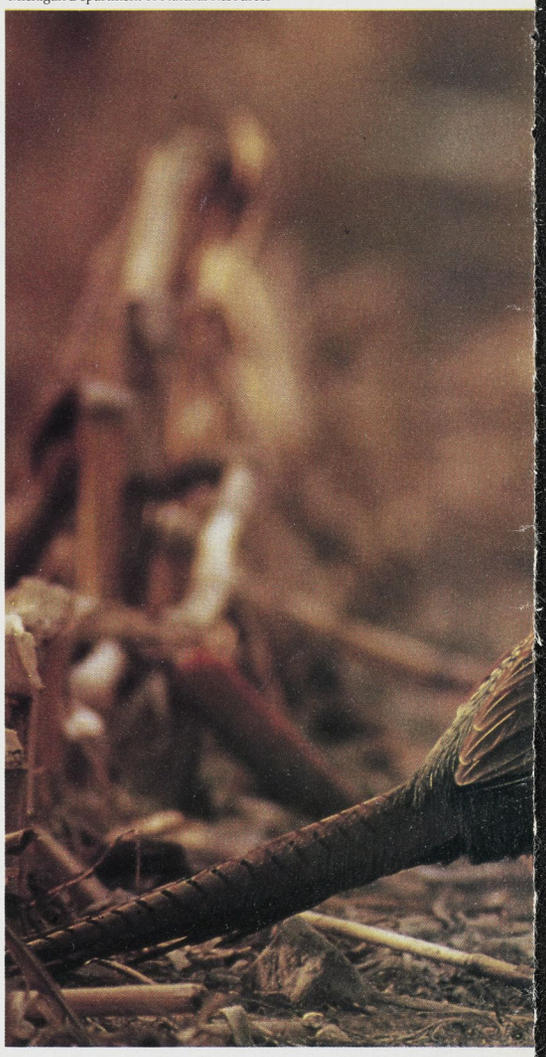
by Art Talsma

Explains some problems in Montana. We're forced pheasants out of the grass & into the brush.

WHY DID MICHIGAN CHOOSE SICHUAN PHEASANTS?

Michigan Department of Natural Resources



ON A RECENT VISIT to Michigan I couldn't help but notice the tremendous change in land use of southern Michigan. Not only were there shopping malls where I once hunted ringnecks in my teens, but other significant changes had occurred as well. The rolling countryside near Grand Rapids is in a state of transition. There are still many beautiful dairy farms and orchards, but between the farmsteads marginal farmland is reverting to idle fields with grasslands, brushy edges and young forest. This change is prevalent in southern Michigan, and brushland now occupies 16 million acres compared to 9.4 million acres of farmland.

Ring-necked pheasant numbers have dropped dramatically in Michigan, and throughout much of their range in North America. Intensive agriculture has led to the decline in many states. In Michigan the decline is due to the reversion of croplands to trees. Could the birds move over into the brushland habitat type and perhaps survive? A few have, but this really is not "home" to ring-necked pheasants. Home for the ringneck is the open prairie agricultural region to which it has become genetically adapted.

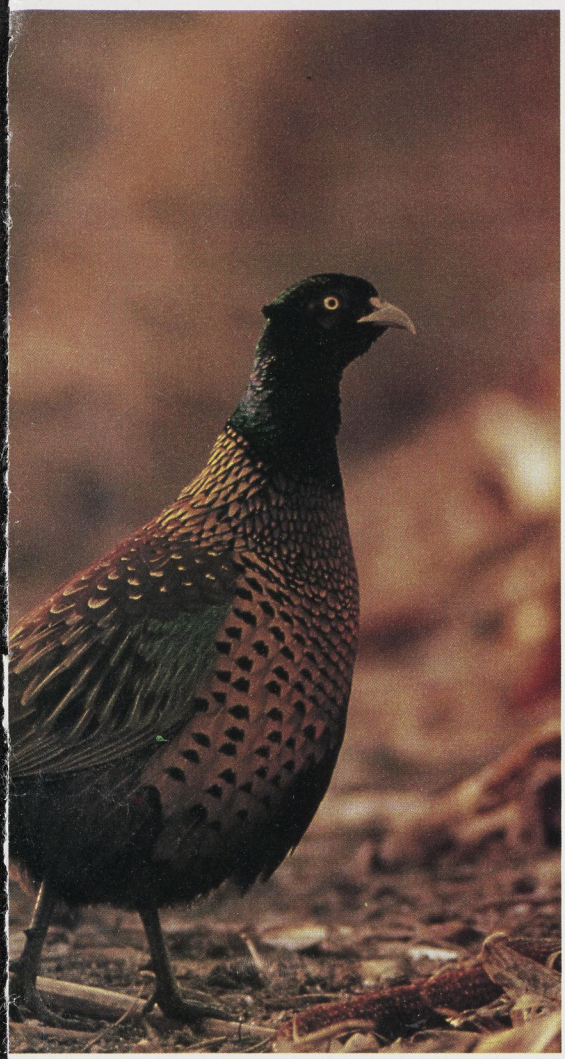
If you were a game-bird biologist facing these trends and a 60 percent decline in pheasant hunter numbers, what would you do? One thing you might consider is reversing the habitat trend. But brushland is great for white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, grouse, and the environment in general. Besides, making significant land-use changes without the help of federal agricultural programs or working against economic influences is almost impossible for a field biologist. Perhaps there is some other pheasant better able to adapt to such a changing habitat?

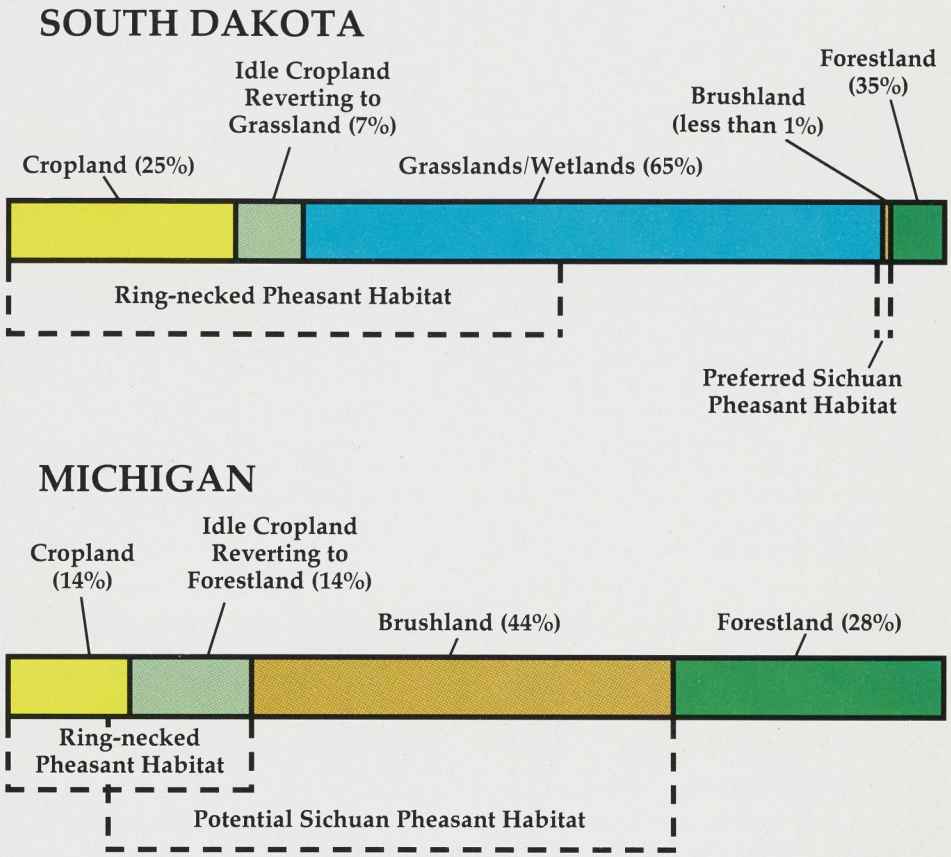
UNDER THIS HYPOTHESIS, in 1985 three biologists from Michigan spent three weeks observing pheasant habitat during a 1,200-mile trip through the Sichuan Province of China. The goal, find and return with a bird already adapted to the current habitat of Michigan. The team observed many varieties of pheasants and studied pheasant behavior in every conceivable habitat type. Pete Squibb, with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, reported that the trio selected an area for egg collection and research that was "Marginal farm country at an elevation of 4,000 to 6,000 feet. The habitat and climate conditions closely match the northern coastal lakes region in the United States, which we feel can support pheasant populations. The subspecies of pheasant in this area is the Strauch's pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus strauchi*)." Strauch's pheasant is very similar in appearance to the North American ring-necked pheasant (*P. c. torguatus*) but lacks the distinct white neck ring.

Now, five years later, Michigan is well on its way to rearing thousands of Sichuan pheasants in their Mason Wildlife Facility. On a recent visit to this facility, I was impressed with all the techniques the wildlife biologists were using to maintain wildness in these birds. Most important though, once the Sichuans are released into the wild they appear to select brushy habitat as their preferred nest sites. Michigan's production should allow

Shopping centers, suburban sprawl and accompanying highway construction cost Americans hundreds of thousands of acres of meadows, wetlands, fields, streams and woods where wildlife once lived.

The Sichuan pheasant lacks the white neck ring of the ring-necked pheasant.





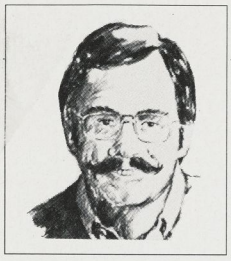
A comparison of habitats in South Dakota and Michigan shows that South Dakota has far less brushland habitat than Michigan.

for the release of approximately 20,000 birds in 1991. The end result of these releases, in theory, will provide Michigan with a self-sustaining population of pheasants that are suited to local habitat.

WHILE CONSIDERING the significance and magnitude of this experiment, it should be noted that there are some undesirable factors and inherent drawbacks involved, as one might expect. For example, start-up costs have been enormous, running into millions of dollars. And, there is the question of how Sichuan pheasant behavior will be affected by interbreeding with ring-necked pheasants. This, in time, may ultimately breed out desirable qualities. In addition, Michigan DNR still must overcome the imprinting or learning problem inherent in a hatchery (for example, there is no hen to teach chicks to hide from predators). As you can see, this is no small or simple undertaking. We wish Michigan well, but do so understanding that this experiment is unnecessary and relatively insignificant for South Dakota because we have so little brushland habitat. Thank goodness for the prairie!

What can we learn here in the Dakotas as we follow this experiment of the release of a new subspecies of pheasants into the more forested states of the Midwest? As mentioned earlier, the Sichuan's success or failure will be largely dependent upon how well Michigan has matched the bird with the habitat and how well its new propagation techniques work.

For those of us who love to see the explosion of a grand old ringneck from a patch of cover here on the prairie, well, we can be assured that habitat ultimately holds the key to the future of our birds too!



By Jim Wooley

Promises, Promises

Politics and natural resources. Ding Darling knew years ago it is a witches brew that shouldn't be mixed.

Somewhere in the code of a disturbing number of politicians, it must be written that when money gets tight you can always bleed a little more from natural resources, no matter what promises might have been made.

This has been abundantly clear in Iowa, a state that stands a better than even chance of losing its shining $30 million Resource Enhancement And Protection program (REAP). In place less than two years, REAP is considered a national model for comprehensive natural resources legislation.

REAP's focal points are conservation education, land acquisition, water quality, soil resources, reforestation, roadside vegetation management, historical resource development needs and maintenance of existing DNR lands.

In place less than two years, REAP is considered a national model for conservation.

REAP was funded in fiscal 1991 at $25 million, and was scheduled to receive $30 million a year the next eight years from the Iowa Lottery. Last year, the program got $20 million. Still, demand has far outstripped the availability of REAP grant money in the program's first two years.

REAP is threatened by revenue shortfalls and budget deficits. In Iowa, a projected $19 million surplus in 1991 has become, depending on whose arithmetic you choose, an $80 million to $230 million deficit.

Gov. Terry Branstad and the Legislature began to deal with the deficit in February by de-appropriating funds allocated to 1991 programs. These cuts included a $5 million slash in REAP (20 percent of program funds)—widely believed to be a disproportionately large share of the burden. And, because greater deficits are projected

SPUR LENGTH

Sexual prowess may be one of many indicators tied to a rooster's foot.

Wayne A. Rowley

An early spring ritual that quickens the hearts of everyone - pheasant hunters in particular - is a rooster pheasant all puffed up, strutting his splendor. Presumably, a male pheasant is displaying his physicial prowess as he beckons a would-be mate to his territory.

The question might be asked, what does she see in him? Is a female pheasant looking for the biggest, strongest, most handsome rooster in the country to father her brood? A woman might look for a man who is intelligent, sophisicated, gentle and with potential to be a good father. But how might that big bird that looks so magnificent to you and me appear to his female counterpart? How does a hen pheasant choose between several roosters she may have contact with in the spring?

Remember, pheasants are precocial; that is, the chicks are active when they hatch and there is no paternal care. Once a rooster has bred a female pheasant, he's through. He takes no responsibility for the young. Their success as individuals and as a brood is entirely up to the female.

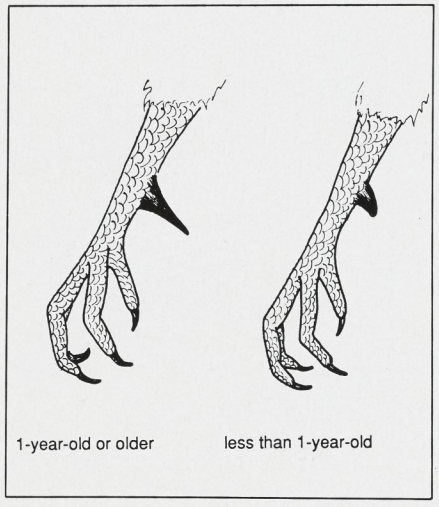
So: What is it about a particular rooster that causes a female to select him rather than another?

If you're thinking a big rooster or one with long tail feathers is most attractive to a mate-seeking hen, you're wrong. In a study conducted by researchers at the University of Lund in Sweden and recently published in the prestigious British journal Nature, an isolated population of pheasants was studied from December 1983 to August 1987.

During the winter of each year, all pheasants in the study area were trapped, marked, aged and biometrically measured. They were then placed in an enclosed area and studied to evaluate social dominance and how contesting their nature was.

Data were kept on individual birds. In early April of each year, the pheasants were released in the study area and tracked using radiotelemetry. The researchers studied the establishment of territories, the proximity of females to males, mortality of individual birds, nesting attempts and hatching success. All of this was related to "reproductive success," then correlated with the physical (secondary sexual) characteristics of the male birds the females "selected" as mates in early spring.

It may surprise you to know that female pheasants shop around. They don't buy the line handed to them by the first rooster they meet. In fact, the researchers found that females visit several males, moving from territory to territory before they select a mate.



The Swedish researchers wanted to find out what a female pheasant uses to judge the suitability of a mate. After all, reproductive success is the name of the game and female mating preferences have theoretically evolved so a hen mates with a male that possesses genetic traits that will increase survival of her offspring. Breeding studies conducted by the group in situations where the female's final mate choice was known showed that when factors such as age (old birds vs. young), size, wing length and spur size were measured and correlated with reproductive success, spur length was the only significant predictor of female mate choice. Neither age nor wing length was important in mate selection.

It should be noted that large spurs correlate with increased male survival. Thus, older pheasants that have longer spurs also tend to be larger and weigh more. In the drawing, you can see how spur size and shape varies with age. Other factors such as seasonal timing (early vs. late clutches) or the quality of the male's territory did not influence the reproductive success of individual females, but spur length did. Unfortunately, this research did not determine how a hen pheasant measures a rooster's spurs.

This research intrigued me because last November I bagged a rooster in central Iowa that had the longest spurs I've seen in 35 years of pheasant hunting. Little did I realize as I pointed out the remarkable length of this bird's spurs to my hunting partner that I had the sexiest bird in the state in my hands.

Next time you're looking for a trophy bird, make sure he has long spurs. They're more indicative of a trophy than long tail feathers.

Area; and on the more than 50,000 acres of Bureau of Reclamation WDA (Wildlife Development Areas) that will be developed over the next 15 years.

Our congratulations to the Oahe chapter and Bureau of Reclamation project director Neil Stessman for this historic joint venture.

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The Buchanan County (Iowa) PF Chapter has implemented its "Ringnecks" youth program.

This pilot plan is intended for youths ages 12 to 18. The goal is for school age boys and girls to become involved with preservation and restoration of wildlife habitat, through education and exposure to the great outdoors.

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Pheasants Forever, the Idaho Wildlife Council and the Idaho Fish and Game Department sponsored a pheasant management workshop in Boise, Idaho, in early October.

PF Field Representatives Jim Wooley, Dave Lockwood and Ken Solomon were featured speakers at the Pheasant Management Workshop held Sept. 30-Oct. 1.

The objective of the workshop was to provide the general public an opportunity to hear experts from throughout the country speak on pheasant ecology and management. The second day of the session consisted of a roundtable discussion that allowed the public to provide input on specific issues relating to pheasant management.

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Ohioan Jim Kaufman has been an avid bird hunter all his life, and started hunting in Putnam County, Ohio, in 1932.

At that time, pheasants were plentiful in northwestern Ohio, with sometimes more than 400 birds per square mile. But by the early 1960s the pheasant population began to decline, due to habitat loss, in part because of changed farming practices. A major blizzard in 1978 followed, killing much of the remaining brood stock. But there is hope that better times will follow.

Pheasants Forever is now forming chapters in Ohio, and interest is keen. Helping the cause along in a big way, Jim showed his commitment by becoming the first Life Member in the Williams County (Ohio) PF Chapter.

Such dedication will help Ohio once again enjoy a diversity of wildlife on its farmlands.

Pheasants on the Outer Banks

Text & Photography
by
Vic Venters

The Outer Banks of North Carolina. To anyone familiar with the area, that phrase is pregnant with emotion; 400 years of European man's settlement has cultivated a rich garden of meaning from which to pick. For instance, had you mentioned those words to a 19th century sailor, chances are you'd have seen fear flash in his eyes; the coast is littered with the wrecks of more than 600 ships and the area is aptly named "The Graveyard of the Atlantic."

Mention those words today, and you'll get a different response. If you talk to a fisherman, you might see his eyes glaze slightly; mentally he's probably already casting to the great schools of bluefish and drum which invade the shoreline in the fall. Many waterfowlers—especially the older ones—will get that wistful look usually reserved for faraway lovers, as they remember the days when the local sounds teemed with ducks and offered canvasback shooting second to none.

Me? I dream of pheasants.

Pheasants on the Outer Banks?

Yes, and not only pheasants, but pheasant hunting to boot. Ringnecked pheasants are found on both the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and the Cape Lookout National Seashore, although hunting for them is allowed only in the latter. The birds are a legacy of local hunting clubs which brought the pheasants to the islands in the 1930s, where, surprisingly, they prospered and established one of the south's only self-sustaining populations.

Their existence is an anomaly, for there is no self-sustaining pheasant population on the North Carolina mainland, and all attempts to establish one have been failures. To this day, the survival of the birds outside of their normal geographical range remains something of a mystery to biologists; some have speculated that the temperate weather, combined with the calcium and mineral-rich sand, allows the birds to successfully raise their broods. It doesn't hurt that predators, of both four-legged and two-legged variety, are relatively scarce, for Cape Lookout National Seashore is uninhabited and desolate, and is accessible only by boat.

Whatever the reasons, these pheasants by the sea afford upland hunters a truly unique sporting opportunity. You see, the pheasant as a gamebird is a stranger to this region and hunting them is an alien experience for most southern upland hunters. As a tradition, "southern" pheasant hunting simply does not exist. Oh sure, you can shoot pheasants galore from local preserves, but that's shooting, not hunting. I needn't say more. Down here, upland hunting means only three things: quail, quail, and more quail. Bobwhites, of course.

Equally incongruous is hunting on the Outer Banks. In the south, hunting pheasants at all seems strange

Upland Gunning

Chris Dorsey

enough, but hunting on the beach, well, that borders on the absurd. By that, I mean the beaches are usually associated with either summer vacationing, where you have fun in the sun and the surf, or fishing, in which case you concentrate on water conditions, the movement of gulls, or schools of baitfish. In both those cases, the beach, the terrain, the lay of the land, are merely decorative stage props for your chosen pasttime.

On the other hand, while pheasant hunting on the Banks, the environment remains the same, but your perception of it changes. The postcard scenery is no longer a prop, but instead the stage where hunting's game of life and death is played out. Instead of a cursory "oh isn't that pretty" glance at the beach, you are concentrating on likely bird habitat, reading the land as intently as a lost tourist might study a Los Angeles road map.

In December and January, the seashore is full of the melancholy smell of winter; the musty odor of the marsh hangs heavy in the air and the taste of salt is palpable and full on the tongue. Just over the dunes, the ocean roars away, its timeless song a constant companion. For me, the oddness of hunting this terrain never goes away, and, as you might guess, trying to locate a bird which is mostly associated with midwestern cornfields in sand dunes and cordgrass can be something of a challenge. It's kind of like devising tactics to catch sailfish in a South Dakota cattle pond. (How fast should we be trolling these baits?)

However, the adaptability which has made the pheasant equally at home in a brushy Pennsylvania woodlot or an open Alberta grain field, has served the bird well on the Outer Banks. Spit-up from the ocean eons ago, Cape Lookout National Seashore is a series of narrow, but long, barrier islands fronted on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, on the west by Pamlico and Core Sounds. This 60-mile slash of uninhabited sand provides all the habitat requirements pheasants need. The birds usually roost and shelter near the sound-side of the islands, where the vegetation is the thickest; the wax myrtle, bayberry, stunted live oaks, and cordgrass form a thicket the strongest of hunters can't walk through. When you find the birds hiding in their thickets, you've got a tough, sometimes birdless, day ahead.

Fortunately, the birds have to eat, and when they leave their protective haunts to feed, you'll find them. Naturally, a salty, uninhabited sand island is not exactly a prime location for growing row crops and the pheasants have to get their food the hard way; by digging for it. The Outer Banks' pheasants feed on the roots and tubers of shrubs and brush, scratching holes in the sand at the base of the plants to get their meal.

Lest I dwell on the exotic elements too long, let's make it clear that there are still familiar traits of the hunt, and, perhaps, that's what makes Outer Banks pheasant hunting so appealing.

First and foremost, there's the dog-work. In North Carolina, there is no such thing as a bona fide pheasant dog, but our "bird dogs" don't seem to know it. My father and his good friend, Pat, are traditionalists, and use English setters or pointers exclusively; those two breeds pretty much being *sine qua non* down here. On their first pheasant, these quail dogs locked on point as surely as they did on their 500th bobwhite. Fortunately, for those of us who use pointing breeds, Outer Banks birds seem to hold better and run less than those from more traditional pheasant hunting locales.

Actually, I've heard of some local hunters having great success with Labradors, which use their strength to muscle through and over the thick, waist-high marsh grasses that sometimes stop a smaller pointer in its tracks. While I'll admit to some advantages hunting these pheasants with a Lab, you won't catch me, or any other hunter raised on quail, following a flushing dog. It's not that you'll kill any more birds with a pointer or setter, you may not. But that's not the point; down south, it's not what you do, it's how you do it.

At the risk of making the southern upland hunting experience sound like a hackneyed cliché—and if I do, I won't be the first—there is nothing quite like hunting with pointing dogs. Advancing behind the dog's archetypical form—your heart a jackhammer, and your stomach in butterflies—is an experience which cannot be duplicated using a flushing dog. You can call this opinion provincial and narrow, and I won't argue with you. But neither will I trade a pointer for a Lab to hunt upland birds.

In fact, I suspect that pointing dogs are the reason why many southern hunters pursue upland birds. Shooting a quail, a woodcock, or a pheasant put up by one of the flushing breeds seems almost haphazard, perhaps a little less than noble. But then, traditions—like our glorified Civil War heroes—die hard in Dixie.

If our quail dogs have adapted beautifully to their task, our quail guns haven't always. Pat uses his "bird" gun, a 16 gauge Fox Sterlingworth choked improved/modified, and takes pheasants consistently and cleanly. I wasn't so lucky my first trip over, I carried my 20 gauge Bernardelli, a modest little double bored skeet/improved cylinder. It's hell on woodcock and Mr. Bobwhite, and I figured, "If I can hit 'em, I can kill 'em."

It was late morning in January, the time of the day when the winter morning haze has burned off, but the bright sunlight has yet to become midday glare. We had walked for miles, and not a bird had been found. "Where are they?" I chided Pat, my host and guide.

"There are plenty of them here," he replied. "But they're not everywhere." It's not unusual to walk for hours without striking a bird, he explained. Then up on a low sandy ridge ahead of us, we found what we were

looking for: the pheasant's telltale three-pronged tracks meandering across the dunes in seemingly aimless circles. A funny thing about these tracks, they are a great indicator that birds are or have been in the general area, but their confusing dance makes them useless for pinpointing a bird's specific haunt.

At the ridge, Pat's two-year old pointer locked up once, then twice. We flushed two pheasants, both hens, which can't be taken.

"Stay ready," Pat warned. "Where there's hens, there are cocks." Pat might well have been a prophet, for Pris pointed again, this time where the open grass on the ridge began a transition to the thicker vegetation near the sound. I circled into the heavy brush in an attempt to keep any rooster from darting to safety in the sheltering cover.

As I entered, a magnificent cock erupted from the bayberry and yaupon not 20 yards in front of me, a noisy covey rolled into one whirring package of gold, green, and red. He was in the open, and my gun found him easily, his deceptive and princely tail notwithstanding. On the first shot, he shuddered visibly, after the second he dropped a leg. Nevertheless, he bored on with grim determination. Only a timely third shot from my father finished him off. The proud bird had just finished feeding, its crop was as swollen as a cannibal's belly, and stuffed to the throat with succulent tubers.

Not to be outgunned again, I went afield the next day with a borrowed 12 gauge pump duck gun, thirty-inch barreled, and full choked. We flushed more birds than I care to brag about. I don't think I touched a feather. Lesson? I can't shoot a pump, or at least that's my excuse. This year, I think I'll get wise and bring my 12 gauge over/under with screw-in chokes.

Pheasant hunters on the Outer Banks are few and far between; Pamlico Sound is shallow; consequently when

On point.

the winter storms blow—which is frequently—the waters become too rough for many boats to make the trip from the mainland. Shallow water near the islands usually necessitates a pre-dawn wade through icy water and mud to shore—not a pleasant proposition carrying a shivering, thin-skinned pointer, guns, ammo and all the other accoutrements hunters find so necessary.

Once ashore your travails aren't over. Sand, the color and consistency of stone-ground flour, sucks at your boots when it's wet, and then when a northeaster blows, the wind, driven hard across a thousand of miles of icy ocean, will scythe through the thickest of clothes. The walks are long and birds aren't guaranteed. Granted, you'll see pheasants, but often they'll be hens.

To be frank, it can be a damn difficult hunt, and in a region where the bobwhite rules the uplands, most don't bother to pursue these birds. It seems most local gunners with any masochistic tendencies stick to duck shooting; though only a shadow of its former self, the area's waterfowling is still good by Atlantic Flyway standards.

Why then? Why take the trouble? Part of the answer is easy: the birds are there and they are magnificent game. The Outer Banks pheasant is a prince of tides, a transplanted noble, gaudy in its finery, ruling a little spit of sand at world's end. His presence is a powerful attractor. Yes, that's the easy part.

The rest of the answer is harder to define, at least for me. It centers on a quest for the intangible, on the illusive search for solitude. Not all hunters share this desire, and perhaps that's why we have the Banks largely to ourselves.

I like it that way. Just a close friend and a couple of dogs to share a lot of sand and water. They say the West is "Big Sky" country, but here on the continent's edge, the horizon doesn't come much bigger. The eye takes in great gulps of sea and sky, miles of it at a time. I don't know of any other place on this overcivilized East Coast where the illusion of a virgin world seems more real, where the land looks as it did on the day Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition clambered through the surf in 1584 to claim this land for England. Now federally owned, Cape Lookout National Seashore will never be blemished by the development which has desecrated most of our nation's seashore.

The pheasant, of course, knows none of the folly of man's spiritual quests. For them, solitude is simply a matter of survival. It means their food and cover is plentiful, their predators scarce, and the men with guns and dogs come infrequently to their little seaside fiefdom. I think they like it that way.

Ptarmigan on the Rocks

Text & Photography
by
Chris Dorsey

As I stood on a granite outcrop, it became apparent to me that Mother Nature, in her role of governing predator-prey relationships, can be immensely sadistic. Below were thirteen ptarmigan weaving through a small thicket of dwarf black spruce. The birds were almost entirely white—a camouflage pattern that was something of a bad joke for the birds, who were still awaiting the first snowfall of the season. There, stark and exposed like sea gulls on a plowed field, stood a baker's dozen of the feathery cream puffs.

From my hawk's aerie I couldn't help but think of the irony. For weeks the ptarmigan had been preparing for the inevitable onset of winter on the tundra. Each chestnut feather had slowly been replaced by the birds' snow-white plumage. Now, all dressed in new suits, the birds had nowhere to hide. Their only defense had backfired.

I had something of a flashback as I recalled a yellowing, black-and-white picture that was taped to a mirror in a decrepit northern Wisconsin tavern. I saw the print several years back after crawling out of an alder thicket that had suddenly been besieged by freezing rain