

BY DATUS C. PROPER

## ALIBIS



**T**he only good thing about September is dove hunting. The world smells like compost, but with the first whiff of powder there is hope. Gunpowder does for rotten weather what pepper does for old meat: hides the flavor. Then, after the shooting, when you sit around plucking the first fluffy dove feathers and watching them drift over a green landscape, you notice that a dogwood leaf is trying to change color, the crows are flying somewhere in flocks, and a distant harvester is turning corn into silage.

We're all out of practice in September. Fortunately, doves are easy to hit. This will take some explaining, or you'll invite me to a dove hunt and then stand around laughing while I miss. We've all read about what fast, tricky targets doves are. Maybe so. We certainly use up a lot of shells shooting at them, but then there are a lot of doves to shoot at. (One thing they are indisputably good at is reproducing.) On the occasional good day, though, the first box of shells might get a dozen birds. For me there aren't many days that good with doves, but there aren't *any* times that good after the other gamebirds come in season.

Doves are moderately fast birds at which we take leisurely shots. Contrast them with woodcock, which are moderately slow but require fast work with a shotgun. The difference is trees. A bird

drifting along in the sky is easier than one wriggling through the branches. If the bird happens to be a little careless, so much the better—and no one claims that the dove is a fast learner. His main trick is that he is smaller than he looks. That's true of all birds—as you know after plucking a few—but the dove carries the matter of feathers to excess. And since he looks bigger than he is, he also looks closer than he is. This struck me one day last September when I plucked a dozen and found that most had only one pellet of shot in them. None had been hit hard. There was

one, in particular, that I was worrying about, because the bird came down to my first barrel, then flew up when I got close. The second barrel caught the

dove at what seemed like a very close range, blowing out a billow of feathers. *Doveburger*, I feared. Wrong. The bird contained only three pellets of shot.

Birds with few shot in them were splendid for my wife's soup of doves, leeks, wild rice, and sherry. But what was good for the table was not as good for my ego. Could I have aimed so badly that I hit every bird on the fringe of my pattern? And if my shooting was that bad, why didn't I miss more doves completely? It just didn't seem to add up, so I preferred the alternative explanation: my shooting was great, but my pattern was full of holes.

And thus an alibi emerged.

Here it is: *I didn't miss that bird. It flew right through my pattern.* This could undeniably be true, in any given case. Most shot patterns have holes through which a dove could fly, except at the closest range. If most birds that fall to the gun contain only one or two pellets, then there must, on the odds, be others who get luckier and take no hits at all. But how often can the alibi be used? Can it explain why, on the bad days, a box of shells produces only six birds? Or a nice bowl of leek and wild rice soup without doves? What we need is facts.

BE IT noted that an alibi, when proven, is not some feeble excuse that a jury can disregard. It means that the defendant was elsewhere when the crime in question was committed. You see, therefore, that my defense is weighty—my shot pellets were elsewhere when a large number of birds flew through my pattern.

I ran some tests using cardboard dove silhouettes dropped on paper targets (30-inch circles) at which I had fired 7½ shot through the modified barrel of my old 12-gauge. Judging from the numbers of pellet holes covered by the silhouettes, I shoot at a lot of doves that are 40 yards away. That's a surprise; I thought I was waiting for easier shots. Seems that birds crossing against a blue sky aren't as close as they look.

The silhouette tests also prove that I miss almost half the going-away doves at 40 yards, even if I aim perfectly, as, of course, I always do. All doves are small.

*Datus C. Proper is an upland hunter, a fly fisherman, a writer, and a Montanan.*

**Do doves humiliate you every September? Take heart: It's not your shooting that's to blame.**

stay calm. There was no cause for panic. If they wanted to be on the safe side, however, they probably shouldn't drink the local water, bathe in it, eat food cooked in it, and oh, yes, make sure that the beef cattle raised on locally irrigated land are shipped to other parts of the country where people have never heard of penta.

**I**n the meantime, EPA began reviewing its standards of penta contamination in order to raise permissible levels in local water supplies. The important issues, so far as EPA was concerned, were jobs and corporate dividends. Penta contamination may cause a certain percentage of people to contract cancer and die a few decades earlier than they might otherwise have done. But such people should look on the bright side—at how much better their abbreviated lives were, thanks to the blessings of treated wood that lasts longer than they do.

The tragedy here is that instead of doing what its name implies, the Environmental Protection Agency has been lending its prestige to efforts to cloud public health and environmental safety issues. EPA has downgraded its mission of restoring the environment to one of establishing a sort of triage system in which it decides how many people in different occupations and areas must die before municipalities and industries will be required to spend hefty but necessary amounts of money to clean up their messes. Although as many jobs, long-term profits, and far better morale would result from a cleaner, healthier environment, the notion that we can't afford clean air or water continues to influence policy.

Last spring, EPA announced it would not impose an acute, 0.4-part-per-million, 1-hour ceiling on sulfur dioxide emissions from power plants even though health-effects data show that currently permissible levels lead to severe asthma attacks in susceptible individuals. EPA Assistant Administrator J. Craig Potter said that his agency had determined that fewer than 100,000 asthmatics live in regions where acute emissions are a documented problem. Such a relatively small number of people is not worth the effort of setting

new standards and forcing industry to meet those standards. In essence, Potter put asthmatics on notice to move (where?) or die an early and particularly discomforting death.

The American Lung Association was horrified by this cavalier disregard for health and human life. The Association's Fran duMelle pointed out that even "healthy asthmatics" will react adversely to 5- or 10-minute sulfur dioxide peaks. EPA remained unmoved; apparently, no one in that agency suffers from asthma.

The past eight years at EPA have been dedicated to finding "acceptable risk levels" for a broad range of environmental contaminants. How much damage can our wildlife and wild lands sustain, how many thousand Americans can die annually from hundreds of different pollutants, before the public outcry is so loud as to force the government to do something to prevent the further degradation of our land, air, and water?

**L**ast January, Barry Commoner, director of the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Queens College in New York, lectured EPA staffers about "The Failure of the Environmental Effort." He was particularly critical of the role EPA has assigned itself in determining acceptable levels of environmental degradation. The core problem, Commoner noted, is that environmental pollution is an incurable disease which must be prevented. There are no "acceptable risks." Anything other than a commitment to the highest possible standards is a reversal of U.S. public health policy dating back more than a century.

Yet, instead of striving to improve the environment, EPA's bureaucrats have decided we can and must accept some, presumably low, risk to the health of people—and with them, fish, wildlife, and the outdoors in general. The major media may not be giving this important issue the attention it deserves, but the sportsmen of America—those to whom fish, game, and a healthy outdoors are of vital importance—must keep their eye on the "canary" and issue warnings of our own.

#### GOOD NEWS ON ACID RAIN?

■ A break in the long impasse over the acid rain problem may be at hand. According to reports published in early June in *The New York Times*, Governor Mario Cuomo of New York and Governor Richard Celeste of Ohio have agreed on a joint proposal that would lead to a steep reduction in sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions from coal-fired power plants and other industrial sources over the next twenty-five years.

This plan, which represents a compromise position between New York, a major victim of acid rain, and Ohio, a major source of the problem, calls for smaller reductions in acid-rain-producing pollutants over a longer time frame than legislation currently pending in Congress. But it also provides some innovative means of paying the cost of the cleanup, which

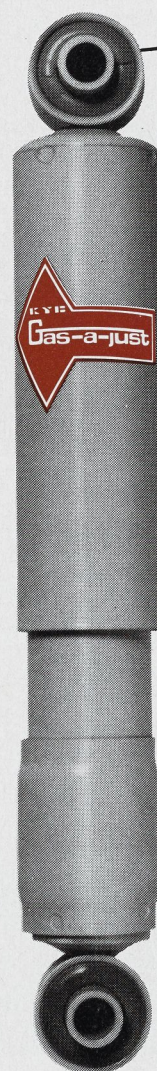
would help lessen the economic blow to the states involved; and (most significant) it is given a far better chance of getting through Congress than the more stringent legislation, which has met serious opposition in the Senate and the House as well as from the Reagan Administration.

Terms of the New York-Ohio plan call for a staged reduction of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions between now and 2003, with the biggest reductions being made over the first five years. Payment for the estimated \$1.8 billion yearly cleanup costs would be shared by the federal government, revenue from an expanded Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which would be collected from the oil industry as "storage fees," and from the polluting industries themselves.

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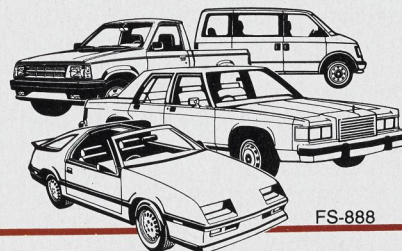
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Going-away doves are *very* small.

I think you will conclude that this is also a solid alibi. I think I will stop shooting at going-away doves unless they seem to be in BB-gun range. I think I will stop taking 40-yard shots at all doves—because doves that look 40, to me, are really 50. Or so.

There is also the matter of flinching. I shoot 20 feet low when I start flinching. Mastering the flinch took years of practice and reverent concentration, but today you could say that my shoulder flinches itself.

A good alibi is not good hunting. Whether I blame my misses on the pattern, the aim, or the flinching, the responsibility still belongs to the guy who pulls the trigger. At least we've learned how doves got their reputation for being difficult targets: I shoot at them when I shouldn't, then try to blame the bird's supernatural speed.

Maybe you are better than I am at guessing ranges. You probably have a different kind of gun, because mine was made in 1896. You don't use my handloads. You may prefer hunting mallards or quail or cassowaries. It doesn't matter, because the alibi test is easy enough to duplicate in half an hour for any bird, any range, any load. You save one average pattern, trace one average bird. Then carry on.

AFTER the alibi tests, when I got out dove hunting again, I used smaller shot at closer

ranges. Seemed as if I did a little better. I would like to be more specific, but there was a . . . well, let's call it a variable that my demonstration had not taken into account.

The hills were alive with the sound of music. Bluegrass music. Somebody had decided to hold a country arts, crafts, and music festival four fields away. From our higher ground, we could see the red-and-white-striped marquee under which the Travelin' Twangs were playing, and I'll say this for them: those folks had great amplifiers. We spread out—Bill Howard settling down where a dry run skirted an abandoned barn, Ben Schley fleeing to the cornfields farthest from the guitars, and me seeking refuge under a leafy oak at the top of the hill. It wasn't a bad day, for September—hardly over 90 in the shade, and with the humidity a point or two lower than you'd expect at the bottom of Dismal Swamp. The Twangs' laments drew bursts of applause from the audience and puffs of pollen from the ragweed. Doves rowed through the haze, and if they were unambitious, well, you'd be lazy too when the crickets are chirping faster than the banjo players.

Down at the festival, a fellow was roading his pointer in the field beside the parking lot. We didn't drop any doves within a quarter mile of the marquee, but if we had, I'll bet he would have brought the

birds to us—which is more than I'd expect from the average ballet audience during the last act of *Swan Lake*.

We hunters could have suggested some improvements in the day—starting with less amplification and more doves—but there was nowhere we'd actually have preferred to be, because we didn't know of anyplace else with any doves at all. Here we could at least watch them: doves zigging over the oaks and zagging over the Twangs, but not many doves zipping over us.

Doves seem to have trouble remembering what party they were heading for when they got dressed up and left the roost. You try to find where a few of them are consistently wandering by mistake. Then you take a stand, hide, persuade your dog not to run in circles with his tongue hanging out, and try to wish the birds down. The first is the toughest. After that there is a sure-fire method. You start dressing (alias undressing) the dove. You pluck the whole bird, because wings and back add flavor to the soup. When each of your hands is covered by a layer of fluff a couple of inches deep, another dove will come over from behind and you can throw some feathers at him. You may not hit anything, but you have another alibi now, supported by statistics. Furthermore, another bird always comes along eventually.

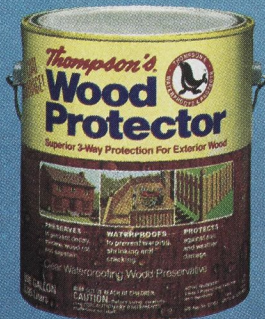
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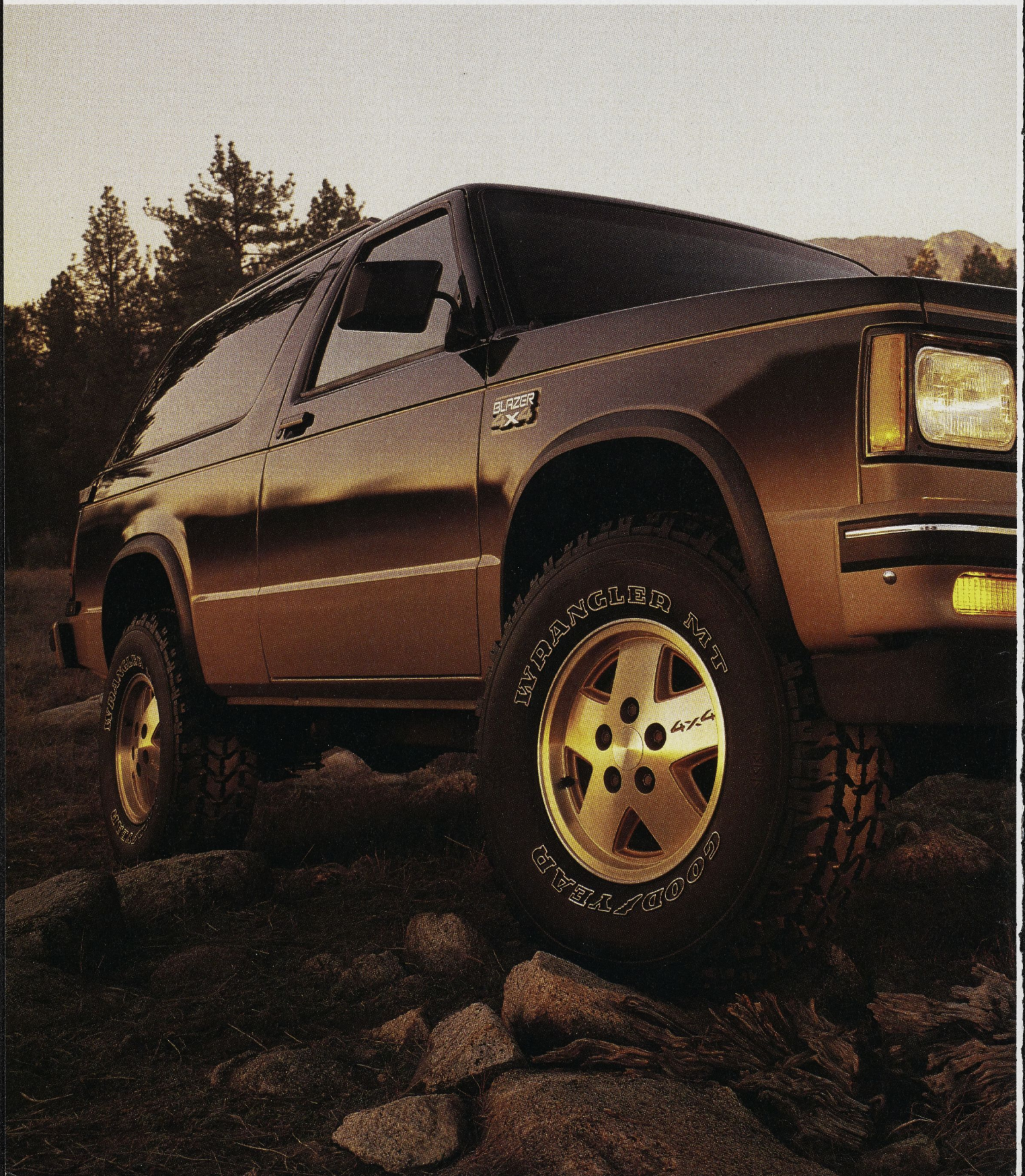
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# *Aerobic Fishing AND Headwater Music*

BY DATUS C. PROPER

I have proven that fishing is good for you, which should entitle me to a place in the encyclopedia after Sir Isaac Newton. I made this discovery on Dogwood Run in Shenandoah National Park, but any other headwater trout stream might have done just as well. The important point is that I rolled out of bed about 4 o'clock in the morning. Great discoveries don't happen without motivation.

*Datus C. Proper is a hunter and angler who works for the U.S. State Department.*

My felt-soled hip boots and fishing vest and lunch were ready to go in a backpack, and an 8-foot rod in three pieces was sticking out of a side pocket. I wanted to be at a certain pool 3 miles up the Run when the sun hit the water.

Besides, I was running away. My lawn was growing unmolested in July temperatures that the weatherman had said would hit 95 degrees. I knew that the mountain water around my knees would not get much over 60.

You'd have to look hard to spot the old homestead where the best water starts,

far up Dogwood Run. But the animals know. Two deer hopped out of what used to be a pasture, then stopped and flicked their tails at me. I stood in the stream and watched them for a moment. In the sudden stillness I could hear my pulse pounding, and the discovery hit me like the apple that had explained gravity by bouncing off Sir Isaac.

I was in the aerobic range. A quick pulse-count confirmed it. My heartbeat had been high, no doubt, for most of the last hour. And ahead of me were a couple more miles of scrambling up a rocky

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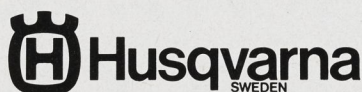
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streambed, then a hike back down to the car. I'd be aerobic for a fair part of the time between dawn and sundown.

It had not seriously occurred to me that fishing was good for anything but my psyche. Maybe I wanted it to be bad for me, like apple pie, or maybe I had read too much about the Contemplative Sport. At any rate, I had never before noticed this aerobic benefit.

The idea of taking my pulse was given to me by Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper. Like a lot of other people, I read his book years ago. It taught me to subtract my age from 220 to get my maximum safe heart rate, and then to exercise at from 60 percent to 85 percent of this maximum. But I thought exercise had to hurt—like running. Some people have fun with aerobic

dancing, but trout fishing is more like my tune. I always knew that it felt good. Now I had discovered that the steep headwaters can give me better exercise than riding my bike to work.

That's the end of my health message. The rest is about catching fish, which is probably all you care about, and good exercise is just a good excuse for doing what you intend to do anyhow. You would go trout fishing in a trickle beside the road, if you could, getting no aerobic exercise whatever.

But you can't. If there are any wild trout left in your part of the world, chances are they are hidden halfway up hills that look blue in the distance. And you have to learn to dance to headwater music. It sounds like nothing on your car

radio. The rocky little streams do not even behave much like other trout water.

In the first place they are a mistake. The wild trout streams that have survived near civilization were simply too rocky to plow and too steep to build towns on. Trout—like wine grapes—just happen to grow desirable where little else will thrive.

The granite and greenstone that stop the plow and bulldozer also produce poor hatches of aquatic insects, so the trout learn to look upward for food that falls from the foliage. Much of that food floats, and none of it can swim against the current. A fisherman has to come to terms with that by fishing drag-free. In other respects, however, the insects that tumble in are diverse: large and small, fat and skinny, green and black. This is not theory—it comes from checking stomach contents. Faced with so many kinds of food, the fish in rocky little pools cannot afford to be selective. A small hairwing Coachman (Royal or plebian) catches trout most of the time. I use it mainly because its wings are white calf-tail, which I can see on dark water. And if it sinks, it still works.

Tough conditions make trout that are small but wary. The fish have learned to defend themselves against the likes of you and me. I suspect that we are developing a race of wise brook trout by the same system the Europeans used on browns over the years: selective cropping of the foolish ones. Do you think of brook trout as innocent? Find a 10-inch cruising around in a mountain pool some July afternoon and try to catch him. It will be a learning experience for at least one of you.

The most difficult thing for me to learn is the tempo. Every kind of fishing has its own—except for headwater fishing, which has all of them. There is the fast part in between trout. Then you stop and listen to your pulse pounding and try, very slowly, to persuade a trout to take a fly with a hook in it.

The easiest way to learn is by yourself. It is, to be sure, companionable to alternate pools with a partner, but when the two of you leapfrog upstream through a narrow canyon, you may frighten your partner's trout. Worse yet, your partner may frighten yours. In any case, one companion is a crowd and more than one is a mob.

The idea is to work the odds by discovering the sort of water in which most of the sizable fish are holding. You move fast between these places, and then you fish the good spots with great care. That is the tricky part of the rhythm. It varies greatly between early season and late.

In early season, the trout tend to be at the heads of the pools and sometimes in the middle, but rarely in the tails. Most of the special spots are in shallow water of a moderate speed. These spots are close to a fast current, which brings the fish a good selection of food. But there is lots of fast water, and there is even lots of fast water with slow, foot-deep, comfortable water next to it where the trout can save his energy. Such spots are always worth a drift or two of the fly.

The really important springtime spots

are further distinguished by a rock that rises steeply from the fast current, providing the necessary separation between fast and slow but also something more: shelter. The water sings by a tall boulder, its side worn vertical by the floods. The boulder pulls a thread of current over to the side, where it flows full-circle in a lazy little back-eddy, rejoining the parent flow in a choppy patch right where the boulder knifes off. Try to visualize this and hear the music changing from lusty to soft to staccato.

This anonymous doggerel may help:  
*Remove the rocks from the river  
 And you still the songs*

Picture a spot where the current sings by and spins off an eddy to mutter full-circle and chuckle back into the mainstream. That is the kind of rock music an angler can dance to.

I dwell on this because of an embarrassing problem that used to afflict me, and still does occasionally. It is worse than poison ivy on the gluteus maximus. What happens is that I catch my best fish when I am not fishing. I cast my fly to the good places in the pool, ending up with the special spot at the head. Then after a couple of drifts I give up—patience not being among my virtues—and wade upstream toward the next pool. But I let my fly stay where I cast it last, to avoid waste motion. When I am finally obliged to pick the line up for the next cast, there is a fish at the end. Sometimes I even

hook the fish. He does not count because I did not mean to catch him, and his solid presence reproaches my carelessness.

This happened so often that I couldn't help conclude that I was doing something wrong. What did I do to the fly casually that I was unable to do on purpose?

My diary has lists of possible blunders. The best guess, so far, has to do with that careful rise of brook trout and browns. They see a fly that is malformed but conceivably edible. They begin to drift up through cold water, concentrating on the fly all the time. If it behaves unnaturally, they drift back down, and we anglers never know. Fortunately, the trout may try again if the next float is correct, though the first one is always the best.

The usual spoiler is the unnatural movement caused by a slow, downstream drag on the leader. This is fatal. It may be—often is—imperceptible to an angler 20 feet away, but the trout has a better view and is accustomed to making his living this way. When in doubt he keeps his mouth shut. Only very young fish will complete the rise, and even they will turn back with a splash. We accuse them of teasing us. It is the other way around.

The answer—speaking only of spring-time conditions—is to wade close. The months of rest and the high water have made the fish relax, and they have an urgent need to fatten while the eating is good. Given half a chance, they will con-

centrate on that fly rather than its manipulator. So manipulate is what you do. You wade deep; you get close; you use the longest rod possible; and you try to keep some obstacle between you and the object of your desire. A rock or a log is best, but a fast current is also a fair shield for an angler up to his thighs in the water.

Then you dap, sort of. You might have to flip out a little line with a bow-and-arrow cast or a roll. You scarcely cast in the normal sense.

When your fly is on the water you stay in close touch with it by lifting your rod-hand high, leaving no more than a few inches of leader on the water, and perhaps none at all. After a while you might lift the fly and let it fall gently, but usually nothing is necessary except a gentle float in just the right spot. When the fly drifts out of the eddy into the fast current, you guide it gently back.

Above all you believe. You insist that the trout takes. And he does.

Then you move fast to the next such spot, and you force that fish up, too. Willing him to do so is hard work, like bending iron bars with your brainwaves.

Now this style takes an apprenticeship. And there is a condition you must respect or you will fail, because I will put a curse on you. The condition is that you must learn to release most of your trout and wish them well. Otherwise you will take too many of the fish that the others have (Continued on page 81)

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# AEROBICS

(Continued from page 57)

not learned how to catch.

In the late season even brainwaves do not work and you must change tactics. In steep little streams, by the way, the season is not measured by the calendar but by the level of water. It runs off quickly. In Virginia I have seen the season become late in early May, though some years it does not happen until July. In Montana the water seldom gets stale.

When the water is low, the trout are nervous. They will not let you wade close enough to try anything like dapping. So in late season you must cast—20, 30, and 40 feet—and this means that you will now lose flies in the trees, even though hemlocks and alders are forgiving. Because of the trees, it is best not to use extremely light leaders. Five-thousandths of an inch is fine enough with the smallest flies. Six is better. The trout will seldom let you get away with seven-thousandths, as you did in the spring.

The roll-and-rock cast is the tactic that beats drag without extra-light leaders. It is not original: You may have heard it called the overland cast, but roll-and-rock is much easier to remember. Besides, you will find that there is more rock

than land in the headwaters.

The cast is made as it sounds, by rolling the line over a big rock. The roll-cast makes the best start because it does not get caught in the trees. Not very often, anyhow. But if you have space, use a normal back cast; the rock part is what is important. A log lying across the stream works just as well if it is big enough to provide shelter for the trout. Lacking a proper rock or log, the rubble at the sides of the pool will have to serve, but it may not stand high enough.

The point is to cast over anything except water. It is in the nature of pools to have slow currents in the middle and fast water rushing over a shallow lip at the bottom. You *move* upstream so as not to frighten the fish, but you never cast directly up the fast water. It would promptly catch the belly of your line and start a drag. You sneak around the pool in any direction till you find a friendly rock. With the line and some of the leader draped over it, the fly can float undisturbed till the trout makes up his mind.

Another difference in the late season is that the hot rocks will usually be in the lower part of the pool, not the head. The best boulders will have deep, sheltered water on the upstream side. You do not look for this; you guess. You sneak up on your knees and roll your fly over to the far side, but *you do not lift your head high enough to see it*. If you do, the trout may see you, too. You listen. The music


now will be a very faint *ploop*.

Sometimes a good trout will take the fly and pull the line violently over the rock. Do not strike hard; he is probably hooked anyhow. It will happen that you will catch trout on a fly that never touches the water. With fish up to 10 inches or so, your leader should be strong enough to hold. And you do not need to worry about catching many trout bigger than that in the headwaters.

The fish I would most like to have seen last year, however, is one that took quietly, headed down against all the pressure I could exert, and broke the fly off on a driftwood snag wedged far under the rock. I never had a chance to get organized. Maybe this trout was one of the big browns. He was the one who brought me back to the homestead pool at dawn the next Saturday. I could not hook him again, but there were others.

So I drove off happy at dusk, alternating left and right feet on the accelerator.

It is important to have a car that allows this maneuver, because aerobic fishing always results in leg cramps on the drive back home. Otherwise you are not doing something right.

While your right leg is dancing to aerobic spasms, you will not want the car radio. The water music in your head is better. Roll down the window; a breeze will not interfere. But human tunes might distract you from what you want to remember, till next Saturday. 

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by Datus Proper

A FORMER PARK RANGER AND MASTER FLY FISHERMAN, SCOTTY CHAPMAN PROBABLY KNOWS MORE THAN ANYONE ABOUT YELLOWSTONE PARK'S WATERS.

## an *artist* with the fly rod

❖ Cinquefoil Creek looked sterile, a sluice so narrow that the willows lining the banks overlapped in the middle. If anyone but Scotty Chapman had been in the lead, I would have suggested that we look for a better place to fish. But Scotty knows more about Yellowstone Park's waters than I do. Perhaps he knows more than anyone. ❖ The two of us walked upstream, looping around clumps of charred lodgepole pine. Some of the trees stood singly—lone survivors of the great fires of 1988—dotting the meadow with patches of shade. In this deep-green field, phlox and larkspur sparkled like stars in the Milky Way. We angled up a ridge, and when its sunburned grass had wiped the dew from our boots, Scotty paused for a breather. He did not like having to do that. Ten years earlier, when he was in his seventies, he had stopped only to capture details for his paintings. ❖ The break from our climb suited me. Scotty is not one to sit around reminiscing, but he is good for a story on the trail. . . .

SCOTTY CHAPMAN FIRST SAW YELLOWSTONE IN 1927, AFTER A TEN-DAY drive from Colorado over unpaved roads. The Wyoming headwinds brought his Model T Ford to a shuddering halt at times. Sounds like a long journey—until you remember that some of us spend all of our lives searching for the most beautiful place in the world. Scotty found what he was looking for on the first try.

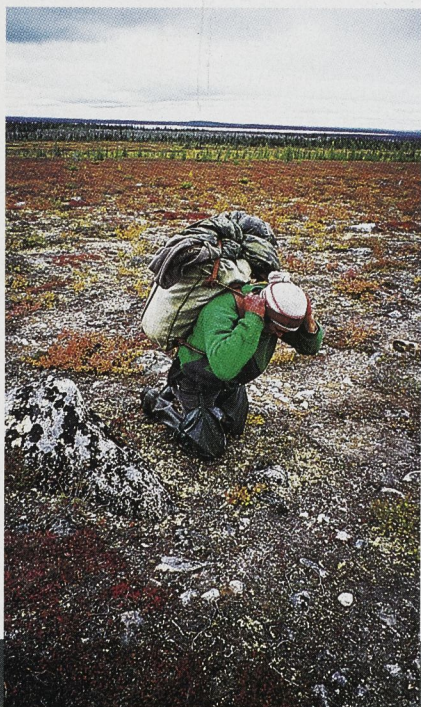
He was “a fishing nut already,” he says, and Yellowstone’s Firehole River was at its peak in those years. Old Faithful and dozens of other sources of warm water must have created ideal conditions for growth. Trout often reached 3½ pounds, sometimes 5—but these were browns of European origin, too wary for the standard American methods (*Continued on page 100*)

illustration by Chris Magadini

# HUNTING *in a hard land*

By David E. Petzal

PHOTOGRAPH BELOW BY JEROME B. ROBINSON; PHOTOGRAPH AT RIGHT BY THE AUTHOR



**T**WENTY-FIVE THOUSAND years ago, moving at the rate of a few inches a year, a wall of ice well over 15,000 feet high crushed its way across what is now northern Quebec, grinding the rock beneath it under the weight of unimaginable tons of frozen water. Then, as the earth warmed, the glacier retreated, leaving the land beneath leveled. Over more thousands of years, wind and unceasing rain scored furrows in the rock, and filled the furrows with water.

It is now a part of the planet where few things can live. Moss and lichens grow there, lending their greens and reds and oranges to the gray of rock and sky. There are cranberries and blueberries, and in the hollows where the wind is not so fierce, clumps of spruces huddle. The hollows are

marshy, and there are grass bogs that quake at a footstep; the roots grow in the water beneath them, not in soil.

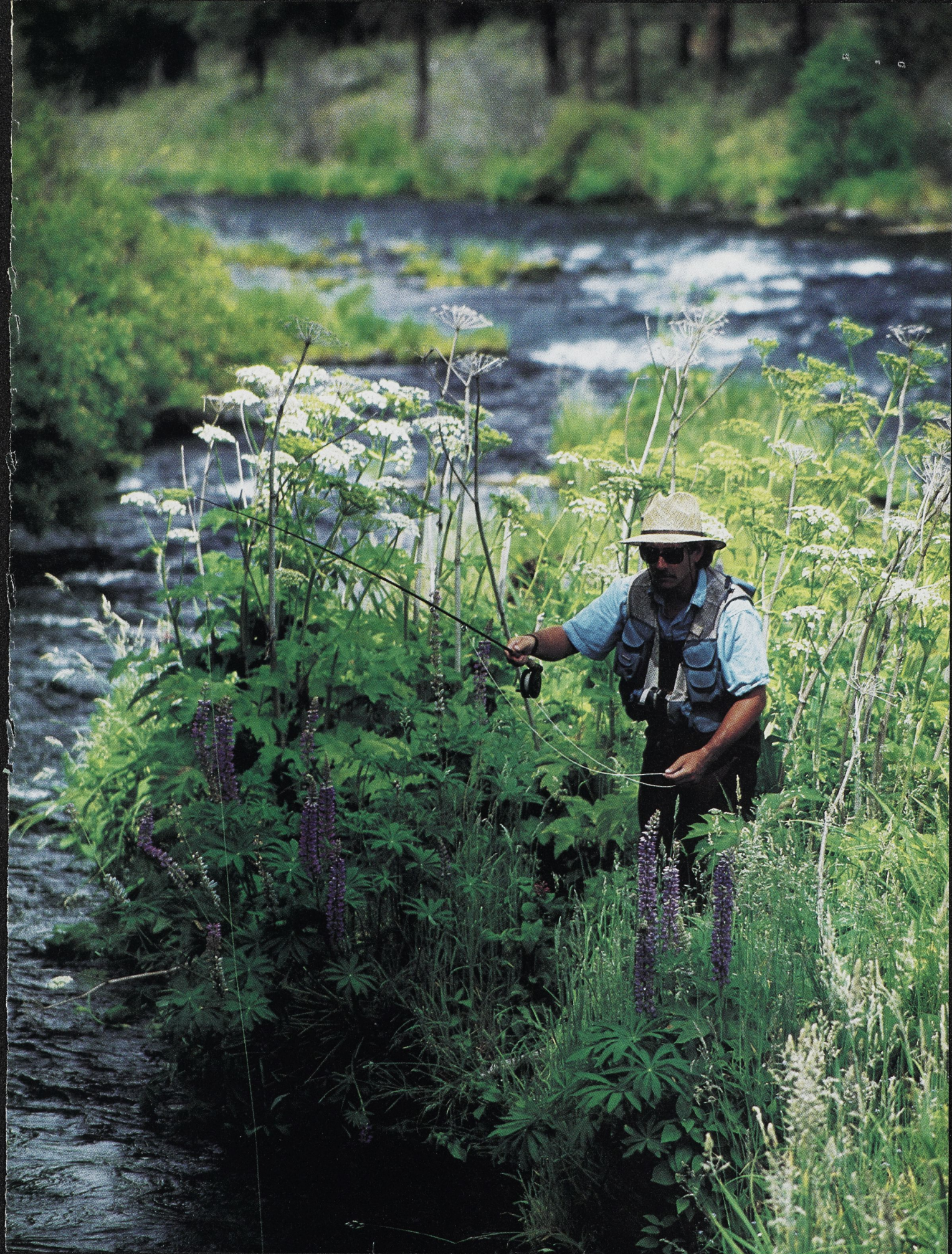
The animals who call this land home have adapted to some of the worst weather in the world. It changes over minutes, not hours, and can go from bright sunlight to rain to blinding sleet and back to sunlight in 5 minutes. In winter, the cold is appalling; it is enough to freeze rapids to a depth of 7 feet.

The list of creatures who can live here year-round is short: Canada jays (called whiskey jacks), martens, black bears, wolves—and the animal that brings thousands of hunters to this desolation each fall, the caribou.

Caribou are circumpolar. In this hemisphere they inhabit Greenland, the islands of the Arctic Ocean, Alaska, and almost all of Canada. There are five species: the Barren







and leaning over the water hanging onto a tree limb. After that, you ad-lib.

The right tackle, though, simplifies matters a good deal. A short fly rod, from 6 to 7 feet, makes best use of what little space you'll have, and a weight-forward line turns a leader over more easily. Experienced fishermen often take this one step further and "overline" their rods, stringing, say, a 3-weight rod with a 4-weight line. Casts on these waters are typically short, sometimes involving only a few feet of fly line and the leader. The extra weight provided by overlining flexes the rod more fully and delivers the fly with less effort and more authority and accuracy at very short ranges.

Accuracy is the operative term. The holding water is scaled to the fish, and neither runs very large. Each thin braid of current, each bankside eddy, each boulder slick presents a different technical problem, a small set of local circumstances that define where the trout are and how they must be fished. There's no chuck-it-and-chance-it casting here, no letting a fly drift down the current while you think vaguely of something else. The fishing is deliberate, attentive, more mindful of the water than the fish.

And if you blow it—crash a cast, snag the fly, or spook the trout—there's always another spot a few yards upstream. And this is finally what you fish for. Every angle in a creekbed, every climb to the next pool, opens on to a fresh and original arrangement of the raw materials of landscape. Each is a small, beautiful puzzle of rocks, trees, sunlight, and running water, waiting to be solved. And concealed among the pieces is a trout, ready to tell you when you have it just right.



## ARTIST WITH THE FLY ROD

(Continued from page 49)

of the time. Most anglers waded downstream, cast wet flies on leaders of stout gut, and caught the smaller trout or none at all. There was not even a fisherman's trail on the banks.

Scotty had read a book on dry-fly fishing by George LaBranche, and the Firehole taught the rest of the skills needed for big, selective trout. It was a sport that followed nature's rules. You had to find a hatch of mayflies and a

trout rising for them. The heavy browns usually fed under overhanging grass, so you had to sneak up the bank and kneel to cast, sometimes with one leg in the water. You had to convince the trout that your artificial fly was the real thing.

In 1930, Scotty became a Park Ranger. In 1937, writer Ray Bergman, author of the bestseller, *Trout*, visited Yellowstone and Scotty introduced him to the Firehole. Bergman wrote that it had "more sizable fish to the mile than I've ever seen in any other stream," but they "thumbed their noses at me."

Bergman quotes Scotty as asking: "Did you try dry flies in size 18 and smaller?" The leader had to taper down to 4X, too—finest silkworm gut generally available, and less dependable than modern 7X. Bergman wrote that "Scotty is an artist with the fly rod. . . . I've watched many anglers fish, but I have never seen anyone else who could so regularly throw the line so that the fly would float without drag under any conditions."

Scotty and Ray Bergman had occasion to fish together until at least 1951, when I tagged along on one trip. Many of the photos Bergman used in his stories show Scotty in his Ranger hat—a tall, athletic angler who happened to resemble another Montanan named Gary Cooper. If you look closely, there is something else that you may notice. There are no poses of angler with captured trout, dead or alive. Scotty does not care to be seen that way.

SCOTTY AND I HIKED OVER ANOTHER rise and downhill to the basin where Cinquefoil Creek flattened out in meanders. In this hidden playground, the little stream was all dressed up like the Firehole. There were undercuts at the outside of the bends, shady clumps of grass, and riffles that giggled between the pools. There were even mats of water buttercup, which is a plant of fertile waters.

We both strung up our fly rods, but Scotty said that he would watch for a while before he started. He did not explain—never does—but I guessed that he was catching the scene for his canvas.

I knotted on a small Coachman. It would look like a beetle to the trout but had little white V-wings that I would be able to see as it drifted under shady banks. I worked upstream with a short line, and the brook trout came for the fly but did not take it as well as they usually do. They would materialize below it,

watch it for a second, then splash at it and miss or get hooked lightly.

The problem was a good one to have. We had arrived at the perfect time of the morning—the hour between dawn-cold and noon-hot—and the mayflies were returning to lay their eggs on the water. It was not the kind of fishing that one expects to find on a hidden little brook trout stream.

I tied a long, fine tippet to the end of my leader and a size 18 fly to the tippet. By that time the trout were rising as far as the eye could see up the creek. I slipped into the water and moved upstream, step after cautious step, like a heron. I draped the leader over tufts of grass, hiding it from the fish, and when the cast was right, they took the new fly confidently. I put some back and kept the best, 8 or 9 inches long.

Scotty was bored by my heron act by the time I landed the third trout. He picked up his tackle and rushed upstream, working out line as he went, rod drawing dark loops on blue sky. I walked to the top of a rise and watched.

Above the angler were round golden hills and purple mountains with streaks of snow in their folds. Those are an amateur's colors—Scotty could tell you the exact pigments. He was a small, straight figure against the meadow, fifty years younger with the urge upon him.

He fished like an osprey, using speed and surprise rather than stealth. I don't know anyone else who can make a fly pounce on trout like that. The scene from my hilltop was an impressionist sketch—dash of predator, splash of prey. He did not wade, seldom knelt. He cruised up the bank, false-casting as he went, pausing momentarily to drop his fly on likely spots. It was not the Firehole method, but these weren't Firehole trout. They'd rise in the second or two before fear overtook hunger. Scotty knew his fish with the intimacy that only a wild predator achieves.

By the time I joined him, he was cleaning five trout between 6 and 10 inches in length. He had taken them "as they came," he said. Fifty years earlier, he'd returned big trout to the Firehole, and that was before most people had heard of catch-and-release fishing. He said that he no longer liked to "hot-lip" fish unless he needed them for food.

WHEN I STARTED FOLLOWING SCOTTY around the Park as a teenager, there were times when I wondered where he

to sketch an antelope in the mud and was sectioning steaks off its backbone with the point of a stick.

It took the better part of a day under these conditions to stalk animals that might have been approached in a couple of hours over hard ground. We concentrated instead on catching them as they moved through passes in the ridge. The day before we had guessed wrong, twice, the antelope crossing out of range as they fed out of our coulee. For two nights we had spent the last hour of light at the pond down the hill, and that is where we turned our muddy boots on this evening in growing despair.

There was a gnawing in my belly now every time we came up on a rise and looked down to see nothing. It was not physical hunger, but a sickness of feeling that farmers must get when the sky comes up clear in the morning and the crops need rain, that the Indians must have felt when the buffalo were late.

We almost didn't catch them. When we came over the ridgeline, they were stringing out below us in a canter. I pulled the rifle out of recoil as a doe dropped from the herd and rolled into the wash. And they were running then, and Kevin was running, too, scrambling back up the ridge to try and glimpse them as they turned the corner and ran out from below. I heard his rifle crack twice.

A few minutes later I buried my fingers in the thick, brittle coat of the antelope. There had been a buck with the band, and a good head, too, but I had instinctively centered on the fattest doe. I could smell the sage in her hair. When I was dressing her out, Kevin came down out of the pass dragging a doe. "I figure we're set up through Christmas," he said. "Maybe the ground will be hard enough to drive out by then."

And so the hunt, if not our adventure, came to an end. We packed the antelope back up to camp, scraped fat off the kidneys, and sauteed steaks in the skillet by the light of the fire. We drank the hard cider. The coyotes started up and we howled with them.

Then the clouds rolled in, purple and billowing. They struck the stars from the sky and stilled the chorus on the hill. "God will have his way with this country," Kevin murmured into his beard, and I stirred from my chair to get a bucket out of the tent to catch us some water. We went to bed listening to rain pang its bottom, and drifted off to sleep with the rhythm of the land.



## CLOSE TO THE BONE

(Continued from page 47)

because they enable you to reach more fish. You can take a wet fly, say a size 14 Dark Cahill or Black Gnat, and snake it down a brushy little run, swim it in the dark water under a log, and generally probe the kind of places where casting a dry fly is little more than a preliminary to kissing it goodbye.

Unlike larger rivers, small streams present little difficulty in locating fish. The trout hide exactly in the fishy spots, where the water is deep, or broken, or obstructed by roots or rocks—any place that offers a stall in the current and some cover from above. From a practical standpoint, all this makes little difference anyway. Most of these creeks are so small that all of the water can be covered. Three or four casts to a spot will tell the tale.

Reading the water isn't the problem—hitting it is. In the ultimate inversion of the customary order, the catching can be relatively easy—fishing is the difficulty. You cast in a tunnel carved by the stream, bound on the sides by rocks and brush, and from above by the leafy forest understory. It's a small world in there. Put a rod in your hand, and it suddenly gets a whole lot smaller. And there's one other thing: the fish know this world infinitely better than you do. Guileless as they may be in some respects, they are preternaturally alert to danger, bolting into invisibility at the mere threat of a threat—the shadow of a rod, the click of streambed stones, a sudden movement. Just getting near them is a ticklish business; getting close enough to keep line, leader, and fly out of the brush and on the water is precisely what it's all about.

Small-water fishing is a sport within a sport, a miniature version of angling that has a correspondingly small set of rules. Two, to be exact: get your fly on the water, and don't spook the fish. The rest you make up as you go along, and that's the part I like best—teaching yourself to fish all over again, rediscovering the original and authentic principles of all stream fishing—approach and presentation.

In the sodden mountains of the Pacific Northwest, where I fish most often, you can scarcely turn around without stumbling across a little creek. They twist

through the woods in rocky defiles, tumble over and around boulders, pause briefly behind beaver dams, and flatten out on sandy tailouts. But these streams could be anywhere. Mountain waters are more alike than different. The water runs downhill and the trout face up, and they are best approached from behind. Where the accepted wisdom on most water is to stay on the banks as much as possible, wading is often an advantage on small streams. The water itself frequently offers the path of least resistance when moving upstream, and more importantly, boulders, deadfalls, and the noise of broken currents can help conceal your presence.

Most of all, stay low. Crouching or kneeling not only reduces your visible silhouette, but increases rod clearance. Even then, close-quarters casting on small water is, to put it delicately, largely improvisational. You do what works, even if it isn't pretty, and it mostly isn't. Fishing is less a matter of fooling the trout than outwitting the tangle of overhanging vegetation, the rocks and snags, and a general thicket of obstacles that offer no more casting room than an old phone booth.

Special circumstances require special techniques, and foremost among them is sidearm casting. It works just like it sounds—conventional casting in a horizontal plane. With the rod held parallel to the water, the backcast travels beneath leaves and limbs, and the low, tight-looped forward cast can poke a fly into remarkably cramped spots. You don't need to go out of the way to learn this method—when the only casting alley lies a foot above the water, you'll teach it to yourself out of sheer necessity.

Sometimes, though, you don't even get this much—downstream obstructions forbid even the lowest backcast. The solution lies in using the water to outwit itself. Most small-stream anglers discover this technique on their own; fewer discover that it actually has a name—the water cast. Let the fly and line drift directly downstream, until they are pulled tight by the current. Hold the rod tip a few inches above the surface, and using the tension of the water to flex the rod, flip your wrist forward and slightly upward. The fly maintains a low trajectory; the delivery is accurate; and it requires no backcasting room at all.

These are the basics, and a good creek fisherman can execute them forehand, backhand, standing, sitting, kneeling,

was going, but I kept my thoughts to myself except on one hike cross-country through miles of lodgepole tangle that would have dizzied a compass. I said, then, that I feared we had drifted off-course—a frivolous comment, aimed at getting his reaction.

But there was no reaction. Scotty kept on without a word and in fifteen minutes we hit the shore of a little lake exactly where we wanted to fish. A golden-eye duck whistled in for a landing, cutting a long silver furrow on the pewter surface, and I promised myself that I would not venture again to tell Scotty Chapman how to find his way around Yellowstone.

He would not say this, but I suppose that nobody else has ever covered as many miles of the park on his own two legs. Not the Sheepeater Indians (they didn't run patrols). Not the mountain men (they didn't last long). Not today's Rangers (there are committed people among them, but they don't spend the winters on skis). You could drop Scotty without a map anywhere in Yellowstone's 3,500 square miles and he'd be able to hike straight to anywhere else he had a mind to be.

He was Assistant Chief Ranger and fire boss back when that was the toughest job in the Park. (Scotty would never say this either, but everybody knew it, back then.) Hundreds of fire-fighters had to be mobilized on short notice and provided with tools, food, experienced crew leaders, and quick, clear orders—a civilian version of a military campaign if there ever was one.

I was a Fire Guard under Scotty for several summers. With insufficient resources to put out a sizable fire all at once, you had to know where the burn would do more good than harm, keeping the meadows open, and where—such as on the steep, fragile watersheds—the flames had to be stopped, before they could destroy the trees protecting stream quality. You had to know what you were doing, and do it fast.

There is a good deal of talk about controlled burns today. With Scotty in charge, we always had controlled burns. I don't suppose he saw Yellowstone as his biggest canvas. That's just how things turned out.

WE WERE LATE FOR LUNCH BY THE time we got back to Scotty's ranch, which lies against the northern boundary of Yellowstone. With the exception of

near-fatal duty in the Philippines during World War II, nothing had separated him from his Park. He had declined transfers and the promotions that would have come with them. I may have asked silly questions over the years, but I never asked if he planned to retire in Florida.

Scotty and his wife, Louise, cooked our trout. She has shared his commitment since 1932. During the couple's first winter in the Park, they lived in an isolated cabin on Soda Butte Creek, and Louise kept the home fire burning, literally. Heating was by wood stove, and water was provided by a spring outside. Scotty was usually away on duty—rounding up the buffalo herd or patrolling for poachers. The patrols were real cross-country work, on 9-foot skis in deep powder, two weeks at a time. "Louise never complained," Scotty says. "I did, but she didn't."

The next winter, Scotty was assigned to the Bechler River cabin, even more remote. Louise left in December to have their first child and came back with baby Bill, in January, on a dogsled.

We sat at the table with afternoon sun streaming through the windows and pulled bones away from the pink, steaming meat of our trout, eating in little bites. We had enough but were not stuffed. And then we talked. I don't remember most of what we said because one casual comment by Scotty got me thinking.

He had been fishing the good spot on Cinquefoil Creek all these years, Scotty said, but he had not shown it to anyone till he took me to it that morning.

I guess I'll be keeping an eye on the place.



## DOEWATCH

(Continued from page 45)

long and bristling snout, shouldered into the opening. A litter of rooting, snuffling piggies followed behind in tumbling disarray. The dainty and sophisticated doe sidled from this unpleasantness. The tableau was as if a gang of bikers had crashed the cotillion. Whitetails are snobs.

Buck whitetails can often be recognized by obvious physical characteristics. We know all about that *Whoa, Charlie, did you see that 24-inch, double-drop-tine 12-pointer!* But antlerless does are pretty

much standard issue. The extremes of age are the easiest to distinguish. A yearling doe looks innocent and soft and playful. An old doe, as an old buck, carries the years for all to see. A painfully old doe is a sad sight, achy and gaunt, moving stiffly against the certainty of a winter die-off.

Occasionally, you will spy a doe with a physical signature such as a limp or a scar, something that serves as a positive ID as the animal sifts back and forth amid the cover. She is transformed from "just another doe" to a familiar fixture. During a hunt several years ago, I saw a doe that was, well, uncommonly homely. There's no other way to put it. She had a sloping, shovel face, as if her family tree had suffered a dalliance with Spuds McKenzie, that ridiculous dog in the beer commercials.

I observed Spuds alone several times. On the final day of the season, with the rut underway, she was keeping company with a proud buck. As you might expect, her suitor sported a freaky, twisted, stunted rack.

On that note, during the pre-rut or rut stages I am most alert to really handsome and healthy does. A pet theory of mine (unproven but interesting to contemplate) is that quality attracts quality. No disrespect to Spuds, but I believe that a great, dominant buck sporting a right antler that would stun Mr. Boone, and a left antler that would stagger Mr. Crockett can pretty much take his pick of available prospects.

That theory may be blown away in camp smoke but one fact is absolute: The rut is a huge ally for a hunter on doewatch. When the rut is on, any doe spotted hanging inside heavy cover demands intense scrutiny. A big buck may be with her and, in typical fashion, the pair may be holding to cover. It is the nature of the mature whitetail buck to go underground and hug the thick brush when he is breeding a doe. Look and look hard, probing the tangles and shadows, before dismissing the doe sighting as a solo. If ever there was testimony for patient work with crisp, light-gathering binoculars, this is it.

Stay on this doe. Keep watching and waiting. The eventual glimpse of a massive, curving beam and a soaring set of tines may be your reward.

Also, an unclaimed doe in estrus is a magnet for prowling antlers. If this doe wanders into the radius of your stand, the odds have soared in favor of a suc-

cessful buck hunt. For this reason, many crafty hunters during the rut position themselves near food plots; the idea is to attract and hold a receptive doe.

Most old bucks, unlike many old politicians, are difficult to bribe. A rut-obsessed warlord may not bite on the food, but he might trail a doe into—or at least near—the open area. If several does approach in a group, only one may be in estrus, but that is all an opportunistic hunter needs.

On a late-December hunt, with the heat of the rut fanning the South Texas brush, I sat on a tripod overlooking a long trail, or *sendero*, cut through the shag of mesquite and huisache and black brush.

A doe stepped out—close, too close. I huddled motionless, handcuffed by her nearness. Unalerted, she passed me at 20 yards and was followed, in file, by five more does. The sisterhood moved 100 yards down the *sendero* to nibble corn amid the afternoon shadows. Then, they turned as one, to study the brush. I eased my rifle into position.

There, on the edge of vision, was a flicker. A high, curving antler bobbed above the gray and green tangles. A mature buck was pushing close, trailing one of the does. Screened by thornbush, he stopped at the edge of the trail. A doe skittered away and he cut into the open. He paused as she stopped and the crosshairs settled onto the bunched shoulder.

That's a bold point—no, eleven bold points that grossed 168 Boone and Crockett points—in favor of doewatch.



## HUNTING IN A HARD LAND

(Continued from page 51)

through mud and bog, so that you may intercept the caribou.

It sounds simple, and it is, until you consider that you may sit for 3 or 4 hours in a slashing 30-mile-per-hour wind, and that you will be pelted with freezing rain every 10 minutes or so, and that the caribou may get your wind and trot off before you're set to shoot, and that your heart may explode while you are extracting your boots from knee-deep muck.

There is a prevailing myth that caribou are dumb, and that shooting one is a question of sitting on the nearest rock while the migration pours by, picking

the Boone and Crockett head of your choice out of the mob, and squeezing the trigger. This may happen. However, it is far more likely that you will see the creatures in twos or threes, or in herds of a dozen, and that you will have to stalk them for some very tough miles, all the while being careful of the wind, and being careful that they do not see you—they have excellent eyesight. Then you may get a shot, or you may not.

The guides themselves are worth a trip to Canada because they are consummate woodsmen, and watching them at work is a privilege. The guide with whom I hunted this past September is named Maurice Boivin. He is a forty-eight-year-old Montagnais Indian who began hunting on his own as a ten-year-old. "My father showed me how to do it, and then said, 'Now you do it.' I was scared to death, but I learned." Maurice speaks the Quebec version of French and pretty decent English.

Each morning, we'd leave camp and travel for half an hour by Zodiac boat, and after disembarking, we would have a brisk uphill march o'er bog and boulder to the top of what was called "Maurice's Mountain," a 500-foot-high rise that gave an excellent view of the surrounding tundra. Maurice would go off on one side and I on the other, where I would glass for caribou, recite Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and think about Carol Alt.

As I was muttering Milton into my beard, I looked to my left and saw Maurice trotting toward me with a look on his face that I have seen mirrored by many guides. The look says something like this: *Oh, this is a big one and I know where he's going if we can just get there ahead of him and I hope the wind doesn't shift and this character doesn't fall on his face in the muskeg.*

And so I bade adieu to Milton and Carol Alt, put on my pack, and trotted after Maurice, down off the mountain and into a spruce-infested bog.

As we came up the far side of the bog, onto what passes for dry land, Maurice slowed to a walk. His hands were in constant motion, fluttering in a kind of sign language directed at me, at the caribou, at Fate, and at who knows who else. We eased up out of the draw and Maurice pointed west. The big caribou and a lady friend were about 250 yards in that direction, but we were unable to see them, or they us.

Moving a half-step at a time, I saw a patch of white 200 yards away. It was the shoulder mane of a big, iron-gray bull.

His head was down, browsing, and the wind was in my face. I needed to move another 6 feet to get a shot. Whatever forces Maurice had invoked were on my side. I fired, offhand, and he went down.

IF YOU'RE HUNTING WITH A RIFLE, YOU don't need to bring a cannon. I had a 7mm Weatherby magnum, and it was too much gun. A .270 would have been more like it. The average shot was on the order of 200-300 yards, so you do need something flat-shooting, but you don't need ton upon ton of muzzle energy. You may use whatever scope you like, but it must have caps for the lenses.

Bowhunters headed for the tundra have my deepest sympathy. Launching an arrow in constant high wind is something I was glad I was not faced with. If you do not use plastic vanes, you'll have to dope your feathers so they don't wilt.

It's hard for me to overdo this business of wind and water. From the moment we hit camp, we were told: "Don't walk out of your tent without your rainsuit," and it was good advice. I found it was best to put the rainpants on in the morning and never take them off, and keep the jacket in the top of my daypack. Not only does raingear keep the water off, but it helps to break the force of the wind, and it is much better to sit down on a clump of wet moss with rainpants on than without. Do not bring your leather boots, and I'm not even crazy about rubber-bottom pacs for this country. The proper footwear is 16-inch-high all-rubber boots.

This is not easy country. It is not the stuff of which picture postcards are made. It is somber, harsh, and uninhabitable by man. It will make you feel small and insignificant, and it will be there, unchanged and unspoiled, until the next ice wall looms out of the Arctic and begins its ages-long advance to the south.



### IF YOU WANT TO GO AND SEE FOR YOURSELF. . .

■ I booked my hunt with **AUBERGE DE LA RIVIÈRE GEORGE**, Dept FS, P.O. Box 88, Saint Augustin, PQ, Canada G3A 1V9, telephone (418) 877-4650, mid-June through mid-October (418) 585-3477. It is a first-rate operation, and has three different types of hunts at prices ranging from reasonable to a price you'll have to save for. Whichever one you pick, you will get your money's worth.—D.E.P.

①

It goes by the unglamorous name of prairie chicken,  
and indeed, it was once no more than food on  
the wing. Now we can appreciate it for what it really  
is—the very embodiment of the Western prairie.

## Antelope With Wings

by Datus Proper

Harvey Dunn, who was born in a Dakota-territory sod hut in 1884, did not romanticize the prairie chicken. He called this painting "Something for Supper."



**T**HIS IS A STORY ABOUT THE PRAIRIE, AND ABOUT THE GROUSE THAT LIVE THERE AND THE DOGS THAT RUN AROUND AFTER THE GROUSE. THERE ARE NO PEOPLE TO CLUTTER THE LANDSCAPE, NOT UNLESS YOU NOTICE ONE SKINNY FIGURE STICKING UP LIKE A SOAPWEED STALK. THE GRASSLAND IN AUTUMN NEVER FEELS LONELY, THOUGH. IT SIGHS AND CURVES AND SMELLS GOOD, DIPS AND BENDS AND RISES UNDER MY BOOTS, LIFTING ME TO THE RIDGES WHERE A VERY OLD AMERICAN GAMEBIRD LIVES.

Last September, I drove my version of the prairie schooner to South Dakota's grasslands, where the prairie chicken still lives as it always has, not confused in

the least. I, however, needed advice. One experienced hunter told me to look for "antelope with wings." Most of the crowd leave prairie chickens alone after opening weekend, he said, not because they are scarce but because they fly for miles and hide in the middle of nowhere. You have to like distance to love prairie grouse.

Meadowlark matins came from all directions, on that first morning, cascading like church bells. From the volume, you would have expected musicians as big as ostriches. A solitary cottonwood seemed like the place to stop because there was no other place in sight, only grass. And besides, I hoped that my spoiled puppy would be soothed by the shade. She was ululating,

Datus -  
pls. see note p. 3

*"Prairie chickens. . .*

*fly for miles*

*and hide*

*in the middle of*

*nowhere."*

she would not be coming along to spoil his bird work. Huckleberry and Tess are German shorthaired pointers—the kind that would rather eat miles than breakfast.

Huck and I skirted the snowberry brush in a long draw. Half a mile uphill, he crept into a near-point, nosed around, then followed scent over the side of the draw and out of sight. He was trailing uphill but downwind, which is tricky. By the time I came over the top, he had run a loop and was pointing back toward me, upwind, game between us. The hard part was over and I could only let the team down. It was the kind of pass I hated to drop, back when I thought I could play football.

My elbow saved me this time, clamping the stock while grouse flushed in eleven directions, more or less. When the birds were far enough out and saying *tut-tut-tut* all at same time, the gun came up and a grouse came down. Huck found it in a patch of rose hips big as marbles and red as blood.

My first Dakota bird was, however, not a prairie chicken but a sharptail grouse. I should have known from all the tutting. Pinnates are less vocal than sharp-tails and do not hang out in brushy draws. I had been hunting the species I already knew instead of the one I wanted to meet.

As the shadows grew sharper, Huckleberry made quarter-mile casts, running arcs for scent that was not there, drawing curlicues around possibilities invisible to me. He sliced the infinite grass into pieces I could discern. By comparison to close-up work on skittish birds, the long search stretched legs and lungs but was easy on the brain for both of us. It was as beautiful as hunting gets.

In time, Huckleberry's arcs turned into tangents, trying to lead me anywhere except back to the truck. When we got there, however, he was content, having demonstrated that there are good smells left in the world to provide work for an honest bird dog.

We drove deeper into the prairie, then, as far as the dirt road would take us, far from trees and the red-tailed hawks that perched in them. We parked where a harrier circled and prairie chickens just might be hiding, and there I released the pup. Her sire turned his head away, refusing to watch us leave without him.

WOE-woe-woe-woooooo, much like the maidens they tied to railroad tracks in home-stead movies. For sustained anguish, tiny Tess beat them all.

The pup's sire, on the other hand, was relieved that

Tess was a year old and built like one of those dress-up dolls that make little girls aspire to anorexia—the kind with inflated chest, depressed waist, and legs much longer than necessary to reach the ground. She floated, for the first half-hour, skimming the grass instead of weaving through it. During occasional returns to earth, the pup could have collided with anything, grouse or porcupine or snake. When I called her in, she rolled onto her back and wriggled, which is her method of appeasing cranks of all persuasions, human and canine. I sat to cool my dizzy damsel and the breeze pushed a shadow over us.

We were right in the middle of America, where eastern heat cooks up clouds and western clarity gives them sharp edges. The bottoms started just out of reach, flat and earth-colored. The tops were whiter than popcorn, billowing, monstrous, exultant, and voluptuous, anything a lonely speck of a man could want. If you have not dreamed on a cloud lately, it is because only the prairies have room for a show like that.

When we moved off again, Tess stayed in the grass but most of me was in the sky. I-of-body experience—rather an awareness of head and feet in different realms. For this feeling, you have to walk west to the edge of fatigue. The east never had sky, even before the smog. Thoreau did not write about sky, nor Emerson. Sky hid in the trees for them and merged with the sea. On the prairie, sky is a place to live.

**I**T CAME DOWN TO EARTH WHEN TESS ASKED FOR water and, having refreshed herself, discovered grouse. The first scent must have been like a wall because she almost turned a somersault when she hit it. Only puppies make that kind of point, inspirational but stupid. I put my hand under her tail and pushed her forward, steadying her. She felt like a bee's buzz, vibrating clear down her spine. The birds, however, had moved on. Tess found them within 100 yards but must have heard them running away from her point, because she charged in and flushed the whole pack.

They were real prairie chickens this time, sharp-edged by sun, big birds in neat brown tweed. They swung past to look me over, curious as antelope, then flew up over the ridge and merged with the bottom of a cloud. No wonder falcons consider this grouse their most difficult quarry. The pinnate co-evolved with the swiftest of raptors—in danger whether hiding in

*"We were. . . where*

*Eastern heat*

*cooks up clouds and*

*Western clarity gives*

*them sharp edges."*

See also typos.

(3)

## Antelope With Wings

the grass or during long daily flights to food.

I brought Tess back to the site of the flush and made her stand while scent ran into her nose. I could not detect the grouse, but a whiff of vanilla came from drying bluestem grass and my jeans pressed the scent from a

herb-garden of sagewort. To my surprise, the air was calm at my waist, though wind tugged at my hair. Tess had found—by mistake—a grouse oasis. We kept on in the lee of the ridge, looking for wind-sheltered patches of tall grass with a mixture of broad-leaved plants for shelter. When you learned to see it, that prairie was more diverse than some forests closer to home.

The pup found another scent, worked it with more caution, held till I was in range—and flushed a cock pheasant, out of season. I should not have been surprised, because pheasants are tall-grass birds, too. What struck me was the contrast in behavior during flight. The rooster angled sharply away from me, preferring to pass near the dog. Pheasants have evolved with humans and learned that they will not bear close inspection.

Back at the truck, I waited for the pup to jump in. Then I told her to kennel, and still she did not move. Finally, I noticed that she had brought me a present. I knelt as chivalrously as I could, with knees stiff from the distance, and accepted a yellow, dried-out foot of prairie chicken left over from some predator's meal. Thus released, Tess whirled into her act of contrition. She groomed the folds of my shirt, swallowed two beggar's-llice burrs from a cuff, and nibbled my ear in case any fleas might be hiding out in there. I told her that she was a fetching lass.

Huckleberry is a dog not of moods but agendas, and all he wanted from me that evening was a general direction. I set it and saw him disappear over the ridge. When next I saw him, he was on point in the hollow where a spur joined our geometry. He was not flustered. I was.

I moved down the ridge till I was well in front of Huck and caught the grouse between us again. This one gained speed downhill and tumbled 30 yards after it died in the air. At the shot, four more pinnates flushed and swooped down the same line. They reminded me of something in their headlong flight, rocking slightly from side to side.

**L**IKE MANY A YANK, I HAD HUNTED RED grouse while working overseas—Ireland, in my case—before meeting their counterparts closer to home. The native American bird was bigger than its prestigious relative, wore much the same tailored suit-with-waistcoat, and was at least as fast over the contours, racing the stoop of countless peregrines through all the centuries. This bird did not deserve to be called chicken.



## Chickening Out— the old-fashioned way

photos by DAVID J. SAMS

↑  
article needs  
to end  
here - runs 7 lines  
over. Pls. call me w/ any cuts  
you'd like to make.  
Thanks  
Jean  
X5290



4

Cool air crept uphill even before a fringe of grass covered the red rim of sun. Huckleberry wanted to hunt one more grouse, and another after that, another forever. I held him in.

When we neared our truck, the next generation saw us and yipped, eager as her sire but not half as useful. Old Huckleberry could teach me anything, I thought, except how to be a puppy.

CREDIT GOES HERE



CREDIT GOES HERE

