Move pheasants to

December? The

Shirtsleeve day w/

2 or 3 Cocks.

Snipe in the mini-spring

Creek.

Work in the ♀ hunters in mythology, per pp. 155-8 Hamilton. And Artemis.

Did I know it? It reflected the eternal primitive reality of ♂

~~into~~ interest in ♀ in short tunics, etc. It always worked out badly for the huntresses, except Artemis, & she was immortal.

GUEST SHOT

BY DATUS C. PROPER

THE CHASE AT PHEASANTS

The drive to Mr. Colchis' farm takes half an hour longer than usual because the forecast was accurate. But pheasants don't worry about the weather. People do. One friend said he'd come along except that he had family driving in from Keokuk for the holidays, and another reported what some lady on television had said about a cold front. Hunters are human and pheasants are heroes.

This drab decade is no place for a bird of bronze, orange, green, white, red, and olive—a bird, moreover, that hides its 3-foot length in 3 inches of bleached grass. Jason and his Argonauts discovered the *phasianos* while seeking the 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 now give counsel on dealing with the unexpected. The first point is that you must make sacrifices to Artemis, maiden goddess of the chase, in order to gain her favor. Artemis can be beastly. Once she turned a hunter into a buck deer and sicked his own dogs on him, just because he watched her skinny-dipping in a sylvan pool.

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.

In the station wagon are two German shorthaired pointers, one has-been and one might-be. Huckleberry is just 6 months old and has not yet grasped the meaning of life. That's the trouble with buying a pup; you have to feed him for a year before you find out if he's useless, and by then your wife won't hear of sacrificing him to some woods hussy. Huck just came along for the ride; Trooper is the one who knows what to do. He can no longer hear my whistle, but he was never a great listener anyhow, except once a day at chow time.

Today Trooper spends too much time sniffing at bushes and piles of brush, none of which harbor a pheasant. I have to wonder if his nose is getting as feeble as the rest of him. He doesn't catch on even when a rabbit sneaks out from one of those brush piles, hops across the field, and hides behind a tuft of grass. This reminds me that rabbit marinated in white wine used to taste good.

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 confusing now so follow this carefully: First, there is a feeble thrashing around in the grass, as is to be expected of a rabbit that's on its way to the marinade, and I run to pick up dinner before Trooper arrives and eats it. 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, which must have been sitting where the rabbit was supposed to be. 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 Artemis who should apologize. Instead of helping out, she has bought an Olympus camcorder and is video-taping a script of the Keystone Kops variety, with me in the lead. Capriciousness 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 6-pound 6-ounce puffball mushroom, our biggest ever, and a good omen. Puffballs are delicious with pheasant—if you have a pheasant. We won't get the main course with Trooper wet and tired, and 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 10 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 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.

Huckleberry does not need waking. I left him with a 19-by-41-inch welcome mat

Datus C. Proper is an avid chaser of pheasants in his home state of Montana.

PHOTO BY ROBERT PEARCY

The events that try us in the field are beyond fiction . . . because fiction makes sense.

(heretofore dog-proof) as a cushion for his little snooze. At present, Arachne, the weaver, working 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 distributed 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 Artemis' altar without consulting Mom.

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

I expect Huck to stay close to me, for protection against Harpies. (A Harpy, in case your mythology is rusty, is a kind of half-bird, half-woman with terrible talons, capable of flying off with pointer puppies. Cock pheasants fantasize about Harpies.) Young Huckleberry, however, shows heroic tendencies. He busts a meadowlark, nearly catches it for the first 30 yards, then chases it out of sight. He flash-points a hen mallard on the creek and flushes her, then 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 discover 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 *Keo-kuk*. Perhaps this is how a pheasant expresses happiness when rain turns into a mere mist. I reach into my shooting vest for a leash, with which I plan to lead Huck close to the bird and encourage sniffing around. "Here, pup," I will whisper, leading him back when he tries to dither off after muskrats. But first I have to catch him, and he's another bad listener. He's running through those weeds too fast but on scent, sure to bust the only pheasant of the day before I can get within shooting range. When he is 30 feet from the far edge, Huck points: head high, tail up, puppy foreleg cocked, baby-fat body tense. He vibrates but shows no sign of moving. The real thing. Neither of us knew he was going to do that.

In his book *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 one, the first for a pup who is hunting a season too soon. There's going to be a flush, because the cock is pinned between us and a clear field.

But you can 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 11 feet long and iridescent against drab grass. Huck is too low in the weeds to see what's happening, and I hesitate. Better to wait for the bird to get in cover again or it will flush wild. My pup loses the body scent but holds the point and turns his head toward me, brow wrinkled quizzically. *Did I do something wrong, boss?*

You did it just right, buddy. (Tell me now, do I know how to pick bird dogs or what?)

I see where the rooster enters a woodlot, 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 40 miles an hour slower than my pup. It's important to stay close. This place is 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 16 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 to where the bird landed, but it's no longer there. Then, instead of getting his nose down and trailing, my wife's idiotic pup gallops away with his head held 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.)

After covering about 300 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 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 in order 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 sunning itself on a tree limb. This vicious animal scrambles down the trunk and charges me. (I trust you have grasped the point about fiction making more sense than the things that happen to hunters.) Mangling by marmot must not appear on my tombstone, but I cannot retreat; the thorns have detained a portion of my anatomy that no one could expect me to sacrifice, except Artemis. Finally, the woodchuck disappears down a hole at arm's length. You may have thought that was funny, Mizz Goddess Ma'am, but yellow incisors at 20 inches didn't look very comical to me. Furthermore, 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.

As I crawl out of the thorns, Huckleberry crawls in, and if he disappears down that hole, the woodchucks can have him. Instead, Huck wriggles further into 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 7 feet—but that's enough to hide much of a six-month-old pointer pup. Huck prances around on tiptoes with his head in the air, just as he does when running off to bury my wife's best shoes. He doesn't exactly retrieve, but he runs around me in diminishing spirals until 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. But he has found something he likes better. His tail is saying that he wants to go chase another of these birds that smell so good.

And so we do. When Artemis is cranky you persist until she changes her mind, and when she's in a good mood, you keep on chasing.

Use as recipe at the end of Nov?

About 2000 words

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Respect

(Is there a long version of Mt. Olympus?)

RESPECT

"Our harvest being gotten in, our Governour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after a more speciall manner rejoyce together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labours...."

--Edward Winslow letter, Dec. 11, 1621, about the first Thanksgiving

My wife sent me fowling in the same season, but 363 years later. Non-hunters would have to celebrate with tame turkey -- full of growth-hormones and empty of flavor -- but we hoped to do better. It was the second Saturday before Thanksgiving, and my mission was to bring home a cock pheasant. It would age on our

back porch, just as birds were shown in old still-life paintings. The feathers would glow like autumn leaves. On the holiday, twelve days later, we would dry-pluck the bird, taking care not to tear the skin. I would then discard the crop, intestine, and lungs. Almost everything else would be saved. The heart, liver, gizzard, feet, and neck would be used in making the sauce. We would have the best dinner in our nation's capital -- full of the emotions and flavors of the field.

My old pointer hit scent along a weedy Maryland hedgerow. If we had arrived ten minutes earlier, we might have had a shot. Instead, we pushed the pheasant toward two hunters coming in from the opposite end. We heard six quick shots, which would usually mean a miss but in this case did not. My dog brought me the warm remains. The hunters who got the bird had "breasted it out" on the spot -- ripped open the skin and pulled off two warm chunks of flesh. They had then thrown out the rest, which included half of the meat, most of the flavor, and all of the beauty. It seemed a safe bet that the torn fragments they took home would not appear on the Thanksgiving table.

When hunters show disrespect for the hunted, something fundamental has been lost. Killing one's prey and honoring it have been inseparable actions since men became men. We know this because ancient paintings on the walls of caves are real art, which shows that the artists were real humans. Most of the paintings are of species eaten by the hunters. The connection has reached down through the millennia, and in some cultures there

are still rituals for fallen game. People everywhere fuss over game cookery, too. When I lived in Europe, where wild game could legally be sold, a pheasant cost several times more than a chicken, and people who went to extra expense always showed respect, at least for their investment.

In America too, our ancestors would not tolerate waste. A friend who is in his seventies says that his mother would have paddled him if he'd skinned a bird. The reward for thrift was flavor, and that's still the secret of great cooking around the world. Whether you pronounce the dishes in French, Italian, or English, they squeeze out all the flavor. The taste is elegant but there's no squeamishness in the preparation. And there are no secrets because all of this has been going on since long before 1621.

The old skills have, however, been withering since Americans moved to town and began buying chicken parts wrapped in plastic. When my wife and I were learning how to cook game birds, we were advised to braise those tough pheasants or bake them in pies. We read the recipes of famous lodges and hunters who were too busy to dress game in the old ways. A book titled Easy Game Cooking opined that "all this talk about letting game hang, is nothing but medieval twaddle. The sooner a bird is drawn, plucked, and frozen or cooked, the better it will be."

On the table as in the field, however, we found pheasants deceptive. When cooked fresh, they were the toughest and most tasteless of upland game. When aged, plucked, and roasted, a

single pheasant made the best of holiday dinners -- big enough to serve our family of three, mellow and robust enough to go with old red wine.

In birds as in wine, the biggest flavors take longest to develop. I don't know why pheasants need more aging than other game birds, but they do. Even young cocks are best when hung for a week. For special dinners, my wife and I prefer the biggest, oldest, fattest birds -- the ones over three pounds with wicked spurs -- and they are tough till they have hung two weeks. We have often let them go for three weeks rather than freeze them, because they are never quite as good after a stay in the freezer. Bear in mind, though, that no game could be hung this long under poor conditions. We live in Montana now, and by November our garage stays between 30 and 40 degrees.

If the weather is warm, age the bird in a refrigerator, preferably on wire shelves for good air circulation. Don't use a plastic bag. Fortunately, the weather is usually cool enough, by pheasant season, to allow aging on an insect-free porch or in a garage. Hang a bird by one foot -- not by both feet and not by the head. Keep an eye on it. Sniff it. If it has been chewed by your dog, don't push your luck. And if your pheasants are full of shot, promise yourself to switch to an improved-cylinder choke tube, for a single-barrel gun; cylinder and modified for a double.

Normally, no field dressing is needed: just get the pheasant out of your game bag and into a place where it can cool off

quickly. If the day is unseasonably hot, insert a forked stick in the vent, twist, and pull out the whole intestine. Some knives come with special hooks for the job. The idea is to remove the part of the innards that is most prone to spoilage, but without tearing the skin. If you open the body cavity in the normal way, you will find it difficult to pluck the bird later.

The rest of the process of dressing is summarized in the first paragraph above. Dry-plucking tries your patience but produces better flavor than plucking wet. If aged correctly, the bird's skin will look good underneath the feathers. You may be surprised by the mildness of the smell, too. A pheasant drawn shortly after it is shot has a violent odor; you would guess that it is half-rotten already. It is not. The viscera of an aged rooster can be removed in the kitchen, where you are likely to do a better job than you would in the field.

We all talk about "cleaning" game. It's Anglo-Saxon queasiness, but we're stuck with it. The problem is that cleaning sounds like water -- maybe even a soak. Don't do it unless the pheasant is badly bloodshot. Wild birds are clean and healthy already; they must stay in top condition to survive, because no one feeds them antibiotics. Save all the blood you can, like a European chef preparing a free-range chicken in the kitchen. When the pheasant is cooked, you can call the blood "juices." They make the best natural sauce in the world, without cream. Unlike most holiday dinners, this one will leave you in good shape for chasing your next pheasant.

The cooking is easy, once you get over two pitfalls.

First, if you have a great chicken recipe, don't use it for wild pheasants. The basic pheasant method given below does not work for chickens, either. (The sauce fails.) The two birds are relatives, genetically, but in the kitchen as in the field, they are at opposite extremes.

Second, avoid moist heat for pheasants in good condition. For leftovers, a pie is all right; and braising lets you make something edible with a cock that has been shot-up or skinned. If there is a moist-heat method that can develop the flavor a pheasant ought to have, however, we have not found the recipe. We have tried clay pots, crock pots, oven-bags, pressure-cookers, casseroles, and pans with tight lids. We have tried every additive from mushroom soup (an American tragedy) to flamed brandy (a French farce). We have sampled every dish friends brought to game dinners. Some of the sauces were good. The thighs were not bad. The breasts were best pushed to the back of the serving dish for somebody else.

High-fat methods taste better. Every year we fry a few of the youngest cocks in a little bacon grease, and the old-fashioned gravy is a treat.

Roasting, however, has for centuries been known as the best of methods for pheasants -- and less fat is needed. Our ancestors spit-roasted in front of a fire, with a drip pan underneath. Sometimes they added elaborate ingredients. We have found the method equally adapted to simple recipes in modern ovens.

Roast Pheasant -- Basic Method

Pheasant aged & dressed as above, skin intact

1 tablespoon olive oil

2 tablespoons butter

1 cup game-bird stock (in an emergency, chicken broth)

1 bay leaf and 6 peppercorns

Sweet sherry to taste

Salt to taste

Bread stuffing -- with chestnuts if possible

Half an hour before you start to roast the bird, heat the stock in a small saucepan. Add the bay leaf, peppercorns, feet, skinned neck, gizzard, heart, and any blood left from the body cavity. Cover and simmer while the pheasant is roasting. Add the trimmed (deveined) liver for a few minutes at the end.

Have the bird at room temperature for even roasting. Do not truss it, and heat the stuffing separately. A stuffed and trussed pheasant would force you to overcook the breast in order to make the stuffing safe.

Use a thick pan just a little larger than the bird, with raised sides. Melt the butter and olive oil over medium heat till a drop of water sizzles when flicked in. Spend ten minutes searing the pheasant from as many angles as possible, turning with tongs (not a fork). The breast skin in particular should be nut-brown.

Turn the bird on its back and put it (uncovered) in an oven

heated to 350 degrees. After thirty minutes -- less if the bird is small -- check. Lift the pheasant with tongs and pour the juices from its body cavity into the pan; they should be barely pink. Prick the breast with a sharp two-tined cooking fork; the juices that run out should be slightly pink or just clear.

Put the bird on a carving board and cover with foil to keep warm. Pour the sherry into the roasting pan, scraping with a spatula to mix in anything stuck on the bottom. Pour in the simmering stock and all of its contents. Reduce at a slow boil while you test for taste, adding salt and more sherry as needed.

Strain what is now the sauce back into the small, empty pan in which the stock was simmered. Retrieve the heart, gizzard, and liver from the strainer. If they still have any flavor, chop them and add to the sauce. Discard the rest of the material strained out of the stock.

Carve the pheasant with a very sharp knife. Make a deep horizontal cut between wing and breast on each side, then slice the breast lengthwise into thin slices. If you do it right, almost every bite of the breast will have a piece of crisp skin, like Peking Duck. The thighs and pieces off the back should be good too. Save the carcass and tough meat from the legs for making stock.

Plates should be warm. Spoon sauce over the sliced meat and the stuffing. Think of the stuffing not as a separate dish but as a pheasant-surrogate that soaks up sauce, stretches the dish, and rewards you with one of the world's great flavors.

NW

About 1780 words

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THE NEWS FROM MT. OLYMPUS

You never know where a pheasant may lead you.

Saturday's pheasant sneaked out of a woody bottom, slithered through scraggly alfalfa right in front of me, and ran up a grassy knob in the distance. I caught no glimpse of the bird, mind you, but my dog followed it out of the brush and showed me what was going on. Huckleberry's nose was not high in the air, as it would have been for a hot trail, but he was not puzzling out stale scent either. I guessed that our quarry had a hundred-yard lead.

Long before I could climb the knob, Huck had disappeared over its top, dark-brown wiggle in field faded yellow. On my right flank was David King, making better time than me -- partly because he had enough sense to skirt the hill. David is in good shape, too. He is a physician who limits himself to sixteen hours of work a day, unless a patient gets sick, and keeps in shape by aerobic exercise -- chasing pheasants, preferably. With David around I push myself a little harder, because he knows the difference between a red face and an emergency-room case.

From the top of the knob, I could hear Huckleberry -- just barely -- from where he was standing on point. He had followed his bird down the far side of the hill, across a dirt lane, and up the steep side of a bench.

Pheasant-trailing, you see, is a very old sport adapted to changed conditions. We have no wild boars in my part of the world, but the feeling is the same and the pheasants taste better. The main problem is that my dog cannot tell us where he is holding game at bay, so we hang a beeper around his neck and pretend that it is a horn blowing the assembly call. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In the days when gods and humans hunted together, boars caused devastation -- even on Mount Olympus -- and killed some of the mortal men called in to help. Huckleberry chases pheasants in the heroic manner and expects David and me to do our duty too. It's good to have a dog like this, once in a lifetime. I am not sure that I could survive another.

David trotted up the bench and then kept moving till he and Huckleberry blocked the bird's escape on the far side. I sneaked in on the near corner of the triangle.

What happened next was the most colorful part of life since the fireworks on July 4 -- the part when they played the Star-Spangled Banner and we all leaped to attention. From tan grass burst a fluster of red and green, gorgeous and almost within reach. It was an optical illusion staged to make a fast bird look slow for just long enough to throw my timing off. I

jerked into action, fired too soon, then aimed with excruciating precision and missed a second shot at very long range, which was how I learned that the cock was moving right along.

David tried too hard with his first shot, like me, but swung through with his second barrel. I knew that the pheasant had lost its bet even before the puff of feathers. This game is all in the head.

There is, however, one part beyond my ken. Why did that rooster sit tight when Huckleberry circled it? Perhaps it paused to gather its breath for flight, discovered that the predator on its trail had stopped too, and found stasis less risky than movement. Or perhaps the bird simply gave up, like the Trojan warrior who threw himself at Achilles' feet. Of all mythic heroes, Achilles was the most intense, and he did not relent. Neither did Huckleberry.

David and I had often seen the same pattern in old cocks: The farther one runs, the more likely it is to hold tight at the end of the trail. Dog and prey reach some kind of understanding -- a fatal entente.

Huckleberry brought me the trophy and I laid it out on the grass, feathers glowing, long tail slightly curved from crouching in cramped quarters. David and I flopped beside our quarry.

"Nothing else could make me work that hard," David said.

We humans would have given our hearts more time to stop pounding, but Huck held his nose high, caught a message on the breeze, and started off, moving his head from side to side with a

new thread of scent. We tried to keep up.

Runners

Our method may strike you as the hard way to get a pheasant dinner. Bear in mind, however, that the roosters we chase are utterly wild and hard to find. It would be a thrill to see birds rising in waves from the fields where such things happen, but I am not complaining and have heard no gripes from David King, except that he could use more time off. There is always a place for us to stretch legs and lungs, always a fast dog slicing arcs from sunlit hillsides. There just isn't much shooting.

Ours, then, is a method for scarce pheasants. It would not make sense to follow a rooster up Mount Olympus if the flatlands below were full of others.

Before Huckleberry, I had a notion that some pheasants, at least, simply hid as hunters approached. It was an idea that came from sporting prints of dogs on point. They would be in whatever pose was fashionable at the time -- standing tall or crouching, tails high or low -- looking statuesque, anyhow. The birds would be painted in front of the dogs' noses, equally immobile.

In fact, however, wild pheasants are moving targets, whether on the ground or in the air. You might catch one on its roost early in the morning or during a winter storm, but most adult birds sit only after they have tried everything else first, and then only if the ground-cover is good enough to conceal them.

In smaller fields, you can follow the runners at a human

pace, pushing them toward an edge where they will have to flush. Hunting is often organized around edges -- but experienced roosters avoid them if possible, and habitat today may be extensive. Over the last decade, the Conservation Reserve Program has set aside 36 million acres of cropland, much of it in large pieces.

Remember when you watched a pup running wild and flushing pheasants far ahead? There were more birds in the field than you expected, weren't there? What if Buster could have held them?

<u>You can't catch a pheasant.</u>

Of course, you could hold your dog to a human pace -- but if you do, an experienced pheasant will get farther and farther ahead of you. On occasions when David and I have chased wing-tipped roosters over bare fields, they have run at about twice our speed. Fortunately, the dog is twice as fast again. I don't know the speeds in miles per hour, but they vary with conditions anyhow. The ratio stays about the same at 1:2:4 for human:pheasant:dog.

In those figures is the reason for a dog that trails at high speed and holds a bird till you catch up. The principle is the same for all species from quail on up. Pheasants just happen to run fastest and farthest before they hold.

The advantages of the trail-and-point method are obvious, for us humans. The canine side of the deal, however, is harder to understand. Why should a dog contribute so much of the team's

skill and strength, then hold the pheasant for you? Why should he want to hunt till he collapses in your arms after his last, pain-relieving injection? The answer, I think, is that there is no deal, for the dog. He sees himself as part of you, and you as part of him. He merges.

I am a pack-hunter too, but I lack the courage to merge. I am better than my dog at conceptual thinking, and it is hard to be heroic when you understand consequences. I worry about the Fates cutting my thread when David King is not around. I wonder if Huck would know enough to howl.

Becoming A Hero

Dog and human had already been working together for ages when Xenophon, a Greek General, wrote about the chase some 2,400 years ago. Since then the good old genes have been passed on to some dogs in every generation, surviving wars, pestilence, canine beauty contests, and modern field trials.

Huckleberry is a German shorthaired pointer from a field-trial line, but he became what field-trial contestants deplore -- a dog that thinks for himself. He had to be trusted, because we humans could not move fast enough to overtake the pheasant.

Trailing came instinctively to Huck, but judgment had to be learned -- one lesson at a time. How hard could you push a rooster? How wide a loop should you run to cut it off? How close should you get for the point? How soon should you resume trailing

if the bird sneaks out?

All this may sound too much like human reasoning, for those who do not accept that dogs have a kind of consciousness. Whatever the explanation, Huck did teach himself to stand and deliver -- though of course there were failures. The ground-cover might be too thin, the pheasant too spooky, or the pup too bold. Caution was the hardest of the lessons.

Huckleberry's faults, however, are shared by his humans, and we have been no faster to learn. We show too much zeal in an enterprise that is not listed on the stock exchange. We exhaust our lives' energies chasing risky propositions.

Huck's virtues, on the other hand, are his own, and they stand out more clearly as his muzzle grows gray. David and I may see grass move as a bird passes through but the vision is fleeting, like a breath of wind on calm water. To stay with the trail, we must free our spirits to run on four legs. Dog looks back, urges us to keep the faith. His courage pulls us along. Head without heart cannot amount to much, but together they add up to a pure and shining passion.

In the days when it mattered more, Artemis was both goddess of the hunt and protector of wildlife (head of the Olympic Fish & Wildlife Service, you might say). On the assumption that she still keeps up with her reading, there is a favor to ask of her. If there are pheasants in the Elysian Fields -- and we know you wouldn't settle for less, Ma'am -- may we please bring Huckleberry along?

Audubon Encyclopedia used for Conservation on names, etc.

New World quails are only member of pheasant family (Phasianidae) in W. Hemisphere.

Ring-necked pheasant
Phasianus colchicus
Male average 2.7 lbs = 2 lbs 11 oz. = 43 oz.
Order Galliformes - "an order of chickenlike or fowl-like birds,"
256 sp. of 7 families

"known also as game birds"

(chicken is a member of pheasant family.)
(16-18 million killed in years of high population.) p. 692
(2/3 in N. Great plains)
Bobwhite -
legal game in 30 states; most harvest in 17.
35 million shot in 1970
heavy N. bird 7 oz.
Grouse - 3,700,000 shot in 1970.

16
7
112

32
11
43

6
7⟌43

pheasant more than (6 times as large)

About 1900 words King

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

[This was cut to half length & used as CRP.REV.]

use to introduce David. Switch to Mt. Olympus

THE BEST KIND OF CHAOS

As conservation reserves come back, so do the pheasants.

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

It was fate, sort of. Dr. King bought his first shotgun just as pheasants were pulling out of a long decline. Like many other wildlife species, they depend on undisturbed grasslands, and that kind of habitat had been shrinking for some 25 years throughout

the pheasant's North American range. The stage was set for recovery in 1985, when Congress authorized the Conservation Reserve Program -- CRP for short. Farmers began to seed large areas in grass that could not be grazed or mowed. Pheasants responded to their opportunity. David King and I responded to the pheasants.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to the tall grass.

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

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

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

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

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

It seemed odd, though, that 4 of the 6 cocks we shot in that corner were old birds. Roughly 70% of all pheasants die every year, whether or not they are hunted by humans. Under normal conditions, therefore, we would have expected to find only 1 or 2 old birds in a bag of 6.

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

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

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

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

Fortunately, it is clear that humans do not diminish pheasant populations by shooting only roosters, and David I made little impact even on them. We hunted the rest of the farm all afternoon, though. Two cocks finally held till we got within range -- one of them with tail-feathers over 26" in length. That bird may have been 2½ years old. Both were trophies. In its way, the hunting was still better than on most farms nearby.

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

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