



# HISTORY, HUNTING AND HOPE

SOUTH DAKOTA'S PHEASANT HUNTING HERITAGE IS RICH. HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR NEXT DAY IN THE FIELD.

By Dennis Foster

**A**S A NATIVE of South Dakota, and having been raised where the whole ringneck revolution started, in Spink County, I believe I can offer valuable insight into where we have come from and where we are headed with the popular, plucky and prettiest of all game birds.

## HISTORY

As the name would imply, the Chinese ring-

necked pheasant is not native to the United States. They are a transplanted species that has found a home that suits them perfectly well in the mixed agricultural lands of South Dakota.

I find myself fortunate to not only hail from the area where the first successful introduction and hunting season in the state took place, but also to hunt and guide hunters on the very land where this occurred.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY LEWIS

up. Georgia is not on a major duck flyway, but it still has good duck hunting opportunities for hunters that conduct a little scouting along the many rivers, impoundments, beaver ponds, sloughs and creeks that crisscross the state. To gather the best tips on ducks, you can't do better reconnaissance than to hang out with other duck hunters at a local Ducks Unlimited banquet.

While chatting with some fellow duck hunters at a DU banquet, a friend commented that he had been busy deer hunting, but all he was seeing were ducks. His deer stand was along a creek bottom that led to a large beaver pond and every evening, wood ducks would pile into the beaver pond.

He stated, "I think they are coming into the pond too late in the day to be within legal shooting hours, but I bet if we got in there early in the morning, we could catch them leaving the area at first morning light."

That sounded like a good plan, so a few days later we eased into the area and set up on both ends of the beaver pond, along likely exit routes. At first light we started hearing ducks make nervous squeals, and then the first duck took to the air, then a few more. It was magical to hear the whistle of the air through their wings as they darted through the tree limbs, fighting to gain altitude. Upon the first blast of my buddy's 12-gauge shotgun, the multitude of ducks that were still setting on the pond took to the air in a roar of beating wings and splashing water. In an instant, a two-minute war was on.

As one beautiful wood duck drake was darting through the treetops, I quickly picked out a small opening in the canopy and took a snap shot at the passing duck. It was a clean miss, but the next duck was not so lucky, dropping into the marshy ground. A couple of other woodies passed to my rear and I quickly turned and connected on another duck. There were a lot of the other ducks passing out of range or not offering clean shots, but my buddy did get a good bit of shooting on the other end of the pond. Most of the ducks, as expected, had left the pond quickly, but a few swam off into the flooded timber into safer and inaccessible areas. A quick text revealed that my buddy had taken three woodies and since I had ended up with two, it was not bad for a quick morning duck hunt.

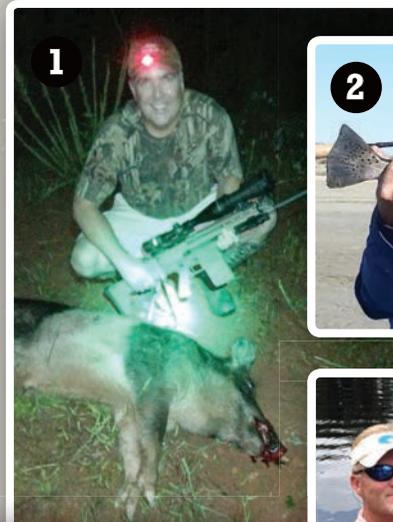
Although many wood ducks, which comprise 50 percent of the Georgia harvest, are hatched in the Southeast, some migrate here from the northeast U.S. and Canada. According to Ducks Unlimited and Flyways.us, many banded ducks, later harvested in in Georgia,

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN FORD

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**1** Matt Slappey of Decatur took this hog while on a night hunt near Monticello. **2** Stephen Theberge caught this sea trout with a fly rod while fishing a tidal creek on Little St. Simon Island. **3** Jason Fender caught this bass on a trip to Banks Lake with his granddaughter, Chloe. It was the last trip he made before succumbing to cancer. **4** Joe Waller of Columbus caught an 8.75-pound largemouth bass with a jig on the upper end of Lake Oliver. **5** David Ward was able to come back from having a misfire to take this trophy whitetail on a hunt in Twiggs County.

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to note we are a bit rare in that we extensively promote the killing and eating of our now arguably most recognizable resident. The numbers have varied for a myriad of reasons over the years, but the allure of hunting them has not.

**HUNTING**

The tradition continues, and the hunting still remains quite good, as we manage to harvest between 1.5 and 2 million birds every year. These are very substantial numbers, to be sure, and the birds continue to prosper, despite challenges.

Agriculture shapes this landscape. And the times, they are a changing. Some things are good, and some are not so good. Farm income is up dramatically. That is good, as it is the farmer who directly supports our pheasant population. We darn sure like to see these hard-working families do well for themselves.

The bad news is that large amounts of marginal land (the kind pheasants love) are being put into row crop production in preference to small grains, which provides more valuable nesting cover.

As most outdoors people know, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has been a huge boon for the birds; just as the Soil Bank Program was in decades past. With the increase in commodity prices there has been a direct correlation in the reduction of acres enrolled in CRP. This isn't surprising, as economics dictate that when the return on putting land into production far outweighs the government payment, something has to give. That isn't to say there aren't still plenty of birds and plenty of opportunities to hunt them. There certainly are. Things are just a bit different now.

**PUBLIC LAND**

South Dakota does have an extensive amount of public land hunting opportunities, with more than 5 million acres of land available. This is in the form of Walk In Areas, Waterfowl Production Areas, BLM and Forest Service Lands, as well as School and Public Lands.

Please be aware that, even with



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—John Geiger, senior editor

this much land, it can become highly pressured. The pressure is even more pronounced in the first few weeks of season. And, much of this land is in the form of heavier cattail sloughs, which make for great wintering cover, but are not as desirable for hunting spots until the weather begins to turn cooler around Thanksgiving. So, I would concentrate your efforts on a later season hunt, as the land will see far less hunters and attracts more birds as the temperatures begin to fall.

Another suggestion I would make is that if you are looking to go on a budget hunt and limit yourself

exclusively to public lands, begin your search a bit farther west than what is traditionally considered prime pheasant hunting areas. We are seeing many more birds farther west each and every year. This is most likely because of the less intense farming practices and more grasslands for cattle.

I would even go so far as looking for public land west of the Missouri River. I recently took on a lease in the Timber Lake, S.D., area and was surprised to find that the population is as good as or better than we have at home. Plus, being these areas are largely off the radar of most hunters, there tends to be a reduction in hunting pressure.

**PRIVATE LAND**

The vast majority of land in the eastern part of the state, where the bird population is highest, is privately owned. Free access to this land has been growing more difficult to obtain, as much of it is leased out for hunting purposes. We also need to factor in that many farm families have close friends and extended family hunting on their land, particularly early in the season.

If you are to hope to obtain free hunting permission to private land, I would recommend politely asking farmers to grant you permission later in the season, as your success rate will be much higher.

A growing trend that I have been a proponent of is for hunters to pay a relatively small "trespass fee." You simply pay for access to the land. This is a great option for those who have dogs and experience hunting and simply do not need or want the services and added expense of a guide. They just require some good, unpressured ground to hunt

There are a limited number of outfitters, such as myself, that can provide hunters with this attractive option and are worth checking out.

**LODGES**

There are numerous options available when booking with an outfitter. One option is a self-guided hunt, where the land and lodging is provided for you and your party is left up to its own

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skills to bag a limit.

On the opposite extreme of the spectrum are luxury preserve hunts, corporate-type accommodations, including gourmet meals with fine wine and a very easy fully-guided hunt over pen raised pheasants.

Most folks choose to fall somewhere in between, with a more affordable fully-guided hunt over wild birds with comfortable lodging and meal plans.

I would strongly suggest that you do your homework when picking an outfitter. Look for an operation that has a solid track record and reputation. Be sure and ask plenty of questions, such as how many acres there are to hunt and how many hunters they entertain each year. Doing so assures you are getting exactly what fits your expectations and that there are no surprises when you arrive.

**HOPE**

Elevated commodity prices and subsidized federal crop insurance have, in my opinion, promoted land that would not otherwise support itself into being broken and put into row crop production.

The reduction in CRP acres is the most visible and telling. It goes even further with some questionable practices, such as farming the ditches of county roads, removal of trees, tiling, etc.

We do need to reverse the "factory farming" attitudes into a more reasonable and sustainable "farm the best and save rest" style of thinking.

The good news is that we still have some conservation-minded farmers who are true stewards of the land that has so generously provided for their families for generations. They get it, and take the approach that if marginal land was meant to be farmed, their grandfathers darn sure would have done it.

A few may lament the establishment of commercial hunting operations,



**South Dakota pheasant populations remain strong. Hunters harvest between 1.5 and 2 million birds each year.**

but the fact remains that land properly managed for agriculture and wildlife as these operations do is good for more than just them and their paying customers. It provides another valuable base of cover and food sources that not only help the birds all throughout the year, but vastly more importantly, during the heart of winter. This helps to keep a sustainable population available for all hunters on adjoining private and public lands.

Roosters and South Dakota are synonymous, not to mention the economic impact pheasants have on the state. Governor Dennis Daugaard knows this fact quite well and

implemented the first of a number of summit meetings of all interested parties late last year to address several issues. Not the least of which is continued loss of habitat.

Farmers, hunters, outfitters, local businessmen, wildlife and government officials were all present and represented. Many viewpoints and ideas were shared in the common spirit of improving things for the bird that has become so dear to all of our residents and the influx of visitors we host each fall.

Topics discussed included, but were not limited to: tax issues, policies and regulation, funding sources and initiatives, private lands habitat, farm programs, public land management, predator control, education and research. These folks coming together to collaborate is inspiring. With this kind of genuine concern, I feel very confident that we here in South Dakota are on the right path to ensuring a bright and pheasant filled future for our state.

**CONCLUSION**

The bottom line is that our favorite bird is incredibly tough and resilient...they always have been and will remain that way. That's why they have managed to survive whatever Mother Nature and man have managed to throw at them. I have no doubt that we, and they, will continue to survive and thrive...side by side. It just seems to be the nature of the prairie and all of its inhabitants that the enduring and honored tradition of a good old fashioned pheasant hunt amongst family and friends will weather the test of time just fine. ■

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Dennis Foster is a hunting and fishing guide from Mellette, S.D. He welcomes comments, questions and feedback. He can be contacted at: [www.dakotapheasantguide.com](http://www.dakotapheasantguide.com) or [www.eyetimepromotions.com](http://www.eyetimepromotions.com).

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