

MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

By Datus Proper

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF nowhere, my pup whined and pressed his nose into an air stream from the truck's window. I pulled over and let him out. He ran 10 yards and lifted his hind leg, which was what I expected—and then he stood there with his leg up and nose stretched out, which was not what I expected. That dog was pointing.

I reached for my shotgun, then put it back out of temptation's way. I did not have permission to hunt, and I wanted to get along with the folks who owned all this prairie grass that rolled back into sagebrush hills. Anyhow, I wanted some pictures. Thought I'd snap a photo of Huckleberry on point, with sharptail grouse flushing. What I had forgotten is that these birds conduct psychological warfare. Four of them flew past me, sassing tut-tut-tut, but what they meant was, "your eyes are bugging out."

Huckleberry lost his composure too. The pup bounded after the flying sharptails until he hit the scent of another bird that was still sitting and decided to point it—while he was in midair. Bad timing. Huck hit the ground on his side, hard enough to raise dust. The sitting bird flushed. The dog chased it, and for a few seconds the race was close. By then, another dozen grouse were in the air. They wanted to be somewhere far from us. We watched them, flapping and gliding, smaller and smaller in a bright sky, coasting over a distant ridge, and merging with the blue of the Snowy Range.

Well, it was good to know that the breeding season had produced so many young birds. I rushed into town for reinforcements and found them in the person of John Bietenduefel. John knows the secret of happiness: living in the exact center of Montana with a bird dog. He also knew where to get permission to hunt the sharptails.

The landowner said that we might find the birds anywhere at all, "standing around looking goofy." Then again, we might never run into them. That's sharptails for you. They are innocent, sometimes, because they have had little time to adapt to humans. On the other hand, their harsh habitat has given them a range of behavior that is—to put it mildly—extreme. Sharptails are as wary as pheasants and as casual as spruce grouse, as fast as mallards and as slow as coots, as skittish as snipe and as tight-sitting as woodcock, as tender as teal and as tough as old ganders. You can learn quickly where to look for the compact covers of

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ruffed grouse or bobwhites, but sharptails live in what looks like the whole world, or at least the best remaining piece of it.

You hunt other birds in places. You hunt prairie grouse in spaces. You grasp the difference in your hand when you sit on the tailgate dressing a sharptail. It looks tighter-feathered than a ruffed grouse, but a little bigger. In fact, it is half-again heavier. The flesh of a sharptail's breast is driven by a pump much larger than a pheasant's. The sharptail is built to fly high in the prairie falcon's clear, blue sky. It takes heart.

In the Eastern U.S., heath hens have long been extinct. Western pinnated grouse—prairie chickens—are scarce over much of their original range, relics from the time when their eggs came up broken and dripping on iron-rimmed wooden wheels. But if you want to know what prairie grouse used to be like, sharptails are doing fine on the high plains.

John Bietenduefel and I bounced down the farm road, the truck moving as slow as a Conestoga wagon. The grass looked as it did when buffalo grazed it, bunches of it reaching to the tops of our wheels. Maybe the covey I had flushed would have landed in a place like this. Our dogs would find out.

John's pup, Jake, was a half-brother to Huckleberry. They were from big-running field-trial stock, and they hunted with demonic happiness. Human legs could not keep up, but our eyes did. A herd of pronghorns spooked and flushed a small bunch of sharptails, which our crazy pups chased. At long range, dogs and antelope and grouse all seemed to fly. I was flying, too, and John's laugh sounded like wing beats. We loosened our muscles and swung our legs from the hip and smiled.

You don't need big-running dogs to hunt sharptails. These birds also like brushy draws, especially those that climb from grain fields to prairies lightly grazed. In such cover, you can push birds out of the same spots every year, and hunters who know where to look get their grouse with no dogs at all. Visitors do well with spaniels or retrievers to explore the thick stuff. It is a good game. Sometimes, though, you want the Oregon Trail—the feeling of skimming the prairies toward the horizon.

Jake followed Huck to find out what we were all looking for. This was Jake's first season, and he was a gonna-be: going to be good, with experience. It came fast. Huck pointed, his tail sticking up, quivering above the grass, and Jake moved in to see what the excitement was about, pushing out a single sharptail. Jake graduated from the gonna-be class right then. For the next hour he was (as

8/92
Theresa
800-227-2224
X5290
Article submitted for 892 issue.
and please write correspondence about

John said) a historian, pointing at places where sharptails had been, but no longer were. That's progress.

John was starting a new pup because he had lost the two dogs he had been counting on. Sharptail country has hazards that you should know about before you pile your dogs in the car and head for the plains. There are porcupines and some rattlesnakes. There are too many skunks. There are prickly pears that fill a pup's pads and barbed-wire fences that rip his skin. There are hungry coyotes and mountain lions. There are sheep farmers who have a right to shoot. And there is that most ferocious of all predators, the jackrabbit, which lures dogs off on long chases and gets them lost. Pointer pups are at special risk because they are fast and wild. Fear is something they have to learn.

Huck pointed a cow that had been dead since the spring thaw. I told him that he ought to know better. He rolled his eyes at me without moving, and a sharptail flushed. I adjusted my assumptions just in time to shoot it, and Huck retrieved with a told-you-so twist to his head. I believe he was suggesting that I could have maggoty beef if I wanted it, but as for himself, he preferred to hunt grouse.

I commended his taste. He worked scent for 50 yards (though how he could smell anything but ripe cow puzzled me), and pointed at another sharptail. It went off, saying tut-tut-tut, and John took the shot. I managed to collar Huck in time to let his apprentice make the retrieve. Jake picked up the grouse, put it down, cogitated, picked it up, and brought it to John. Then Jake frisked around to celebrate his discovery of the meaning of life. He and Huck are German shorthaired pointers, though they don't know that. They are also from Missouri. They tolerate training because it beats lying around the house chewing on furniture, but they don't see much point to the exercise. When they meet real birds, however, they wrinkle up their brows and think deep thoughts.

One thing they have not learned, unfortunately, is how to read. They point pheasants as happily as they do sharptails, even if the regulations say that pheasant season is closed for another month. The two species inhabit much of the same range, and when young, they can be hard to tell apart. The sure way to avoid expensive early-season mistakes is to shoot only those birds that make a low, gentle cluck. Sharptails usually do that. Pheasants either say nothing or make a raucous cackle.

We hunted toward a tiny alfalfa field off on the horizon. It grew and grew until, when we got there, it had some 320

acres. John worked the bottom side and I trotted to the fringe of sagebrush on top. I was in a hurry because every mile had made me ten years younger, and I was about sixteen at that point. We discovered why we had not found many grouse in the grass: They were all dining on an evening salad of greens with little blue flowers. Huck found a covey hiding in alfalfa that did not look high enough to cover a mouse. I walked in, flushed the birds, and fired both barrels coolly. Or perhaps lukewarmly. A dozen sharptails flew off discussing the incident. We watched for two of them to discover that they were dead, but they never did. I excused my gun for firing crookedly. It had not been in the midst of a flock of big clucking birds for a year.

Huck found the next sharptails as singles. These were older, wiser grouse. They ran downwind, which makes trailing tricky, and they flushed wild when the pup pushed his luck. But he held some of them, and I shot two. Never mind how many I didn't shoot.

Sharptails do have one semi-predictable cycle: In late season, they bunch up and flush at impossible distances. In early season, they may sit so close that you feel obliged to ~~loft~~ your gun and let them go. You tell yourself that you are just dog-training. But there is a point in the cycle when prairie grouse are neither impossible nor too easy. They are learning. Pheasants and partridges had a few centuries' head start, but sharptails are catching up, and in that alfalfa they were the real thing.

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My three birds were all I wanted to pluck, so Huck and I wandered back to the truck. The low sun played tricks. Each bunch of grass had a shadow as long as a tree. Prairie that had been smooth at noon took on texture. I saw what looked like a sharptail standing on a mound several hundred yards away, called my pup to heel, and tried to see how close we could get. As we got closer, the bird got smaller. When we got close enough to hear it, it sang like a meadowlark, which it was. Crickets joined in for their last concert before frost. I took off my sunglasses because the light was no longer yellow or bright. It was the color of the pocket watch my grandfather had left me, gold that had not been polished for a long time.

TITLE TKTKTKTKTKTKT

■ There are only a few places that offer serious upland hunting for sharptails in early September, and central Montana is near the top of the list. The general public has discovered it, however, and access is difficult. If you are on a tight budget, you might look for sharptails in eastern Montana, parts of the Dakotas, or Canada's prairie provinces. Alternatively, there are outfitters in central Montana with experienced Western dogs and access to good land.

I have hunted with the first of the following and talked, but not hunted, with the others.

✓ Dennis Kavanagh, Montana Bird Hunts, Dept. FS, P.O. Box 5031, Bozeman, Mont. 59717, telephone (406) 587-5923. Uses English setters and German shorthaired pointers.

✓ Roy Olson, Dept. FS, P.O. Box 836, Grass Range, Mont. 59032, telephone (406) 428-2195. Uses vizslas and shorthairs.

✓ Richard Cox, Dept. FS, HC 85, P.O. Box 4056, Lewiston, Mont. 59457, telephone (406) 538-7821. Uses English pointers and Labradors.

About 2000 words with optional sidebar

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MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Sharptailed grouse still thrive
on the high plains.

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grouse flushing. What I had forgotten is that they conduct psychological warfare. Four of them flew past me, sassing: "tut-tut-tut," they said, but what they meant was "your eyes are bugging out."

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We hunted toward a tiny alfalfa field on the horizon. It grew and grew until, when we got there, it had some three hundred and twenty acres. John worked the bottom side and I trotted to the fringe of sagebrush on top. I was in a hurry because every mile had made me ten years younger and I was about sixteen at that point. We discovered why we had not found many grouse in the grass. They were all dining on an evening salad of greens with little blue flowers. Huck found a covey hiding in alfalfa that did not look high enough to cover a mouse. I walked in, flushed the birds, and fired both barrels coolly. Or perhaps lukewarmly. A dozen sharptails flew off discussing the incident. We watched for two of them to discover that they were dead, but they didn't. I excused my gun for firing crookedly. It had not been in the midst of a flock of big clucking birds for a year.

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Sidebar

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But first I hunted for lunch. Found it in Lewistown at the Woolworth's counter. Ordered a tuna salad and sat on a round stool to eat it, dropping crumbs dropped on the waxed wood floor. Then I walked next door to the Bon-Ton soda parlor. The lady scooped out vanilla ice cream and put it in a tall glass shaped like a tulip. She pumped the cherry sauce from a plunger in a stainless-steel counter. She filled the glass with soda drawn by a lever at the top of the counter, then put a long spoon and a straw in the glass and handed it to me. I knew exactly what she was going to do before she did it, because another lady used to do the same things at the same kind of counter when my Dad bought me sodas in the 1940s.

We hoped that they would find grouse, but they had already served John and me as translators between civilization and nature.

By now, however, hot had turned into too hot. We drove to the Kozy Korner, parked the dogs in the shade of a big cottonwood, and attacked cherry sodas. Something had been bothering me all these years I had now perceived that the problem had been lack of sodas. The walls of the Kozy Korner were rewarding too. They held a jackalope, the skin of a coon-tailed bear, and a plaque labeled "Elk Hunt 1951." The trophy on it was four elk droppings.

The day had cooled off a little by the time we drove back toward the field of honor. The road to it was hard to spot so I

helped John look for the sign. It did not say "Sharptail Bench." It said "Vote Lauralee Trapp for County Assessor," and Lauralee's emblem was a painting of a leg-hold trap, bear-sized. We should have watched the rear-view mirror instead. We got a speeding ticket. Cost us five dollars.

Back on the bench, we turned loose our exercise machines, alias Jake and Huck.

Once I met a fellow who understood prairie grouse. He'd hunted them twice.

Sharptails survive winter blizzards and spring rains that would decimate even Hungarian partridges. []

(One of those time came in a room where you pretended that you were reading till a nurse said that sir, your wife is fine and you have a big, healthy, baby. You metamorphosed from a shriveled pupa into a monarch skimming the world. You paced a few steps and vowed to help that baby grow. I hope that you succeed. There are grouse still on the prairies.)

A harrier (alias marsh-hawk) started following Jake, not to eat him but to catch any mice he might disturb. A covey of partridges (alias Huns) flushed wild, saw the hawk, and lit in a patch of snowberry bushes before it reached them. The hawk stooped repeatedly, trying to catch a bird on the ground. They escaped one at a time, flying off to a jungle of buffaloberries and chokecherries. The harrier could not catch them, but a prairie falcon might have done it. Paradise, you see, has claws.

If there is anything in early September quite as good as
skimming the prairies, I don't need to know about it.

Sharptails

Proper

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After lunch, I went to John Bietenduefel's house and switched my gear to his pickup. Its front seat was big enough for four oil sheiks or two American hunters with their gear. Huck and John's dog Jake went into cages in the back, yipping at us to ~~take them to the good place,~~ *hurry up and find some hunting,* so we did. The truck bounced over a farm road as slowly as a Conestoga wagon. The grass looked about as it did when buffalo grazed it, bunches reaching nearly to the tops of our wheels.

There is a thing that happens when you hike off behind dogs in this country. You have been squeezed small by walls and cars and noises, but you feel yourself growing. You expand with each step till you fill the horizons. You ~~must not resist.~~ Relax and swing your legs from the hip and smile, because there are not many ~~other times in life when you get grow~~ like this. One of them comes in a room where you pretend that you are reading till a nurse steps in and says that sir, your wife is fine and you have a big, healthy, baby. You metamorphose from a shriveled thing into a being that could reach out and hug the world. You pace a few steps and vow to help that baby grow into a mighty hunter. I hope you succeed. There will be grouse waiting on the prairies.

is dead?
Jake and Huck were half-brothers, dogs from big-running field-trial stock, and they furrowed the grass with the same

skinning
reports

Park has a WWII
Canon & a WWII (SAC)
Missile on proud
display.

No more hot-food intake
(the D., -h) + only a
Dash Dinner.

Loralee Trapp for
w. answer.

Picking big enough to
carry 4 pop-up sheiks
in the front seat.

He sits on the poles,
@wls in the grass.

Woolworth

Old wood floors

Bacon Cheese Burger

Phila. Steak Sandwich

Another cup of coffee at

Don't forget presentation.

(Coke) (could have tuna sandwich)

Local fish spring creek
with shelled Sandy Mites.

The
Bon-Ton

^

Cherry sodas - w/ glass
of water first.

In old ~~flavor~~ glasses

Phosphates - 3 flavors

Old cream w/ side for ice cream

plunger for phosphate syrup
^ over-pale
taps for soda.

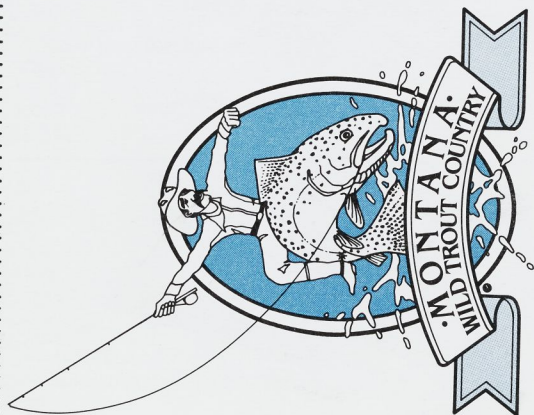
Kouss Kouss.

Joekalpe, won-ter-lor Sear,
Saw blades w/ 1/2 horn sheep + elk,
bottom of cart. no. skillets w/
Shiloh & ducks.

"Elk Hunt 1984" - plaque w/ 4 droppings
Laurie Tapp for her son
(picture of boy-hold trap
or sign)

Norma Asbestos Queen of
the chocolate festival for
her cc pie. Baked a house
at head of the parade. we
bought her syrup.

\$5 ± Spending ticket.



Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks

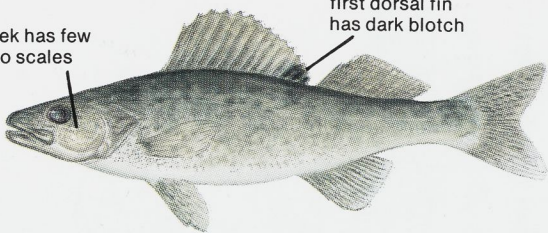
1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, Montana 59620

Warm Water Fish

Walleye

cheek has few
or no scales

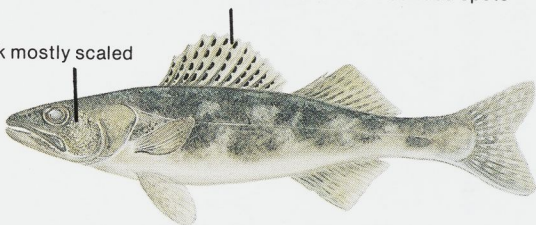
first dorsal fin
has dark blotch



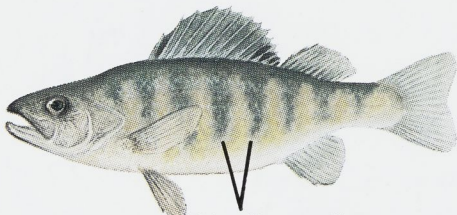
Sauger

first dorsal fin has rows of rounded spots

cheek mostly scaled



Yellow Perch

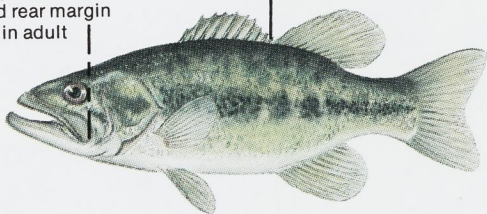


side yellow to yellow-green
with 6-8 vertical bands

Largemouth Bass

upper jaw reaches
behind rear margin
of eye in adult

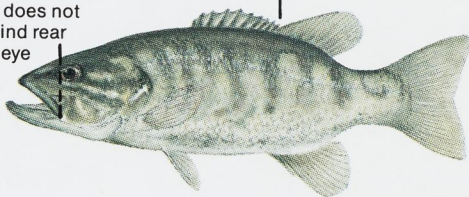
dorsal fin almost completely
divided by deep notch



Smallmouth Bass

upper jaw does not
reach behind rear
margin of eye

shallow notch in dorsal fin



Lowertown story.

Skimming ^(or muck, in the grass)
deer that pier = antelope
do, that pier = hares/printers
(very pliant long legs)
do, + antelope skimming over
grass like the sharp tails.

Virtue of snowberries - native
plant; good cover but doesn't
take over.

La Dence Ranch for County aspen

Antelope going around on Q. with: it's
quite country, & they're too pretty
to throw out.

Cafes w/ pretty ladies for
waitresses, traveling salesman
+ mt highway patrol.
Great rolling hills of ungrazed
grass - like Brazil.

putting tip on the table, not hands.

~~Cord MT has good~~

~~Here population.~~

"U-R home here" (I was)

Bunch grass throwing patches of
light & shadow in prairie.
Cattle. Buffalo prairie.

If there's anything better than this in September,
don't tell me 'till I'm in heaven.

~~Wait for the check.~~

Seasonal cycle: too tame, too wild - perfect.

Rotted grove ~~seem~~ old because of decay. (farms)
Shanghaied because of virginity.

Black & Iron promptly.

Listening to Ph & Turkey while watching grove & river.