

“Rooster!” I heard Don Vetch yell as the sound of flapping wings lifted the cock pheasant out of the prairie grass towards the bright blue November sky. As I looked to the east I saw the bird rapidly gaining speed as I shouldered the over and under and fired a single shot. As quickly as I heard the report, I saw the bird fall from the sky. Immediately, Zoe the Spaniel was on retrieve.

The moment was to be short-lived. Within the next few minutes a flurry of activity occurred, both hens and roosters began to rise from the wild prairie grasses and specially planted food plots. “Rooster!” was called again and two evenly spaced shots from a 12-gauge filled the air. This time, all eyes were on the bird as it winged its way over the corn stubble before dropping out of site. Instantly, the scene seemingly replayed itself as more birds began to fly in all directions. This was the first hunt of our 3-day trip and in this small area covering only a few acres we had flushed dozens of birds and enough cock pheasants to fill both my limit and my wife, Lydia’s, limit for the remainder of our visit to AJ Acres in Onaka, South Dakota. Over the next 3 days, we flushed well over 1,000 pheasant, both hens and roosters, as we set out to bag our limits. Additionally, when not hunting, we would see large number of birds along the roads, in trees, on hay bales, and in the cornfields.

Earlier this fall we were dining with a friend, Reid Sherwood of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Reid invited Lydia and I to join him on this trip. To my surprise, Lydia accepted his invitation to her first ever bird hunting experience. Our host for this trip was Don Vetch and his two flushing Labrador Retrievers, Kelley and Duchess. Don has spent his entire life in this sleepy farming community where he began hunting pheasant in 1966. In 2003 Don and his wife Cathy, who also own rental properties in the Black Hills as well as a small business in nearby Aberdeen, SD, decided to offer privately guided pheasant hunts on their property, AJ Acres, an 1,100 acre mixture of owned and leased hunting land around the Onaka, South Dakota area. Each group of 6 to 8 hunters has exclusive use of the facilities and property during their visit.

Onaka, South Dakota is a small rural farming community and a place where the family farm meets the technological future. Large family farms, such as the one Don grew up on, have been passed down through generations. Combines and large tractors are seen harvesting corn in the fields and offloading their cargo, on the fly, into waiting trailers. These combines, equipped with large teeth, guide the corn into the advancing machines to be stripped, cleaned and gathered in a matter of seconds. An exhaust of partially stripped corn cobs, stalks and hulls fill the air as they are scattered behind the advancing goliath. On-board computers measure the moisture content, yield and whatever other information the farmer needs to know about the annual crop that is his livelihood. As I came to understand it, a map of the farmers land can be downloaded into the combines on board computers and the machine pre-programmed to harvest the field on auto pilot.

This year there are an estimated 12 million pheasant in South Dakota. From the number of birds we saw upon our arrival and in the first few minutes of the hunt, this is a believable number. To look upon the landscape in this area, I found it hard to believe the land could be host to so much wildlife. Gazing upon the rolling prairies and cropland we could see for several miles. It was not uncommon to see a white tailed deer crossing a stubble field up to a mile away. But the land is not always like this. During the spring and summer months thousands of acres of corn, soybean, and wheat provide the necessary food, water and cover to raise an incredible amount of wildlife. Only when the fall harvest comes do the combines reduce the crops to stubble leaving behind countless tons of grain to feed the abundant wildlife over the long winter months and into the spring.

Much of the land in this area has sloughs and fence lines as a part of the landscape. During the spring and summer months, while cover is abundant, the sloughs hold water from the winter snow cover and so is not cost effective to the farmer to try and cultivate these areas. As the crops are harvested and the sloughs dry up, the remaining vegetation becomes prime habitat for these beautiful birds.

The wild Ringneck pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) is a true bi-athlete. Agile, speedy and evasive on foot, the bird is also able to burst into flight and accelerate on the wing to incredible speeds in a short period of time. These birds are the favored prey animal of hawks, owls, fox and coyotes. So, their ability to evade and escape is necessary for survival.

As we continued to hunt sloughs, fence lines and planted trees, it was obvious that the sheer numbers of pheasant was overwhelming the bird dogs in their never ending search. Once on a bird, in many cases, the dogs were seen trying to hold a point on multiple birds. In many cases, birds tried to escape and flush before the advancing dogs. I quickly learned that as the hunters move through the slough, the pheasants seek to escape well ahead and out of range, generally running to the edges of cover before taking flight into the surrounding crop lands and prairie grasses.

Hunting this area of South Dakota was different than I expected. At least what I think I expected. On my first pheasant hunting trip to South Dakota, or as I described it to Lydia: Expect a guide and a dog taking a nice walk through the fields and crops while we watch and wait for the dogs to get "birdy". Then as the dog holds point, she and I would advance and flush the bird hoping for a cock pheasant. This, as it turns out, was not to be the plan. Instead, we strategically hunted a fence line, slough or planted trees each time usually flushing out dozens of birds before loading our gear and moving to other similar areas throughout the day. There were no shortage of places to hunt at AJ Acres. Since Don has hunted this immediate area for over 40 years and knows where every 'honey hole' is located, we trusted his ability to locate huntable birds. We were not disappointed by the amount of shooting opportunities he presented from beginning

to end, regardless of the weather conditions we experienced. To accomplish this we needed to strategically enter each individual hunting area with a single goal in mind - keep the birds from escaping, out of range, at the other end of the slough. This was a difficult task since the birds knew the lay of the land far better than we. Since Don only schedules one group at a time to hunt this land, we were always able to choose the prime locations to hunt for that day.

Locating an area with birds is relatively easy. Harvesting them however, was a little more of a challenge. During our stay at AJ Acres we experienced a variety of weather conditions. One day brought cold temperatures with wind gusts exceeding 50 MPH. Using the wind to their advantage, a stiff tailwind made judging the proper lead a little tricky, usually resulting in shots placed well behind the accelerating bird. Conversely, pheasant winging their way into the wind were equally misjudged and often led too far. Unfortunately, when the wind died down the next morning, the air was still and the ability to move into hunting areas quietly was nearly impossible. The result, birds were flushing significantly out of range.

Each morning, just after sunrise, Don would take a few of us and drive through the South Dakota farmlands. During our stay, legal shooting hours were 10:00 am to sunset to allow the birds to feed in the morning without pressure. Some of this early morning time was spent locating where the birds may be concentrating that day. It was, however, mostly an excuse for a relaxing drive - through the country watching a magnificent sunrise and looking at all the wildlife at first light. From a great horned owl, more than one trophy class buck, and tens of thousands of geese.

Once it was legal to hunt, we took to the fields. As Don drew maps with circles and arrows and gave assignments before each hunt, our tactics became more of a battle plan. Safety, of course, was a priority. Don worked with Lydia, and she immediately became a part of the team and the overall strategy. I enjoyed hunting side-by-side with her. Our group consisted of 6 people. At any given hunting area, we assigned two blockers, 2 flankers with 2 hunters, the guide and dogs moving through the center of the area. The plan was to place the blockers to keep the birds from flushing too far out; the flankers moved along the outside left and right ahead of the dogs for opportunities on birds flushing to the sides, and the hunters in the center walked behind the dogs for opportunities at rising birds from the grasses or birds flushing to the rear of the slough. With this strategy, most of the time, at least some of the birds will hold tight, moving ahead on the ground in heavy cover with a few birds flushing from the grasses. As the center hunters and the flankers come together maintaining a safe distance and meet up with the blockers, the pheasant will suddenly begin to flush from inside and from the perimeter of our enclosing circle. Suddenly, the action becomes fast, really fast and furious as birds begin to rise. "Hen!" someone will call out warning others not to shoot the illegal birds. "Rooster!" calls another as hunters locate the rising bird to assess a safe and effective shot. Suddenly two, three, four, five roosters are in the air at once. Some birds burst straight up out of the grass while others change their escape tactics by running to the edges of cover and then exploding into flight staying low over the harvested crops.

We hear the double report of over and under shotguns firing, watching to see if the shot hits home taking the bird to the ground. "Good shot" yells Don. "Another rooster!" I close my gun after reloading as quickly as possible. This one rises between Don and me. As the bird elevates, I shoulder my shotgun. With a single shot the bird is mortally hit and the dog is on retrieval before the bird hits the ground. I break open the chamber to re-load as another rooster rises before me, this time heading towards Lydia. "Rooster, rooster!" I call out as she turns, aims and shoots. Today this bird is lucky and with rapid wing beats accelerates away safely into the wheat stubble. This same scenario plays out at least ten times a day and by the end of every day, all hunters have their limit of three cock roosters. As the sun sets, we head back to the lodge at AJ Acres to re-live the hunt, share in good food and spirits before waking the next morning, having a relaxing breakfast before starting all over again.

According to Don, in 2008, the Federal CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), a program to pay farmers not to cultivate parts of their land, is up for renewal. Due to the increasing value of these crops to the farmer, it is expected that many will forgo the program in search of a better return through the cultivation and harvest of these presently unused habitats. While these lands are presently unused by farmers, they are presently used heavily by the pheasant to nest and rear their young. With this decrease in habitat, many areas may also see a decrease in the numbers of pheasant. Don, on the other hand, intends to enroll much of his land into this program increasing the amount of habitat available to hunting guests at AJ Acres. Where, he claims, he personally expects to see an increase in the number of birds.

While both Lydia and I enjoyed our time at AJ Acres, we never felt the host/guest relationship. Right away, Don became a part of our group and by the end of our trip we felt as though we had just spent a few days hunting with an old friend - an old friend that knows where there's a hell of a lot of pheasant!

South Dakota's pheasant season runs from the third week of October into January. Each hunter is permitted three cock pheasant daily. Non-residents can purchase a 10-day small game license on-line for a fee of \$110.00 plus a \$4.00 handling fee.