

About 600 words

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

(January Travel Section)

DEER AND PHEASANTS IN MONTANA

Time enough to rest when it's winter. While autumn lasts, you want to hunt all day. You could chase birds, for example, in between morning and evening hunts for big game. A Montana pheasant bottom always seems to have deer tracks somewhere in soft ground near the water, and the bucks could be bedded down nearby in tall grass planted under the Conservation Reserve Program. Then again, they might have retreated to the foothills before dawn. That's why it's called hunting.

Methods for fur and feather could hardly be more different, but they do good for you, both of them. The deer time is quiet -- suppressed shiver before sunup, magpie scolding in the crystal distance. The pheasant hours are tumult -- mad dogs and sweaty men running around in the midday sun. An onlooker might think that all the brains out there are as empty as the prairie. There is too much land to hunt and the sun moves too fast toward evening, but the birds are around somewhere.

Before the hunt, you need careful planning. The first step is to call (406) 444-3738, which will connect you to the Board of Outfitters in the Montana Department of Commerce. Ask for the list of licensed outfitters, and look through it for the few who offer buck-and-bird expeditions. Then call them -- right away. With an outfitter's help, your odds for drawing a buck license will improve, but you will need to apply early in the year.

If you have hunted whitetails elsewhere, you'll know their pattern of behavior in Montana. You might see big antlers, especially if your combination hunt falls during the rut. There has not been a pheasant season when I've failed to jump a buck or two that made me wish for a rifle instead of a shotgun. A dedicated trophy-hunter, however, will not expect miracles. You already know that your search has to be long, lonely, and single-minded.

If you hunt with a bow, you will find outfitters who have tree-stands in heavy cover. If you prefer drives, or roaming the uplands with a rifle, those methods are available too. Ask when you call.

The outfitters I've talked to report that visiting hunters usually know less about pheasants than deer. It seems that hunters in some states grow accustomed to roosters who have done time in the pen. Wild Montana birds "run up over the pine hills like elk," says Sam Borla in Forsyth, and you have two choices: block the draws before the pheasants get out of the bottom, or keep climbing. Dennis Kavanagh in Bozeman also reports that

hunters find late-season roosters to be the most challenging of upland game. Dennis's setters know how to stay with the birds, though. If you work with the dogs, you get shots.

Here's a checklist of questions for outfitters.

Whitetail deer, mule deer or both? Bows or rifles? Stands or still-hunting? A few big bucks or lots of younger animals?

Are the pheasants wild, pen-raised, or a mix? Does your outfitter have dogs? Flushers or pointers? Is this an opportunity to give your own pup some experience? (The answer will probably be "yes" -- but you may want the outfitter's experienced dogs as a ready reserve.)

You will be tired, at the end. You will have exercised two sets of muscles, two kinds of skills. The long quiet stalk and hot-blooded chase will have given you twice as much to talk about during your drive home, twice as many flavors in the kitchen when the hunting seasons are over.

"Somehow the sound of a shotgun
tends to cheer one up."
- Robert Ruark, 1965

PHEASANTS & HUNS 1993

Mark it down, you're invited.

Dates Available: October 16 - 19, 1993
October 21 - 24, 1993

Please RSVP and indicate preferred dates immediately.

Marc Pierce

About 500 words

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

(January Travel Section)

DEER AND PHEASANTS IN MONTANA

Game was getting scarce in Michigan, a few years ago, so two hunters from Detroit drove west for their pheasants and deer. When the sun came up in Montana, the young men decided that they had found the right place. Whitetails or mule deer were out feeding wherever the road dipped into a stream bottom. Pheasants were harder to find but, in one valley with thick cover, they had left the frosty grass to pick grit from the roadside.

The Michiganders did not want to sound greedy, so they started by asking only for bird-hunting permission. The answers from landowners were no, no, no, and no. By that time it was mid-afternoon. The fifth farmer also said no, but then sent his dog out to chase deer away from a haystack. The hunters mentioned that they had rifles as well as shotguns in their truck. The farmer said: "You shoot some of those deer and then maybe you can try the pheasants."

The newcomers left three days later with four deer and "some birds." That's the way the Michigan boys described the hunt, anyhow. The distractions had been hard to handle. When the hunters set out with bird shot, a decent whitetail buck would appear, but by the time they had run back for rifles, the buck would have disappeared and a rooster would cackle from the tall grass. With no dog to pin it, the bird could sneak off, and usually did.

It was an exciting experience, all the same. The whitetails and pheasants lived in exactly the same places but exercised different skills -- long quiet stalk, hot-blooded chase. The contrasting emotions provided twice as much to talk about during the long drive home, twice as many flavors in the kitchen during the winter that followed.

That trip took place in 1981. Today, permission to hunt on private land is even harder to get -- and Montana does not have much public land with good populations of pheasants. For a combination hunt in the '90s, a non-resident usually needs an outfitter's help, both in getting access to farms and in applying for buck licenses.

The first step is to call (406) 444-3738, which will connect you to the Board of Outfitters in the Montana Department of Commerce. Ask for the list of licensed outfitters. Many of them specialize in big game and some arrange bird hunts. A few guides even do both. Call several and ask questions.

For pheasants, ask especially about dogs. Does the outfitter

have his own, or does he borrow them for the season? How much experience have they had with real wild roosters? (Famous bloodlines and formal training are no substitute.) Finally, ask whether the dogs are flushers or pointers, if you have a preference.

This is the time to start making calls. The hunting is as good as ever but the world is more complicated, and you might be disappointed if you just head for Montana without planning.

It's an approach that might work again in any of the plains states or adjoining Canadian provinces. Montana is the state I know best, because I live there, but parts of the Dakotas get more rainfall and therefore have more extensive pheasant habitat. In any case, you need to locate the birds first for a combination hunt. Throughout the northern plains, almost any cover with pheasants is capable of supporting whitetails -- but not the other way around.

This is not trophy hunting, in the usual sense. If you want a big buck, you will go to a place that produces big bucks and hunt nothing else.

If you live where pheasants do time in the pen, real wild prairie birds will seem like a different species. Whitetails are the same everywhere -- but their country is not. The plains expand a hunter's lungs. *Big fields + hills + sky*

You will not find much public land with high pheasant populations. And you may find a farmer who would sooner you date his daughter than his birds.

What you get, in Montana, is quality. You won't find many roosters who have done time in the pen. You may not find many roosters of any kind, unless you have a dog that can stay with long trails and give you a shot at the end.

You could run into a big buck at the peak of the rut, but if a trophy is what you really want, then you should hunt single-mindedly.

You can figure that almost all the pheasant cover supports

farmers or ranchers, too. It's not that the birds need grain -- I find roosters with nothing but wild seeds in their crops -- but the pheasant does need heavy ground cover, which in the arid west appears mostly in bottoms watered by streams and irrigation ditches.