

OUTDOORS

Sometimes dreams are worth the wait

ABERDEEN, S.D. Hunting can be as much about imagery and experience as anything else. Since I was 11 or 12 years old, I've carried the image in my head of what it must be like to stand in a Midwestern field, watch a big cock pheasant rise and then see it crumple under my gun. I also wanted to look down the barrel of an aside-by-side at a pheasant and watch it fall.

I was 55 years old before I saw it, and I almost waited too late, almost got too fat and old to do it.

It took two years for me to put together a hunt in Aberdeen, S.D. My son and I drove up through the heart of the country in quest to realize the image I'd carried in my head since I started reading outdoor magazines as a kid.

I don't know what it is about pheasants. They don't live down here, so to those of us who grew up hunting in the South, they seemed out of reach. But they're also elegant and regal. When European monarchs shot birds, they shot pheasants.

I've enjoyed shooting pheasants on local preserves and tower shoots. But it didn't satisfy my urge to hunt them where they roam wild. And South Dakota is where they roam in the greatest numbers.

And so, I suddenly found myself stepping from Casey Weismantel's pickup onto land his family owns just outside the Aberdeen city limits. I stood in the snow with snow still falling and a wind like we never know here blowing and looked out at where I had always wanted to go. The cornfield where he parked gave way to a small creek bottom with cottonwood trees, cattails and grass. It looked so much like Mr. Wilkinson's Creek.

Leonard Wilkinson owned a farm outside of Demopolis. One of his fields bordered Yellow Creek but we called it Mr. Wilkinson's Creek. As a boy, I killed my first quail, my first duck and my first rabbit there. And if I cocked my head the right way, I could imagine that it was a Midwestern grain field that held pheasants. But I never found one there. I would at Casey's place.

Casey took his German wirehaired pointer, Gretchen, into the bottom and bade me walk along the edge. We sent my son, Bob, walking down a grassy fence line. I have a double barrel, but I carried my old 16-gauge Model 1100 loaded with high-velocity No. 6 shot. I wanted to get my first one with that, because if a pheasant ever had leapt from the weeds along Mr. Wilkinson's Creek, as impossible as that would have been, the 16 gauge is what I'd have shot him with.

A little distance in, Gretchen began putting up when pheasants. When the rooster rose, there was no mistaking it. The color stood out dramatically against the white snow. My face was coming down on the stock when it folded up and hit the ground. I heard Casey's gun pop.

I took a couple of overly long shots at a couple of birds that Bob flushed but I never expected to hit them. A few minutes later, I heard Bob's gun and a pheasant hit the ground right in front of us.

"Good shot, Bob," Casey shouted. I was the only one still shut out.

Up ahead, the grass gave way to heavier cattails. Occasionally, we saw a bird hop up and settle back down.

"They're in here," Casey said, anticipating the action. He sent me over a land bridge to the other side of the little creek. I was to stay along the edge but occasionally work in toward the cattails. I was nearing a fallen tree when I heard the bird rising behind

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me. I saw a rooster coming out of the cattails at about 25 yards and shouldered my gun. I pulled the trigger fully expecting to see it fall but it didn't. Two more shots did nothing either. I had the chance I'd waited on for more than 40 years and blew it — just missed.

I took only a few more steps and another rooster burst from the cattails. It crossed right in front of me, and when I pulled the trigger, I saw feathers fly from the front end of the bird. And that's when my hat fell into my eyes. By the time I got it out of the way, the pheasant was wobbling across a barbed wire fence. It hit the ground and flopped but wasn't going anywhere. In a minute it was still.

The problem was that not only was there a barbed wire fence with more than 2 feet of snow drifted up against it, there were two fences only about two feet apart. It was as if realizing my boyhood dream would again be delayed. It wouldn't be real until I held it in my hand.

We decided to go down to the end of the creek and pick it up on the way back. I killed one more bird off of a beautiful point by Gretchen. The pheasant held as tight as a quail and presented an easy shot for me.

By the time we reached the end of the property along the creek, I realized my blood sugar was dropping. I hadn't carried anything to eat with me. I'm a type II diabetic and knew that I had to be careful. But there was still the matter of the pheasant on the other side of the fence. It's been a long time and a bunch of pounds gained since I crossed a barbed wire fence, much less two. And these were way too tight to squeeze through the middle. It's the transition over that's awkward but I made it.

The bird was stiff and cold and half covered up with snow when I picked it up. I realized that if I'd left it much longer, it would have been hidden by the white powder and I'd have lost it. Getting back over, I fell in the snow drift. I didn't care as long as I got over. I had no game bag on my coat so I had to carry it by the neck.

"Was it worth it," Casey asked, chuckling at my struggles with the fence.

"Yeah, it was," I said. "I wasn't leaving it."

Two days later, serving as a blocker because I'm too old and out of shape to be a driver, I was carrying my Browning BSS side-by-side. As the drivers approached the end of the little strip of woods, a pheasant burst from cover and I rolled it up at 20 yards. I could see the bird down the twin barrels just as I had imagined. Somehow, it's just a little better with a side-by-side.

As we rolled toward home at the end of the week, I felt a sense of sadness when the sign welcoming us to Iowa appeared. Nothing against Iowa, but I wondered if I'd ever return to South Dakota and shoot pheasants again. And I realized that what had lived in me for so many years as a dream had become reality. And it was as if part, perhaps the last bit, of my childhood died.

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HUNTER'S HEAVEN

Late season perfect for South Dakota pheasants

By Robert DeWitt
Outdoors writer

ABERDEEN, S.D. | The strip of woods beside the quiet, two-lane highway is hardly more than 100 yards long and 25 yards wide — a tiny island of trees and grass in a vast ocean of flat, snow covered, harvested grain fields.

Dennis Foster takes his Suburban with three hunters and four dogs to one end of the little patch of cover. Casey Weismantel drops one hunter off in the center of the patch and then carries two more hunters to the opposite end of the trees. Before he can load his gun, pheasants are popping out of the trees and gliding into the field across the road.

Weismantel's "blockers" wait, but not long. As soon as Foster's "drivers" start moving toward the blockers, the shooting begins. The shots come in clusters as pheasants burst from cover. The dull brown hens get a pass, but the roosters, their long tail feathers and gaudy colors accented against the snow are fair game. As each rises, cries ring out, "rooster!"

As the drivers near the end of the trees, the blockers tense, knowing the action could come quickly at any moment. Hens come out first and then two roosters burst from cover. Feathers puff from the first one, which balls up and hits the snow. The second gets away with a clean miss. As the blocker loads, a third rooster rises from the trees and the other blocker takes him out.

A moment later, Foster emerges with his dogs, asking about the body count. Hunters have put five roosters in their bags, moving the group closer to a limit of three per hunter.

"Late season hunts are better," said Foster, who guides throughout the more than two-month long season and probably hunts 60 days a year. "Every day, I'm walking less."

Most folks come to this pheasant Mecca in northeastern South Dakota during the first couple of weeks of the season, which typically begins on the third Saturday in October. Often, they hunt in the same clothes a Southeastern quail hunter might wear in November.

Rather than pushing 40 or 50 birds out of small bits of cover like this one, Foster must scour large corn fields to seek out the widely scattered birds in the early season. But that can change quickly in South Dakota.

On Nov. 9, snow rolled into Aberdeen. The weather authorities said it was 3 inches. Weismantel, an avid hunter who handles outdoor media relations for the Aberdeen Convention and Visitor's Bureau, said it looked more like 6 inches. It doesn't matter a whole lot in South Dakota. Winds blowing 20 to 30 mph push the snow around until it drifts up 3 feet deep along fences and fills up ditches waist deep.

That drives the pheasants, introduced into this part of the world about a century ago, into "shelter belts," little strips of trees planted to block the wind and keep the topsoil from blowing away.

When European settlers first arrived in South Dakota, it was nothing but miles and miles of open prairie grasslands. The only trees were along the river and creek bottoms. The rich, black soil, created by centuries of decaying grass, was a farmer's dream. But once laid bare by the plow, the fierce prairie winds that seem to blow like a gale all of the time carried the top soil away. Farmers were encouraged to plant little strips of trees and shelter belts dot a horizon dominated by agricultural fields.

When the snow comes and the wind howls, pheasants take refuge in shelter belts or they huddle in low spots filled with grass and cattails that were too wet for farmers to plow. That means Foster can take his clients from spot to spot throughout the 150,000 acres he has access to, for short, productive drives.

"Typically, if I had a preference, I'd hunt from mid-November to Thanksgiving," Foster said, looking out the window of his Suburban at the snow. "This is as bad as it gets this early. This is Thanksgiving weather."

Weismantel concurs. The first snow of the year is usually a light dusting. This year, after it blanketed the area, temperatures never rose above freezing. During the day, temperatures were in the teens with heavy winds. At night, it dropped into single digits and, finally, below zero.

If that sounds daunting to Southern hunters, Foster said it shouldn't. In that kind of weather, hunting will be done in short bursts. The rest of the time, hunters are in Foster's warm SUV rolling along the farm country back roads to the next bit of cover.

Hunters don't wear their heaviest clothes because they're moving. Slogging through snow keeps them plenty warm.

"Even if it's 20 below, you're not out in it that long," Foster said. "We run and gun and hit these small sloughs."

They need to be fit enough to walk most of the day.

"I tell guys they don't have to be Olympic athletes but they should do some walking before they get here," Foster said.

South Dakota has pheasant preserves with released birds just like the quail pre-



LEFT: Dennis Foster with a rooster pheasant shot in South Dakota and his dogs. Pheasant dogs work close to the hunters and are invaluable as retrievers.

BELOW: Pheasants aren't the only game in South Dakota. The same cover that holds pheasants often holds deer, like this trophy buck photographed on a pheasant drive. The state also has abundant ducks and geese.

STAFF PHOTOS | ROBERT DEWITT



WAYS TO HUNT

DENNIS FOSTER GUIDE:

For information about hunting with guide Dennis Foster visit www.dakotapheasantguide.com

HUNTING ABERDEEN, S.D.:

For information about hunting near Aberdeen, S.D., visit www.huntfishsd.com. Trip licenses for out of state hunters cost \$125 and are good for two 5-day periods for a total of 10 days.

serves in the South. But Foster hunts only wild birds. And there are plenty of those for people like him who know where to look.

Pheasants were first successfully introduced in South Dakota near Redfield, a short distance from Aberdeen. Brown County, where Aberdeen is located, annually leads the state pheasant harvest or is near the top, Weismantel said. He hunts family land just outside of town.

Aberdeen is located in the middle of some of the state's richest cropland. As sunset approaches, Weismantel points out pheasants heading out into the open harvested fields to feed.

Unlike quail, pheasants frequently don't hold tight. Dogs must work close to the hunters so they don't flush the birds out of gun range. Birds often run ahead of the advancing hunters and dogs until they reach the edge of cover and then take flight. That's where blockers come into play, picking up passing shots at birds that escaped the drivers and flushing shots at pheasants that wait until they reach the edge of cover to fly.

Foster has been saving a big, cattail "slough" for the end of the day. With the blockers in place, he and his four dogs, a German shorthaired pointer, two short-hair-Labrador retriever mixes and one full-blooded lab, plow into the grass and reeds along with three other drivers. It's about 200 yards long and 100 yards wide and by the time he reaches the end, more than 100 birds have flushed.

Foster notes that before the snow fell, he might have worked the whole area and flushed three birds. Foul weather definitely concentrates them, he said.

This year, the South Dakota pheasant season runs from Oct. 18-Jan. 4. And it's quite an event around Aberdeen. The signs outside of hotels, motels and businesses often say "Welcome Hunters." Hunters spend between \$14 million and \$16 million a year in Brown County.

Pheasant hunting is part of the community's identity. The bird population boomed after the habitat improvements following the dust bowl years of the 1930s. The city of about 25,000 people was the major rail hub during World War II and thousands of troops passed through. Locals served up to 1,500 "pheasant sandwiches" — kind of like chicken salad but using pheasant instead — a day to servicemen. Today, it's

arguably the top pheasant hunting destination in the country.

Most of the visitors come between the opener and mid-November. But Weismantel does most of his personal hunting in the late season and thinks more visiting hunters ought to consider it.

"The crops are out of the fields," he said. "It's cooler. The hotels are cheaper. And the birds covey up more into small areas. The birds are more concentrated."

That's largely because cover comes at a premium in South Dakota. The agriculture's scale there dwarfs anything in the Southeast. Even the big Mississippi Delta, fields look small by comparison. Storage bins and ethanol plants rise out of the flat scenery abruptly. Tractors and combines with tires far taller than a man's head work the land. Every square inch of ground that can be plowed is turned under. The ethanol boom has produced more agriculture which means more food for pheasants. But it also means less cover and natural areas get plowed under.

"South Dakota and every other state needs to improve its habitat," Weismantel said. "In South Dakota, you're shooting the state bird."

Unfortunately, some farmers are pulling out their shelter belts so they can have more plowed ground. Weismantel said it isn't good for pheasants or soil erosion when shelter belts disappear.

"The key to birds is habitat," Weismantel said. "They'll find a food source. I've never heard of a pheasant starving to death."

While a pheasant might look a bit too pretty for the wild, they're survivors, tough as nails and deceptively difficult targets. Foster and Weismantel recommend heavy loads of lead No. 4 or No. 5 shot (Weismantel switches to 3-inch 4s before the season is over). It often takes two shots to bring them down. And when one does come down, hunters should move immediately retrieve it. Pheasants often hit the ground running and escape even when a dog is available.

Pheasants aren't the only game South Dakota has to offer. Thousands of ducks and geese roam the skies above and feed in dry fields. And deer grown heavy from corn and soybeans frequently bound out of the same cover where pheasants are found.

Sitting in his truck waiting for Foster to begin the drive, Weismantel suddenly exclaims, "Oh man, what a buck." The big whitetail breaks into the open and heads across an open corn field sporting a massive 13-point rack with a forked drop tine.

Weismantel also hunts deer and ducks and the duck season is in. But permits that allow out of state hunters to hunt waterfowl are done by lottery and hard to come by.

Trip licenses for out-of-state hunters cost \$125 and are good for two five day periods. A hunter and staying seven days must burn the entire licenses. But a if someone hunts five days or less, they can hunt again later.

"That lets them come back later and hunt on the same license," Weismantel said and smiles. "We want them to come back."