry hunted seriously when he was six months old, which saved a whole season that I had expected to lose and provided a good omen for the future. There is a tide in the affairs of pups which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows and in miseries.

Most hunters recommend a close-working dog for pheasants. The case is this: lots of cocks flush wild, either without provocation or because the dog blunders. If the dog stays close enough, his owner may get a shot anyhow. That's one way to do it, but not mine. I want a pup with a five-speed transmission. When he hits the right smell, he should shift down and work out the

trail. He should have four-wheel-drive, too. If the birds are in swamps clogged with cattails, then he should push through them. But when scent is hard to find, he should shift to overdrive-fifth and look for birds in a swath ten times broader than I could cover on my own. I want him to be a force-multiplier as well as a sensor.

It is true, however, that Huck strains my powers of telepathy. Slow down, you little brown expletive. Give me a chance to see some scenery that's not filtered through sweat. Aren't there any birds over here in my part of the farm? Oooo ... easy ... whoa ... beautiful. Hold that rooster, boy. Help is on the way. Little brown dog, how I love thee.

These are the strongest sensations in adult human life. By "adult," I mean post-woman-chasing life, because eventually you catch a woman you like, and then you ought to chase something different (especially if you are a candidate for high office). You are too young to stop vibrating between despair and reward. Maybe you will never be ready to stop, in your mind. You wouldn't have to worry about catching Huckleberry.

One of these years my body will catch me, though. I will be standing out there, breathing hard and smiling wide and holding up a bird for Thanksgiving dinner, when thump! Body will catch up with spirit as if attached to an elastic that I have been stretching thin all these years. So I am keeping my mind and eyes open. What I hope to see is a close-working pup that can find as many birds as Huck. So far, the best bird-finders have been the pups that wanted to follow their noses a bit too far on occasion.

Which humans do you bet on for tough jobs: the nine-to-fivers or the hard-drivers?

That's the trouble with dogs. They are too much like people.

(citation)

(This article is drawn from the author's book titled Pheasants of the Mind, published by Prentice Hall Press.)

About 2300 words

1/1
Datus C. Proper
1085 Hamilton Road
Belgrade. MT 59714
(406) 388-3345

1st draft - use most after p. 1 1/2
for another magazine.

FOLLOWING PHEASANTS

Pheasants run. They also sit tight, flush wild, fly clear off the farm, pose like lawn ornaments, skulk in fields of tall grass, and shriek imprecations from the depths of fetid swamps. Pheasants do everything that is good for their survival and a few things that are good for their egos. What they do best is sneak off when they hear you coming.

Pheasants think. A rooster learns that dogs and humans pose different dangers, so he keeps track of both but adapts his tactics. While on the ground, he worries about the dog. When he flushes, he may fly right over the dog but tries to stay away from the human. There is no opportunity for a shot unless dog and man work together, using two talents to outmaneuver one bird.

Pheasants are farm birds. Once I assumed that they could live only in rural areas, the middle-lands between cities and wilderness. That turns out to be wrong. Pheasants thrive in the

right kind of American wilderness -- the kind that has water, brush, and good grass. But you and I do not need pheasants far from town. We need them where we can get at them. We need them where native game-birds cannot survive. We need pheasants so that we can survive, hunting on Saturday and thinking about hunting for the next six days. We need a bird that is unremittingly wild, a bird as clever as the brown trout, a bird that refuses to go tame even when we fence it in.

The pheasant is our bird. Its ancestors were immigrants like yours and mine, which means that its genes are adapted to our civilization. The pheasant knows more about us than we know about the pheasant. That is why it runs. We Americans know how to hunt birds that sit tight, but we are not very good at following long-distance runners.

→ You take Ireland, now. It has twice as many people as Iowa, two-thirds the area, and far fewer pheasants. Irish hunters would not get many birds if they hunted American-style. They have to locate the occasional cock through an intelligence network, and then put a dog on his trail, and then stay with that trail till the conclusion. The conclusion is not always favorable to the hunter, but it is always better than not hunting.

I lived in Ireland for awhile. We'd take Ned's English setter, Paddy's English pointer, Liam's German shorthaired pointer, or Bryan's setter/pointer cross. Sometimes we'd also

take a springer spaniel or a Labrador retriever, but they were not allowed to trail the bird because they might flush it out of range. The flushing dog would stay at heel while the pointing dog herded the pheasant toward cover where it might hold. Then the flusher might be sent in to root the rooster out. He might still fool us, but there would be a tinge of relief in our disappointment. We could chase him again next Saturday, from a different angle. Eventually we'd get him surrounded.

From Ireland I moved back to Washington, D.C. The pheasant-hunting near there had become just as difficult. My dog Trooper found birds, though. He found them in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. He was intense, steady, and equipped with an outstanding nose. (Every owner says those things about his dog, but Trooper proved them in field trials.) He would get the scent if it was there, point the bird if it would sit, and hold it if it could be held. If it ran for any distance, he would lose the trail. He could not be counted on to find a wounded rooster. If it lit dead, I had to race to keep him from chewing up Sunday dinner. I did not like it. When old Trooper's time ran out, his successor had to be a real pheasant dog.

Getting one took experimenting, because (so far as I am aware) not much has been written on the subject. The professional trainers handle far more dogs than I do -- but that's the problem. When you train lots of dogs, you have to train most of

them on pen-raised birds that do not run much: pigeons and bobwhites, mostly. Even pen-raised pheasants are slow-moving by comparison to the wild ones.

There is another problem, too: the American pointing-dog myth was largely built around the bobwhite, which used to be our major game-bird as far north as the Catskills. The old bobwhite shaped our dogs, and the dogs shaped our field trials, and those trials became the game which most professional dog-trainers had to play. By now the sport is uniquely American -- more so than baseball. It is a great game, but its rules and taboos were developed for a tight-holding covey quail that had not fully adapted to hunting. The pheasant is different in all respects.

You can, however, have a real pheasant-dog if you want one. He will trail cocks when they run, point them when they pause, and hold them when they can be held. At the end you will get a shot -- sometimes. This, for me, is as exciting as hunting gets, but not because it is easy. It is at the limit of what a dog/man team can do. The ruffed grouse is the only other upland bird that is quite as demanding, and it too is best hunted by a set of rules that do not fit the bobwhite.

Here is how to make a pup into a non-trailer. You start with a talented dog like Trooper. You never let him break point on his own initiative to work out a scent. You make him steady to wing and shot, which means that he may not break point even when the

bird flushes and is killed. To reinforce his steadiness, you do not let him retrieve anything until he is a year or two old. It works. You get what is called (in a sort of Freudian slip) "a finished dog." He wins field trials and adapts to tight-sitting wild birds. For pheasants he is, if not finished, at least handicapped. He has spent his youth learning how to obey you, but not how to hunt.

So my wife and I did just the opposite. We praised our new pup, Huckleberry, for retrieving anything. Anything. That included slippers, rugs, bags of groceries with the pickles falling out, long-dead muskrats, and live, complaining gophers. Then, as he got on pheasants during our rambles, I let him sniff and trail. When I shot one and let him fetch it, he perceived the meaning of life. At the age of six months he followed hot scent at a gallop, nose high. It took longer to get his nose down and follow weak ground-scent. He taught himself to do that too. I did not know how to teach a pup to trail, so I gave him a chance to teach himself. He was not finished. He was started, on the real thing. All he really needed to know he had learned in kindergarten.

I do not mean to suggest that a pup should train himself in all matters. The kind of intense dog that is best for pheasants is most unlikely to agree with his human on every little thing, so you have to teach him the meaning of commands like "no,"

"come," "fetch," "heel, and "whoa." Especially whoa. But that's conventional training, in obedience rather than hunting. Lots of people know more about it than me. I went easy on the obedience-training at first because I did not want to dampen Huck's enthusiasm for hunting. In hindsight, he had more than enough enthusiasm ^{to} tolerate a bit more dampening.

Huckleberry is two and a half years old now and has been through two and a half pheasant seasons. Maybe you'd like to know the ups and downs. You get more pheasants and more work. You get easy shots at the birds that hold for the dog and tough shots at some that do not hold. You get to surprise friends who do not believe that pheasants can be hunted in this way. "Those runners all flush wild," people will tell you. I suppose that Huck and I get half of our birds at the end of a trail that is between fifty yards and half a mile long.

You hear lots of other advice, too. Some of it is accurate.

1. "It takes a smart dog to work pheasants."

True. You cannot pick a clever pup at eight weeks of age (which is about when you should get him), so you try to pick an intelligent sire and dam. If they were slow to learn -- if, for example, they never figured out that pheasants run, porcupines hurt, and skunks smell bad -- you look for other parents.

You know that you have a good prospect if he is hunting well by the time he is seven months old, a year at most. Develop his

brains by exposure to stimuli. Kennels don't have many. Get out among wild pheasants if you can, meadowlarks and robins and pen-raised birds otherwise. And get the pup inside, too, where he'll learn about cooperation with the human half of the team. That is going to matter more than almost anything else.

2. "The best breed of dog for pheasants is a Mesopotamian wurlitzer."

There is no best breed. They've all got something wrong: hip-crippled heavyweights, long-coated burr-catchers, self-hunting run-offs, uninspired plodders, weak-pointing show-dogs, and drooling idiots. I'd like to persuade you to think not of breeds but of traits needed for pheasants. Look for intensity. (That rules out many Brittannies and grouse-strain setters.) Look for a dog that you'll want in the house. (My wife does not share my fondness for English pointers.) Look for a desire to retrieve. (You will hear that continental breeds trail better, but some English setters and pointers are good too.) And look for proof. (~~Remember that~~ we all believe, sincerely, that our dogs are hot stuff.) If you can't watch the sire and dam hunting, look for wins in shoot-to-retrieve trials. [The serious competition is in those open to all breeds -- not just Mesopotamian wurlitzers.]

3. "Get a close-working dog for pheasants."

I don't know. Pheasants in the the mid-Atlantic states are hunted in the same coverts as bobwhites, and with the same dogs.

The big birds demand better teamwork but they are spread as thinly as quail, these days, and a wide search finds more of both. On the other hand, a dog is most comfortable to handle if its range has some relation to that of the human. Huckleberry's papers say that he is a German shorthaired pointer. He does not look like one. He is a small, fast, American-style field-trial dog. When he hits scent he settles down to unravel it, and these slow interludes let me catch my breath. The rest of the day is more like coursing. I'm wild about it. You might be consternated. It is not a gentleman's sport.

Picking a gentleman's dog would be easier if the close-workers were as energetic as the wide-rangers. Maybe such pups exist. They have not turned up where I could get a look at them. Exuberant pups -- the ones that get carried away on occasion -- are also the ones that work hardest, find the most birds, intimidate roosters, and win trials. That's the problem with dogs. They are too much like people.

4. "Pheasants will make your dog wild."

Maybe. Pheasants run and stop, run and stop, run and fly. A dog unused to such behavior loses control. The right dog thinks faster than the bird at least part of the time. It is a high-risk, high-gain enterprise.

Watch out for flocks. Flocks of pheasants strain the patience of pointers, and so do flocks of people. The pointing

dog's specialty is going out with one man, two at most, and finding the one bird hidden in a great deal of landscape. (If you are afflicted by pheasants in pestilential numbers, however, Huck and I will try to help you out.)

5. "A dog that breaks point on his own initiative will decide that it's all right to bust birds."

It does not work that way, in my experience. A dog that is not overcautious will always bump some pheasants, which means flushing them inadvertently. They will refuse to hold, no matter what the dog/man team does. (You don't know till you try.) But if your dog persists in busting birds -- which is flushing them on purpose -- you've got a problem. It's a big problem. It's the wrong dog.

6. "Pheasants will ruin your dog for other birds."

It can happen. Dogs learn that they must push pheasants hard, and after that it is difficult to handle such an ultra-spooky bird as the eastern ruffed grouse. (By the same token, grouse dogs are usually not much good on wild old roosters.) Short of grouse, one of the most sensitive birds around is the gray (Hungarian) partridge. Huck learned to switch from pheasant-to partridge-mode when the scent changed. So did the two English setters who own Dennis Kavanagh, a friend of mine.

7. "Late-season roosters won't hold."

It depends on how good the ground-cover is. One December day

last year, Huckleberry's beeper went on point-signal so far away that I could barely hear it. Ten minutes must have passed before I could push through a stream-bottom clogged by willows. Huck had trailed something through the bottom, out the other side, around a field of stubble, and into a draw where, at last, the bird found enough grass to hide in. I assumed that this would be another hen but steamed my glasses anyhow. The point is the best part of the hunt, tension crystallized, emotion prolonged.

The hiding bird was a cock. I wanted it so much that I rushed off two shots without pointing them right. A fringe pellet angled the bird down into brush that looked thick enough to stop a weasel. With Trooper, that wounded rooster would have escaped, but Huck squirmed into the willows and found scent. The pup worked up the bottom for a hundred yards and caught what he was looking for, an old cock with eagle-eyes glaring at me, almost a survivor. My gun was open, by then; I had promised to quit if rewarded by a gift that I did not deserve.

Huck came to heel and followed me back to the truck. He looked puzzled. He'd made no promises and could not understand why anyone would quit when there were still pheasants to be trailed.

SI

About 3000 words

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

For SI?
(already sent to Knox)
Taken from chapter 11 with a few bits
from other chapters, as shown.

POINTERS AND PHEASANTS

Chapter 11

↓
Your wife ought to look like Mom and your dog ought to look like Rover. You knew that when you were very young, but you did not know that you knew it. You had a dog of the mind, conscious or unconscious, functional or emotional -- unless you were utterly deprived of Rovers, which is unlikely. Man's best friend may be man's most understated cliché. The dog is man's only friend, if friendship means anything. Your dog sees you as leader of his pack, not just the biped who brings food.

We have been creating the dog in our image for at least ten thousand years and possibly twice that: longer than any other animal. We started, moreover, with another species that had evolved as a member of a cooperative hunting band, not one that stalked alone like the fox or cat. You may want to think that your dog is hunting pheasants for you. He thinks that he is hunting them with you. He does not reason well, but he perceives

what you want before you understand it yourself. He also runs beyond your aspirations, and he knows something at which you can only guess: where the bird is. You and dog mesh. You are strong in what he lacks, weak where he is strong. No other team has so little redundancy of skill, such economy of baggage.

The shared part adds no weight. You and your dog have the same emotions in the field. It feels odd to share things like that; uncomfortable, even, if you believe that only one of you has a soul. It happens only with man-dog working teams, and with hunters it happens in the last Edens.

Chapter 1
This continent still has them, if wide fields and wild pheasants are your idea of Eden. They are mine. I want sunburned grass, golden stubble, gray barns, red rose-hips, dogwoods turning purple, and miles to go before I sleep. Somewhere along the miles my dog will hit scent. It will run into his flared nostrils, stiffen his spine, and raise the hairs on his back. He will stop on point, one foot off the ground. His eyes will glare at something he cannot see. I won't see the pheasant either, but it will be there, hidden under tumble-down stalks. This is either the best-camouflaged of birds or the smartest. Smartest, I think.

New
The ring-necked pheasant is big and tasty and improbably beautiful. It should be perishing in some remote wilderness, threatened by old-growth logging. Instead it prefers farmers' fields and thrives near the cities where we work. Do not confuse

New
wild with wilderness, however. Immigrants like the pheasant and brown trout are unremittingly, ineradicably wild, wilder than wilderness species. They refuse to go tame even when we fence them in. In a well-ordered society, they would be ranked among the basic human rights. Chasing pheasants and pursuing happiness are the same thing.

Chapter 3
Pheasants and pointers mix like brown trout and dry flies, oysters and stout, vinegar and baking soda. They fizz in your skull. They make you forget promotions, projects, and your wedding anniversary (if, by bad planning, you got married in the fall). They make you look away from work, into a cup of coffee. In there you see your dog shivering on point. In front of him you see a wood lot, red and copper. At the edge there is a rail fence smothered in green honeysuckle. You take a step. A cock pheasant is suddenly in the air, heading for a gap in the woods. Your reflexes slow the blur, separate it from the background, slow the violence. The world narrows to a bird the color of autumn.

Chapter 9
Thanks to a pup named Huckleberry, I chase pheasants with more success than I used to have, but that is citing practical results to explain wildly impractical pursuits. Huck makes no more sense than my fly rod; hunting pheasants is no more profitable than drifting a fly over a brown trout. The bottom line is in the mind.

Moments: fly floats on bright water; trout drifts up. Dog

catches scent in midair, lands curved and tense.

Conflict: fly is delicate, trout wary, their meeting
violent. Pointer bends the grass like a squall,
stands like a snowdrift. Catches bird in desire,
body innocent.

Myth: books, feathers, tales, history, art, science, and
magic.

Chapter 11

My myth does not include any specific breed of pointing dog.

I have worn out boots behind most of them, and a few of each have
been good. It has been the same with people: a few friends in
every new place, surrounded by masses from which to escape. I am
not a revolutionary seeking to abolish the whole concept of dog
breeds. As an organizing principle, however, it has been so
trivialized that it is just a little better than none at all.

The worst mistake is to pick a pup just because it is cute,
counting on your love to make it good. The next-worst trap is
breedism. There is a lot of Huckleberry in this tale, not because
he is a breed but because he finds my pheasants. He was bred for
them, trained by them, and equipped with a body that is up to the
job.

* * * * *

Dogs work their bodies harder than people, so dogs' bodies
must be sound. Only one principle works: form follows function.

Anything else, by now, looks ugly. It is a matter of culture shock. I started looking at cars in the 1950s, which was their baroque period. A nation that had once made beautiful vehicles started making them with chrome jowls, droopy eyes, atrophied muscles, short legs, and decorative excrescences. I bought a used Jaguar XK-120 coupe. It was a hawk among barnyard fowl, a protest against corruption. It was what my dog has to be now that I would rather walk than ride.

There is one other model: not my original dog of the mind but a discovery that is recent, for me. It is in a book by William Arkwright, who in turn found it in the Louvre. "The model," he says, "was evidently of high quality ...: observe ... the beautiful profile of the skull." [Editor: I have a plate of this drawing if you want it, and can suggest other illustrations as well.] The artist who drew my model dog was Vittore Pisano, called Pisanello, of the Veronese school. His is the first known image of a pointer. It lived before English pointers or setters, before the first covey of bobwhites was ground-sluiced by a musket, before the first ruffed grouse was knocked from a limb by a pilgrim's stick. Pisanello died in 1446, before Columbus sailed off to look for India in the wrong ocean.

What we know as the gun dog, then, came before the gun -- one of those accidents that bend events in unforeseeable directions. We gunners might never have had the discipline to

develop the dog we needed. The original pointer's mission was to find birds, first, and then herd them into a net or hold them while the fowlers did their part. Imagine two men unfurling a long net and dragging it, afoot or by horse, over pointer and birds alike. It was the ultimate test of staunchness. It required a dog of opposing characteristics: drive and discipline, eagerness and steadiness. Human campaigners with that kind of talent become generals.

Some men of wealth owned fowling dogs. Lafayette, for one, brought "Spanish pointers" to this country in the days before wing-shooting. The explanation is to be found in the first book on American game, written by an anonymous author in 1783. "Netting," he said, "is entertaining, and requires excellent dogs."

Most fowlers, nevertheless, must have been professional; there was a market to serve. The pointer would have been their business partner, standing between them and hunger. Fowling dogs developed in several European countries and took on different shapes. The Italian model that impressed Pisanello and Arkwright had small ears set high on the skull, the better to avoid snagging on thorns. It had a pronounced brow ridge, or stop, to shield the eyes. It had small jowls, one effect of which you can see in skin that is snug around the eye, protecting it from foreign matter. (Heavy jowls pull the skin down and leave a pink

corner which serves as a scoop for seeds and twigs.) The tight jowls meant, too, that this dog would waste little moisture in drool.

Pisanello's model was visibly light-boned, probably small. The rest of the body must be guessed from its function and from other old Italian pictures. While I am guessing, I will assign a gender, because the dog of my dreams needs that. She would have been capable of walking miles to the fields, hunting all day, walking home, and going out again the next day. For this she would have needed a capacious chest, level back, long legs, and a long spine (relative to her weight). She would have had high-toed feet for a springy step. She would have been the kind of dog that was, on the one hand, shapely enough for Pisanello, and on the other what my Portuguese friends call "rustic": tough of constitution and able to thrive on table scraps. She was (as far as I know) of no breed whatsoever.

I suspect that we have not improved on the Veronese model in five or six centuries. A great deal of the fussing over breeds has to do only with their upholstery -- and Pisanello's model already had the right coat (short for heat dissipation, flat to shed burrs, and white for visibility).

According to Huckleberry's papers, he is a German shorthaired pointer, but he does not look like what the Germans set out to breed in the nineteenth century. Older genes must have

come to the surface. For a time, when he was a year old, his head could have been distinguished only by its color from Pisanello's model. My conceit is that he is an Original Veronese Fowling Dog.

None of this is meant to suggest that the right form guarantees good work in the field. Form is merely the external equipment to do the job with a minimum of physical problems -- a negative virtue. The positive virtue is function. It would not flow from form even if we humans could be trusted to pick the right one. We cannot. To call dog shows "beauty contests" is unintentional flattery. Human beauty contests at least produce winners who are not physically impaired. Their judge is informed by natural hormones. In dog shows, on the contrary, the standards are abstract, unguided by nature. Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. There were beholders who thought that the 1956 Cadillac was beautiful, too.

Look at the show-strain Irish and English setters. They have everything wrong that man can breed into a dog. In the field they are flat-footed, hip-crippled, stiff-backed, short-winded, overheated, ear-torn, eye-infected, and drooly-jowled. They are as hapless as the trout produced by fish hatcheries. We designed both that way.

* * * * *

In Pisanello's time, the market might have tested dogs for function. One that failed to make a living for the boss would not

have been bred. Today, economics do not work. Most people looking for pure-bred dogs buy a paint job, an image, or long silky hair like Mom's -- anything but function. The real tests are competitive trials and hunting, with different limitations.

Hunting is the most relevant test. The problem is bias. Of ten people watching a dog in the field, nine will conclude that its talents are modest and the tenth, who happens to be the owner, will be convinced that he has a gem. He will, furthermore, tell you that he had a great pheasant season last year. He is right, if he enjoyed it. Pheasants can be hunted in more different ways than any other bird, and Rover's human has found one that both participants can handle. A human who can be objective about his best friend is either very experienced or a cold fish. Don't believe any of us.

Field trials are objective. They tell you not only which dogs find and retrieve birds, but which do it better than other dogs. It takes competition to do that. I prefer the products of competition, but many American hunters are radically dissatisfied with dogs of field-trial stock. One of the complaints is well known: our traditional trials select for wide-running dogs. With the right rules, this problem is manageable. The complaints have led to important circuits of shoot-to-retrieve trials for unmounted hunters.

There are, however, other problems that have not (as far as

I know) been widely discussed.

Some hunters are unhappy even with the products of foot-hunting trials. In any open competition among the major breeds, the winners are fast and energetic. They have had training to channel their energies. They have had experienced handlers. And they have been followed by humans who could do a bit of moving too, at least for half an hour. You might prefer a dog from one of the less-popular breeds or strains -- one whose line has been put through rigorous, relevant, independently-judged hunting tests rather than open competitions. The problem with such breeds is their persistent "miracle-breed" advertising. You might be led to believe that your pup will find more birds than other dogs. He is unlikely to be competitive, let alone miraculous, but he may be easier to follow around than a miracle.

Every breed is erratic, to say the least. English setters have useless show strains, cautious ruffed-grouse strains, field-trial strains bred to hunt on the far side of the mountain, and shoot-to-retrieve strains that produce pheasant dogs. The only thing that these strains have in common is a coat designed for collecting burrs. English pointers are a little more consistent: wives consistently refuse to let them into the house. And then there are German shorthaired pointers. They range from dogs that resemble the dragon in a Wagnerian opera to little rockets like Huckleberry. Did you ever see a dog who not only chases deer but

catches them, and then tries to get them to play with him? I hope never to see it again.

Those are just the three breeds that win most of the relevant field trials. Equally good insults are available for the others, but I'd rather persuade you to look, instead, for the traits a pheasant-dog needs. Look for intensity. (That rules out many grouse-strain setters and Brittany spaniels.) Look for a strain that can trail. (Continental breeds are more likely to have been tested for that trait, but some others catch on too.)

Look for a good nose and a strong desire to point. You can usually equip a pup with these things by choosing the right parents. (It is more than you were able to do for yourself, and look how well you turned out.) Never mind distinguished ancestors farther back in the lineage. Aristocracy is an appealing idea that seldom works for many generations.

It takes a smart dog to work pheasants. If his sire and dam never figured out that roosters run, porcupines hurt, and skunks smell bad, then look elsewhere.

Look for precocity. Huckleberry hunted seriously when he was six months old, which saved a whole season that I had expected to lose and provided a good omen for the future. There is a tide in the affairs of pups which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows and in miseries.

Most hunters recommend a close-working dog for pheasants. The case is this: lots of cocks flush wild, either without provocation or because the dog blunders. If the dog stays close enough, his owner may get a shot anyhow. That's one way to do it, but not mine. I want a pup with a five-speed transmission. When he hits the right smell, he should shift down and work out the trail. He should have four-wheel-drive, too. If the birds are in swamps clogged with cattails, then he should push through them. But when scent is hard to find, he should shift to overdrive-fifth and look for birds in a swath ten times broader than I could cover on my own. I want him to be a force-multiplier as well as a sensor.

It is true, however, that Huck strains my powers of telepathy. Slow down, you little brown expletive. Give me a chance to see some scenery that's not filtered through sweat. Aren't there any birds over here in my part of the farm? Oooo ... easy ... whoa ... beautiful. Hold that rooster, boy. Help is on the way. Little brown dog, how I love thee.

These are the strongest sensations in adult human life. By "adult," I mean post-woman-chasing life, because eventually you catch a woman you like, and then you ought to chase something different (especially if you are a candidate for high office). You are too young to stop vibrating between despair and reward. Maybe you will never be ready to stop, in your mind. You wouldn't

have to worry about catching Huckleberry.

One of these years my body will catch me, though. I will be standing out there, breathing hard and smiling wide and holding up a bird for Thanksgiving dinner, when thump! Body will catch up with spirit as if attached to an elastic that I have been stretching thin all these years. So I am keeping my mind and eyes open. What I hope to see is a close-working pup that can find as many birds as Huck. So far, the best bird-finders have been the pups that wanted to follow their noses a bit too far on occasion. Which humans do you bet on for tough jobs: the nine-to-fivers or the hard-drivers?

That's the trouble with dogs. They are too much like people.

(citation)

(This article is drawn from Pheasants of the Mind, a book scheduled for publication November 1, 1990, by Prentice Hall Press.)

Hard to generalize about present behavior.

~~It's easy to go~~

(Spooky)

Can can push pheasants out of
any cover — but a really big field
of CRP will hold them longer than
most. They can run rings around you.

Differs from wild prairie grass in
uniformity, & exp. rows. ~~That Pheasant / day~~
over Pheasant runways.

Call Pheasants Freedom for CRP figures,
distribution, expiration. Conservation
angle. Any estimate on increase in
pheasant #s?

~~Pre: David's 1st bird?~~

~~that Pheasant / retrieval combination works ok.~~

~~Scouting vs. visual marking.~~

~~Birds often not visible to trucks
when they come down.~~

Wild Hunting (title)

Who was my call from new mountain?

Reactor: This has changed too.

940's - not effective?

(Were one step behind the curve.)

Firstly can push ~~and sell~~ on common?
+ return to being staunch.

CAP has changed things.

Need a dog that can point after
a long chase - ~~because Sinds~~

~~is not better~~ They do hold.

(Hacks here)

Call w/20% further.

Easy to ~~lose~~ lose Sinds, esp. if many
others running around.

Looping head because of rows, but possible.

Tight Eyes - or clear out seeds.

Toughed on a dog of all cows; only one
I wouldn't put Hacks in all day
every day.

~~David King's dog before~~

~~hears & hanging back~~

Hacks a perfect match, in temperament.
Rex more of a benevolent (dog)?

H. could not cope first year, when
7 mos. old. Needs a strong dog.
(but light)

Hard to hit them for D. w/ full-choke &
model 12. ~~Good w/ cylinder-bored Perazzi.~~
& ~~of hand shot.~~

Can't compare DK to a candle burning
at both ends: He has more wattage.

Avoid generalizing about cover pheasants
like. They like lots of birds, main thing
in common being heavy cover near the ground.
Edges of woods.
Dense.

Open

Grass - maybe best of all. Five year-
round.

When a hunter tells you don't where phe
live, & ought to be hunted, you can.
Learn more about his likes than theirs.

Death in the tall grass.

CRP: No spraying
good cover.
fair for food?

'88

12/4

Huck twice as fast as fast as bird. The 2D
 $\frac{1}{2}$ as fast.

on pheasants all the time - harder to
pin w/ snow.

10/29/89

Day over too soon, said D. Huck hoping
to get wind right. Mostly young birds.

12/6/89

H starters held tight despite much pressure.
one of the pheasant huts, & after water -
but not w/ Huck.

Birds ran out of stream bottom into grass.

May have preferred bottom for roosting;

could ~~be~~ ~~unavoidable~~ little to escape us in grass.

10/24/90

CRP so high & thick that all pheasants in it,
not bottom.

11/14

Huck's eyes full of seeds. Only cock in which
I would not ~~have~~ want to hunt him
every day.

12/16/90

Andel season w/ 3-2, 3-7, 3-8. All in
Cove we hadn't hit. Eagle may have kept them
sitting tight. Found a feather pile. (Not
rec. by snow).

10/23/91 David no live he was staggering.
But happy.

10/19/91 She out.

11/13 Hyperkinetic hunting, as usual.
But tight holding. Even the oldest

12/4 Round tail feather. 26 1/8"
many hms. Cooks not in grass. Snow made them
feel exposed. Migrated?

P1 (Per Rich Hollborn)
Pheasants learn to
avoid traps baited with
corn. Lyhold + Cornbear.
Some learned to pick
the corn without getting
trapped. Sometimes caught
by head - ribbon
feet.

~~Dogs learn only from experience — The best of them don't read much — & they may not learn fast even then.~~

No dog learns from reading. The best of them learn from experience, preferably when young. The worst of them don't learn at all.

(What distinguishes the best of hunting dogs is brains: they're smarter than pheasants. They're ~~smart~~ intelligent enough to work as a team, with a human. They can puzzle out problems that are different to: the every running bird.

(Trials are designed to eliminate variables, the better to test dogs on a few qualities deemed important: ~~plain points~~ ^{plain} ~~bird~~ ^{point} (good), plain points (irrelevant), etc.
(+ maybe bad)
(but hold pheasants)

The best learn it fast. Most of the rest learn it slowly. Some never learn the game at all.

and the best of runners is a ph,
The best of all hunting is trailing a
running bird, but the best of all
dogs for it is a pointer. [But the
experts will tell you everything else.]

The best bird of running & short of
an ~~exh.~~ is a pheasant. The best dog to
trail it is a pointer.

~~Stand~~

What trailing type is brains. Some hunting
doesn't. (Slow-pointing.) To follow a ph,
you've got to be smarter than he is —
a real predator, not a kennel animal.

On the last day of pheasant season, a pup named Huckleberry picked up scent near Porcupine Creek, where the willows grew tight-packed as quills. He followed the trail quickly at first, then slowed to work out a difficult pattern. That's when I caught up. Huck discovered that the pheasant had crossed to the other side of the stream bottom, picking a place where I could not squeeze through the brush. The pup stayed on the trail while I jogged a hundred yards to find a crossing with enough room for a human.

By the time I got out of the tangle, Huck's beeper was making a signal that told me he was on point somewhere far away. He had followed the bird out of the willows, around a field of stubble, and into a draw with enough grass to provide hiding cover. Getting there took a thousand of my best heartbeats. Perhaps this bird would be a hen, but it steamed my glasses anyhow. Running, cleaning glasses, and watching a dog on point is more excitement than I need all at once.

PHEASANTS go to extremes. They sit tight, flush wild, pose like lawn ornaments, fly clear off the farm, skulk in fields of tall grass, and shriek imprecations from the depths of fetid swamps. Pheasants do everything that is good for their survival and a few things that are good for their egos. What they do best of all, however, is sneak off when they hear you coming.

Pheasants escape by running because they know more about us humans than we know about them.

We cannot hear, see, or smell them on the ground, and usually we cannot guess which way they are going. I do not mean that they calculate the odds and decide on the best tactics—though some individual birds may indeed be clever enough to do that. All are products of evolution. Their ancestors were adapted to civilization even before they reached America. In this country, they kept on evolving under pressure from the shotgun. We have now shot almost 100 generations of cocks that flushed within easy range. A few still make that mistake every year on opening day, and get removed from the gene pool. The long-distance runners live on and reproduce.

There are ways to hunt the runners without a dog, even after opening day. You can walk linear cover—hedgerows, abandoned railroad (Continued on page 84)

Excerpted from Pheasants of the Mind, Prentice Hall Press, New York, N.Y.

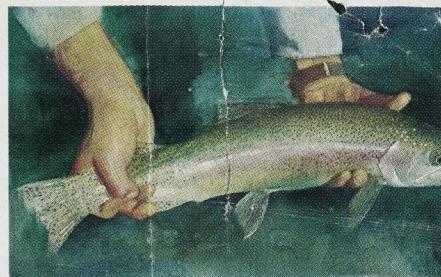


Pheasants

GO TO EXTREMES

BY DATUS C. PROPER

The fall-run rainbow trout may be the least understood and most widely ignored gamefish in our Western waters.



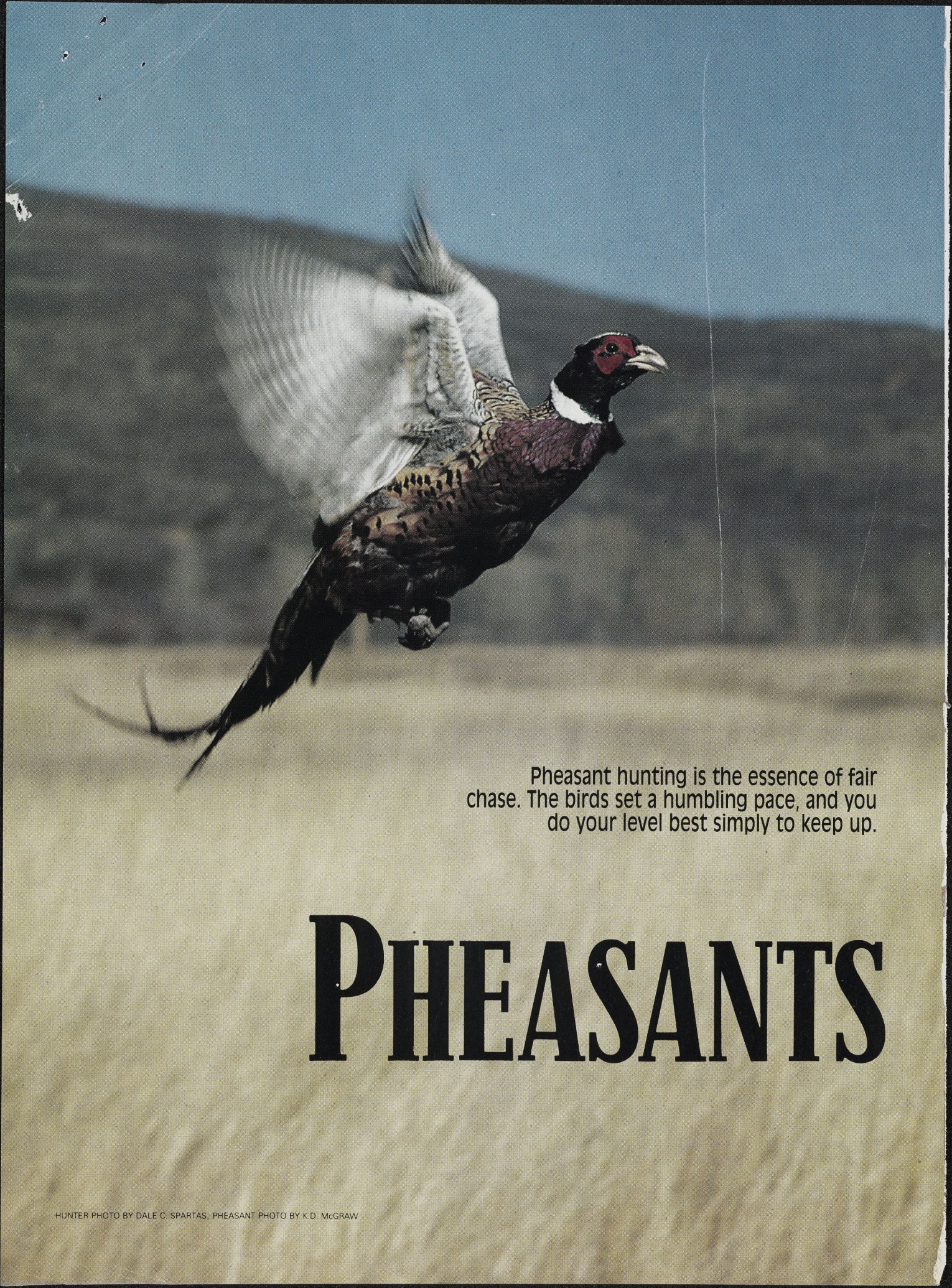
POOR MAN'S STEELHEAD

BY KEITH McCAFFERTY

I had hoped to go to British Columbia this fall, to throw a fly for steelhead in the Morice River where it winds out of the Telkwa Range near Smithers. I settled for a blue-ribbon trout river in Montana, one that was just far enough from home to give me the sense of taking a trip. In size of fish it was a long step down. But in other ways the streams had much in common. Both ran through country as yet untarnished by the hand of man. And both rivers, by the third week in

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT HUNT





Pheasant hunting is the essence of fair chase. The birds set a humbling pace, and you do your level best simply to keep up.

PHEASANTS



recommended that a hunter not remove these glands while field-dressing a deer or skinning an animal in camp, due to the risk of accidentally contaminating the desirable meaty parts of the carcass with pungent tarsal scent. Once the final butchering of the deer is complete and the venison is safely in the freezer, however, Mackey returns to the hanging remains of the carcass to slice off the glands for future use. During the interim, he stores them in his freezer in plastic freezer boxes with snap-top lids.

Since tarsal scent is one of the main ingredients in any sex lure, Mackey uses his tarsal glands almost exclusively during the rutting season. Simply place one of the glands in a 2-foot length of discarded panty hose, tie a knot at one end, and tie the other end to your boot-lace. Then, hike to your stand. As the gland bounces on the ground it will leave an authentic buck-in-rut or doe-in-estrous trail.

Once Mackey reaches his stand location, he removes the tarsal from his boot and ties it to a nearby tree branch to divert the attention of an approaching deer. He reminds hunters hiking out of the woods at day's end always to place the gland in a

plastic bag, never directly in their coat pocket. Also, as time passes, they should occasionally sniff the gland; once it begins to lose its strong, musky aroma it's time to discard it and fetch another from the freezer.

"The tarsal scent of a doe in heat has a mesmerizing effect upon amorous bucks and sometimes even makes them go loco," Mackey says. "One time, a buck approached my stand with none of the usual caution you might expect and just stood there nuzzling the panty hose containing the gland for long moments, allowing me plenty of time to place an arrow just behind his shoulder."

Yet another time, there was no opportunity for Mackey to shoot. A buck following the scent trail he laid down quickly homed in on the hanging gland, snatched it from the branch in his mouth, and dashed away snorting and wheezing with his head wagging from side to side.

A resourceful hunter who goes back to nature for his deer scents also recognizes the value of using deer pellets on a regular basis. If they are still moist and are squished beneath a hunter's boot soles, they create an effective illusion that may cause deer to follow the hunter right to his

stand. Whitetails are highly gregarious and socially oriented creatures, so when a deer crosses the scent trail of other animals it often feels compelled to follow.

Even old, dried-out pellets can be put to good use. Crumble them between the palms of your hands and rub the powdery residue on your lower pant legs to hide any human odor that otherwise might be transferred to trailside vegetation as you hike to your hunting location. Or, as noted Texas animal caller Murry Burnham suggests, throw a handful of pellets into the plastic bag where you store your outer hunting garments so that, in time, a subtle "deer aroma" permeates the fabric.

In farm country, a common practice among insightful hunters heading to their stands is to step into fresh livestock dung. This needn't be a messy affair since livestock dung is quite potent; just a bit smeared on the bottom of your boots should be adequate to cover your scent. Conversely, when hunting in a region where cattle, sheep, or horses are not pastured, always (Continued on page 104)

The author is a frequent contributor and a natural at hunting whitetails.

PHEASANTS

(Continued from page 43)

tracks, and the like. (Perhaps a cock will think that you are on his trail, lose his nerve, and give you a shot.) You can work other kinds of cover that attract birds to small areas, such as "rock breaks" in the middle of a harvested field. (A pheasant in there cannot sneak away unseen.) You can try to push birds from thick cover toward bare ground, and then kick the last clump of grass. You can wait for a snow heavy enough to cut off the escape routes. You can organize a drive, if you have enough friends and know of a place with a fair number of birds. All of these methods worked for me in the 1960's, and sometimes even in the 1970's. They still work in parts of the country—especially the Midwest—where birds are reasonably abundant.

Unfortunately, the latest research suggests that pheasant numbers in North America have fallen by about half since the early 1970's. They are not only smarter but scarcer. I simply cannot find them in most places, but Huckleberry can. Unlike me, he can follow a pheasant when it runs. A dog has the only sensor that works: a nose.

You can have a pheasant dog if you are willing to put yourself into the project. Money does not help much. Maybe it hurts, because if you have money, you probably do not have time, and nobody else is likely to make a pheasant dog out of your pup for you. You have to start by training yourself. If you choose a pup from one of the pointing breeds, you have to abandon most of what you thought you knew about hunting and learn it over from him.

Flushing dogs are less complicated. A springer or Labrador pup will fit in with your old group of hunting friends, doing things that make sense to humans: working close, sniffing the ground, probing brush, handling rabbits and birds alike. Be careful, however, to avoid fluffy spaniels bred for shows and big retrievers specialized in water work. You need a small- to medium-sized dog adapted to long, hot, hard work in the uplands.

A flushing dog is bred to push out birds himself, as soon as he finds them. Clearly, then, he must work close to his human, and even so the shots tend to be difficult. Some hunters keep their flushing dogs under control by training them to sit on command. Such training is a substitute for the pointing instinct, but unlike the point it goes against the dog's nature. Most of my friends take an easier way out, letting their dogs know what is wanted and counting on them to help. A good flushing dog will try hard to do what the boss needs, even if it does not fit formal rules.

The pointing dog has this fundamental difference: he comes equipped with

brakes, and when he finds a bird that will hold, he slams them on. Almost everybody likes to see this, in principle. The point gives the hunter a better chance at a close shot and clean kill. Not everybody likes the qualities that go along with the point, however. A dog that has brakes is usually equipped with faster running gear, too. His game is stop and go—opposites that depend on each other, like love and death. His speed and range may be too much for a human who wants to go slow. A pointing dog is a sports car rather than a family sedan. He needs attention. He gets in trouble. He may not fit your way of hunting.

He fits mine. I hunt alone, mostly, or with one friend. We don't mind walking. We need a dog that searches wide, finds the only cock in a square mile, and then slows down to work out its trail. Most of all we want a dog that will point at the end of the trail, with no whistles or shouts that might cause a wild flush. Only a pointer is bred to do that.

It happens, too, that young Huckleberry looks good while he's looking around. On point he is tension crystallized, emotion prolonged. When the season closes, I take him out anyhow, leaving the gun at home. Just watching him point birds is more fun than most things I can think of.

You should know, however, that most pointing dogs are trained *not* to trail pheasants. My old Trooper was like that. He was a German shorthaired pointer, good at what he had been taught to do. He was keen, steady, and equipped with an outstanding nose. (I knew that because he won field trials.) Over the years he found many birds for me. He would get the scent if it was there, point the pheasant if it would sit, and hold it if it could be held. If it ran, however, he would often lose it.

Trooper had been trained by the bobwhite's rules. Once the quail was our leading gamebird as far north as the Catskills. Ruffed grouse and pheasants were late-starters, gaining status only in the late 19th century. The American pointing-dog myth is a bobwhite myth, though I don't suppose most people today think of it that way. The innocent bobwhite of the 19th century shaped our dogs, and the dogs shaped our field trials, and those trials became the game which most professional dog trainers had to master. By now the sport is uniquely American—more so than baseball. It is a great game, but wild pheasants won't play it.

I am using the term "myth" respectfully. Myths give us our most powerful rules—the ones we accept as profoundly right, without thinking about them. Perhaps we hunters crave mythic guidance more than most people. And so, if we live in America (but not in other countries), we train our pointers in the good old American way. When they do a poor job of hunting pheasants, we blame the bird. Confounded roosters just won't behave

like gentlemen's game.

Here is how not to get a pheasant dog. You start with a talented dog like Trooper. You never let him break point on his own initiative to work out a scent. You make him steady to wing and shot, which means that he remains on point even when the bird flushes and is killed. To reinforce his steadiness, you do not let him retrieve anything until he is a year or two old. It works. You get what is called (in a sort of Freudian slip) "a finished dog." Like old Trooper, he wins trials of the good old American kind and adapts to tight-sitting wild birds. For pheasants he is, if not finished, at least handicapped. He has spent his youth learning the wrong things.

When Trooper's time ran out, my wife and I got another shorthair. The breed did not matter to me, but it did to her. She did not want long hair on the rug, which ruled out setters, and she did not share my admiration for English pointers. Her good will was important. The new pup, unlike Trooper, was to be raised in the house. I wanted him to grow up smarter than a pheasant, and kennels provide few stimuli for developing brains. I wanted Huck to get used to being on my team, too. Man and dog must often work together to surround a running pheasant.

We bought a pup from outstanding parents, and then we raised him to be a pheasant dog. We praised Huckleberry for retrieving anything. Anything. That included slippers, rugs, bags of groceries with the pickles falling out, long-dead muskrats, and live, complaining gophers. I took him outside for half an hour most afternoons, and as he got on the scent of pheasants during our rambles, I encouraged him to sniff and trail. He started pointing wild birds when he was six months old. When I shot the first cock over his point, he perceived the meaning of life. From then on he followed hot air-scent at a gallop, nose high. It took him longer to get his nose down and follow weak ground scent. He was not finished. He was started, on the real thing.

This is not to say that Huckleberry was self-trained. (A pup who can intimidate cock pheasants is most unlikely to agree with his human on every little thing.) He had to learn commands like "no," "come," "fetch," "heel," and "whoa." If I had realized quite how bold he was, I would have leaned on him even earlier.

Training, however, is no substitute for hunting. You can train a dog to avoid behavior that you do not want. If he has the right instincts, you can encourage him to intensify habits that are useful to you. You cannot teach him to hunt. You do not know the real game. We humans see cock pheasants in the air, or strutting over a field in the distance, and have to deduce the rest. Only a dog can sense every move they make. Only he knows their resourcefulness and strength, and he learns only

Grandpa told me to cast toward the bank and around any cover I could see in the lagoon. I got one spectacular hit, but I couldn't hold whatever it was at the other end, and I lost my lure and most of my leader. It was then Grandpa explained that along with the cutthroats, there were big "jack" coho salmon coming in from the ocean.

I put on a pink roostertail and picked up another nice cutt that took half my line on the first run. Grandpa was having plenty of action, too, and he had just released his third cutt when we heard shouts from the direction of the island.

"HELP!! HELP!! HELP ME!!"

I stood up in the bow and looked toward the bank side of the island. Through the high grass I could see the kid who'd been fly-fishing waving his arms in the air. He was roughly 150 yards away and nearly invisible.

Grandpa, who was facing the opposite direction from the shouts, said: "Is that the kid by the channel?"

Before I could answer the kid began yelling again. This time we could hear the panic in his voice: "HELP! QUICKSAND! I CAN'T GET OUT!!"

The old man had already pulled the starter cord on the outboard and had the engine revving. He put it in gear and the skiff headed across the lagoon toward the desperate voice.

Grandpa yelled at me: "Get the anchor rope ready to throw to him!" I crouched in the bow and began coiling it on my arm.

It took about 25 seconds to cover the distance but it seemed twice as long. Grandpa's comment about the "tricky" bottom earlier in the day flashed through my mind. I wondered if the kid could swim and in the next second realized that if you're caught in quicksand you can't get free enough to swim.

As we rounded the tip of the island we could see the kid was struggling to stay afloat. Water had filled his waders and only his head and neck were visible. It was obvious his body and legs were sinking deeper into the sand. Just when it looked like he was about to go under he saw us and made even more of an effort to work himself loose.

Grandpa cut the engine and in another few seconds we were on top of the kid. He reached out and grabbed the gunwales on our skiff and held on. Grandpa barked out in urgent tones: "Hurry up! Put the rope under his arms and around his back!"

The kid was terrified and when I tried to pass the rope under his arms he wouldn't let go of the skiff. He'd stopped yelling but he was still stuck in the sand over his waist and the water in his waders was pulling him down, making him think he was going under. I asked him if he could move and he shook his head. He was afraid to talk, and I could see the fear in his eyes and feel it in his arms and hands that wouldn't let go. His grip on the gunwales was like a pair of iron clamps. Once I got the rope around his back and told him he

wouldn't sink, I could sense he relaxed a little. But not much.

Grandpa moved up to the middle of the boat to see if he could help. It was obvious I couldn't do anything alone. I'd pulled on the rope and the kid hadn't budged.

Just then the boy tried to lift himself up and the weight in the boat shifted. For a second I thought we were going to capsize—our fishing gear clattered to the downside, the tackle box fell over, and plugs, hooks, leaders, and sinkers all tangled together. But Grandpa quickly trimmed the skiff and then decided that the only way we could pull the kid out was by using the motor. With the anchor rope wrapped securely under the kid's arms and around his back so he couldn't go under and me pulling, we began making progress. Inch by inch the kid started moving.

After 5 minutes of working him along the bottom the kid said the sand was getting firmer. In a few minutes we had him on safe ground.

Grandpa explained what had happened. The 15 feet between the bank and the island was the main channel of Ten Mile Creek. Winter rains had dug out a deep hole—like the holes in the lagoon. But every day the incoming tide refilled the hole with loose debris—leaves and bits of wood. The tidal action kept stirring up the sand and debris, which would then

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settle down, looking like the rest of the creek bottom. But looks were deceptive, for the bottom was treacherous. And although the creek normally had only a 3-foot flow, when combined with a high tide and a mountain freshet, a short man or a young boy could sink deep enough to drown. In short, all the conditions for a disaster were present.

When we finally got the kid up on the bank, safe and sound, he thanked us for helping him out of a dangerous situation. We found his fly rod about 20 yards downstream and retrieved it and then said goodbye. We looked for Andy, but he'd evidently caught his fish and gone home. It was close to 11:00 when we started back up Ten Mile Creek, and Grandpa asked me if I'd learned anything about sea-run cutthroat trout.

I replied, "I sure did, Grandpa. I'll never make fun of those Ghost Trout again. But, you know, I learned something else today. No matter how little a creek or lagoon may be, when you go fishing or hunting you better think about what you're doing and check things out. That kid would have drowned back there if we hadn't come along."

"Amen!" said Grandpa. "Now let's check this creek out for some mallards. We might be coming back here again, real soon, and we've got to think how we're gonna approach 'em. . . ."



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by chasing them through cattails and cornfields, weeds and willows.

He should learn all he really needs to know in kindergarten. My friends and I shot about sixty pheasants during Huckleberry's first full season, and I kicked up only one of them before he found it. Conclusion: a year-old dog can locate pheasants about fifty-nine times better than a human. Huck also retrieved all that I shot, except for one that came down on property where we could not get permission to follow. To make up for that, he brought me two winged birds that other hunters had failed to recover. This was better than I did even in the good old days of high pheasant populations.


Please do not take this to mean that hunting is about scores. It is not. It's about one man and one dog chasing one pheasant at a time, and earning the ones they get. This is never going to be called a gentleman's sport, because no one else does the work for you. You do not stand around while someone drives birds in your direction; you do not ride in a vehicle and dismount for a shot when the dog goes on point. Pheasants won't sit still for that. They take real hunting, not just shooting. They are not somebody else's myth. They are yours, in the making.

Early in the season, some birds sit tight in grass that is still thick enough to hide them. When the cover gets thin, however, many pheasants flush wild, no matter how well your dog hunts. If you want a shot, you try to keep up. You play the odds. You and your pup are like wolves running a herd of caribou to see if one of them is vulnerable. Call it fair chase. If predation were a 100 percent successful, you would not want to be a part of it, would you?

During the chasing, you sweat. I recommend that you put an anti-fog solution on your glasses before every hunt. If you forget, you will be standing there like me, cleaning off your shooting-

eye lens with a gloved finger and hoping that you are not about to miss the season's last chance.

THE DECEMBER bird that Huckleberry trailed and pointed was a cock. It held till I got close, but I was too flustered to shoot well. A fringe pellet angled the pheasant down into brush that looked thick enough to stop a weasel. With Trooper, that wounded rooster would have escaped, but Huck squirmed into the willows and found scent. He worked the bottom and ran down what he was looking for, an old rooster with eagle-eyes glaring at me, almost a survivor. My gun was open by then; I had promised to quit if rewarded by a holiday pheasant that I did not deserve.

Huckleberry came to heel and followed me back to the truck. He looked puzzled. He'd made no promises and could not understand why anyone would quit when there were still pheasants to be trailed. 

WHITETAILS

(Continued from page 51)

have bedding sites that are removed from feeding grounds, but during the day the deer are often quite content to rest and ruminate right in or near the places they like to feed. So, moving slowly through a stand of aspen or stripped maples or oak will often be the best way to find whitetails in the afternoon.

However, the all-time favorite and most productive whitetail stalking grounds for me are hillsides above brushy thickets. Because whitetails are especially jumpy during hunting season, they may spend their days in thicker cover than usual, making them particularly difficult to see. But, if you can stalk above this cover and look down into it, you may be surprised at how many whitetails can pack into even a small patch of brush.

The strip of hawthorn I like to hunt is so obnoxious I would never try to hunt *in* it. But it comes with a steep hillside at its back and a narrow, yet relatively level, game trail on which I can stalk



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PHEASANT HABITAT IN THE GALLATIN VALLEY

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The Gallatin Valley, where I live, has in the past produced pheasants in large numbers. It is evidently capable of doing so today, because I have seen excellent populations while hunting on properties that happen to have the right conditions.

I have tried to improve habitat on my own small place, with limited success. I don't claim to know what works, but I am becoming an expert in things that do not work. This paper ends with a plea for research that would help other Montanans avoid mistakes like mine.

Three of my neighbors are managing larger areas for wildlife, and they might be interested in my experiments -- if I produce better results.

1. Existing Habitat

My property is small (60 acres), but it is decent pheasant habitat. Characteristics:

- a. 1 large and 3 small spring creeks -- perhaps a mile in total -- plus some ponds.
- b. Lots of buffaloberry bushes that the pheasants use for shelter, plus some willows old enough to create tangles of fallen trunks. (The birds have not shown much interest in

young willows.)

- c. Dense stands of snowberries and wild roses.
- d. About 25 acres of barley that is left in stubble all winter. It adjoins the heavier cover.
- e. Some good grass for nesting cover. (One hen last year raised a brood of 11 chicks to full size.)
- f. Adjoining properties have additional habitat, including stands of cattail. Mine is not a patch of isolated cover.
- g. The East Gallatin River winds around my house, separated in one place by a single field. It is a sort of pheasant corridor for this part of the valley, with thick brush on the banks.

The worst habitat on my place is some 10 acres of bluegrass. I would replace it if I were confident of achieving a lasting improvement.

2. Leading Problems

Hen survival is generally poor. In December we had 4 or 5 hens, but most did not survive the (mild) winter. There seem to be more cocks than hens, even though the cocks were hunted.

The hen that raised 11 chicks was exceptional. Some years I get only small, late-hatching broods, suggesting that the first nesting attempts failed.

3. Experiments

- a. There has been no grazing for several years. Pheasant numbers improved markedly when the cows left. Conclusion: success.

b. 4 years ago, I put in $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres of rough barley for winter feed. The deer ate every head in the fall. I don't think that they spilled a grain of barley. Pheasants never used the plot. Conclusion: flop.

c. Today we are harvesting all 25 acres of barley, in the process spilling some grains for the pheasants and ducks. The barley appears to rot by late season, and I am concerned about pesticides used in its production. Conclusion: better than nothing.

d. Five years ago, I put in about $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of what was intended to be nesting cover. The mixture was suggested by the SCS: tall wheatgrass, alfalfa, and yellow blossom sweetclover. I now have a fine stand (mainly tall wheatgrass). The pheasants, however, go out of their way to avoid it. The problem may be that the grass is too dense at ground level. Conclusion: failure.

In contrast, I have hunted several times on a CRP field elsewhere in the valley that was planted in shorter grasses -- mainly crested wheatgrass, I think. This grass is not supposed to be suitable for pheasants but it has always contained lots of them, at all seasons.

It seems clear that we need research on the grasses (and food crops) that pheasants really prefer in this climate. I am reluctant to try any more experiments on my own.

4. Limiting Factors

The following factors, in order of priority, may be limiting

pheasant numbers on my place.

a. Predation: Predators get more pheasants (and ducks) than the population can afford, despite respectable cover. I realize that this conclusion is not politically correct, but I have made enough observations to be fairly sure of it. My dog finds the carcasses. I can pretty well track the pheasants around my area by seeing which trees the great horned owls are sitting in: They know. Goshawks have started to show up in the same trees. Red-tailed hawks are around. Foxes are thriving. Of nest predators, there are many skunks and magpies, plus some raccoons.

All this is a big change from the situation when I was growing up. At that time too, biologists believed, or hoped, that predation would have little impact on birds in good habitat. The latest research on that subject is not encouraging.¹ Predation needs to be identified and discussed as an issue, if only because it affects decisions on types of habitat.

b. Winter food: My barley stubble adjoins good cover, so the pheasants do not have to commute far for food. In late winter, however, a pheasant that is even a few yards from cover is likely to be a target of predation. The rotted barley may also be low in nutrition. The bottom line is that I do not see much use of the stubble during the time when birds are most in need of food. I might be able to put in a plot of better food near the holding cover -- if I knew of something that would not attract the deer.

1. See especially Stephen Trapper, Malcom Brockless, and Dick Potts, "The Salisbury Plain Predation Experiment: The Conclusion." In The Game Conservancy Review of 1990, pp.89-91. (British publication.)

c. Deer: There are so many whitetails that even the young buffaloberry bushes get eaten back. I have considered planting one or more shelter belts, but the deer demolish unprotected trees. This again is a big change from the situation when I was growing up in Montana.

d. Nesting cover: There is an alfalfa field next to my property, but any nest in it is going to be destroyed by mowing. (Is there any nesting cover good enough to keep hens out of the alfalfa?)

e. Winter cover: No problem for the last two seasons. Has been a problem during winters of extreme cold and heavy snow. At such times spilled barley is inaccessible, the buffaloberries are gone, and the pheasants have to travel long distances between shelter and food.

Long-Term Changes

If I have assessed the limiting factors correctly, an interesting conclusion leaps out: the leading factors are new.

- ¶ A generation ago, we had no raccoons and few raptors of the species skilled at catching pheasants (great horned owls, goshawks, and red-tailed hawks). Foxes and skunks may or may not have been better controlled by trapping.
- ¶ Whitetails were unknown in the valley or just arriving.

The existence of new factors again points to the need for research.

Answers Needed

I have been talking to biologists recommended by Pheasants Forever in other states, and reading as many papers on the subject as I could find. Unfortunately, research done even in the Dakotas may not apply here. Our climate may be too cold for switchgrass. Our deer might eat sorghum and buckwheat (though these crops seem to survive deer attacks elsewhere). I don't know how to plant a shelter belt that would survive current deer populations.

The Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks has been doing great work on a tight budget, but research will take funding. I am willing to speak out for an upland bird stamp, if that would help to finance research. I have been buying sportsmen's licenses, which means that I am not even identified as a bird-hunters in official files. I would welcome a chance to contribute to small-game research.

September 12, 1992