

Birds Aplenty



There's more in northeastern South Dakota than you might imagine, beginning with pheasants.

by Dennis Foster

Northeastern South Dakota is an often-overlooked diamond in the rough, hidden amongst the state's other excellent pheasant hunting areas.

That's too bad, too, as we have plenty of birds. Always have. This can be evidenced in the fact that the original and first recorded successful stocking of pheasants in South Dakota occurred just north of Redfield in 1908, leading to the initial one-day season on rooster pheasants on Oct. 30, 1919 that started it all. Things just exploded from that point and, as they say, the rest is history.

I can shed some well-informed light on this subject and on the area as I was raised in and still reside right in the heart of the outdoor traditions that this area is famous for. More interesting and even a bit humbling is that I have the exclusive hunting rights for the very farm where it all began. Therefore, in full disclosure, I must admit more than a bit of obvious pride in hailing from the area and full-heartedly agree with Redfield, S.D.'s claim as the "Pheasant Capital of the World."

The south-central portion of the state gets the most notoriety when it comes to pheasant hunting and, not surprisingly, the most hunting pressure. It traditionally has high numbers of birds and the good hunting that goes with that. Lots of folks go there and have never felt the need to venture too far away. This also makes it a bit difficult to find places to hunt there.

This has kept the area I call home off the radar of many pheasant-hunting enthusiasts and has allowed us a much more relaxed and traditional type of hunting atmosphere. We do have a fair number of outfitters who cater to pheasant hunters, but I feel we do

things a bit differently around here in that there is not near the over-commercialized aspect to it. Once again, I confess prejudice, but we are just a bunch of laid back folks who choose to do things at our own pace, and the friendliness and hospitality our visitors receive reflects that.

Our area is unique in that we are right in the middle of sort of a boundary of land types that can be divided on a north/south line that U.S. Highway 281 forms from approximately 20 miles south of Redfield to the state line north of Aberdeen. To the east of 281 lies the James River Valley, which is comprised of very fertile farmland and runs for approximately 50 miles and is bordered by the Coteau Hills and Glacial Lakes Region. To the west of 281 the land becomes a bit more arid and is comprised of increasingly more grasslands and, in about the same 50 miles, gives way to even more arid ground and begins to form into the breaks of the Missouri River Valley.

So, in my opinion anyway, we kind of have the best of both worlds in that there is a mixture of habitat types that the pheasants find appealing enough to compel them to continually multiply into consistently huntable numbers. It also give us some added insurance that should one type of habitat see adverse conditions, it is very likely that the other will fare much better and still produce good numbers. There can be distinctly different weather patterns despite the proximity of these differing habitat types and this diversity is a key factor in there continuously being good numbers of birds somewhere in the area. Therefore, we are always within short driving distance of some darn good hunting — no matter what Mother Nature throws at us. With that

PHOTO BY JOHN FORD



Pheasant numbers are generally down in many parts of the country, but things are still pretty good in northeastern South Dakota. ■ Photo by Dennis Foster.

in mind, I do my personal hunting and guide my clients on large tracts of land on either side of Highway 281, so as to hedge my bets and ensure success.

AREA AMENITIES

As previously mentioned, although you won't see a whole lot of the super high-dollar corporate/celebrity-style hunts in this area, there are enough outfitters available to suit the needs of hunters seeking some high-quality land in which to pursue plenty of birds. One very nice aspect of this is that these outfitters are more suited to those with more modest incomes and therefore have more affordable rates. You will also be pleasantly surprised that the majority of these operations fill their client's limits with wild birds in a true fair-chase hunt. This is because they have no need to use tame birds on small parcels of land in order for the corporate crowd to kill out quickly and then be escorted back to the lodge for an afternoon of cocktails and smart talk. To each their own, but I prefer to actually hunt and feel that a pen-raised pheasant is little more than a colorful chicken, and never have nor ever will allow them to be part of my operation.

Access to the area is very good with U.S. Highway 12 running east and west into Aberdeen and U.S. Highway 212 doing the same into Redfield with S.D. Highway 20 coming through the

heart of it all north-south wise and intersecting 281 at my small town of Mellette.

Aberdeen does have a commercial airport and Redfield has a smaller airport accessible by private planes. Rental vehicles are available from several sources, and include four-wheel drives just for hunting purposes.

Both Redfield and Aberdeen have some fine lodging, eating and entertainment options available. The small rural towns I frequent will not only



Spectacular plumage and a fine shotgun evoke thoughts of the outstanding hunting that awaits the pheasant hunter in northeastern South Dakota. ■ Photo by Dennis Foster.

treat you like a lifelong resident, you will also be fed some of the finest prime, hand-cut beef to be found anywhere.

If in the area, I would recommend that you not pass up the chance to grab a meal and experience the hospitality and camaraderie of either the Brentford Legion Club (605-887-3312) or the Chelsea Bar (605-887-3788). Both are located along S.D. Highway 20 and if you tell them I sent you their way, your first stiff drink will most likely be on the house — or me for that matter, as there is a good chance I will be there. It's a good idea to call ahead for reservations as both are quite busy during hunting season.

An important note for hunters is that Aberdeen at 25,000 in population is large enough to have an excellent full-service gun shop in Sodak Sports (www.sodaksports.com) where you can find skilled gunsmiths and a selection of guns and ammo that will rival any shop in the nation. You will also find a good selection of reputable vets that know hunting dogs and just how important they are to you. Meaning if old Gauge has tangled with a fence and it is now after business hours or the weekend, they will gladly take your call and get your pride and joy fixed up in no time at all. I personally find this very reassuring.

CURRENT CONDITIONS AND PREDICTIONS

Last season was a bit interesting as we saw fewer roosters than we had expected. I personally feel we had a decent hatch after experiencing a mild winter. It was just that what I experienced being out in the field everyday is that there was a distinctly disproportionate number of hens compared to roosters. Although I am not a biologist, I would suspect it would have something to do with temperatures while the eggs were incubating. While it is great to see the large numbers of breeding stock, it did make for a bit more work in bagging out each day. But with a due diligence, a little more legwork and hunting over good dogs generally yielded acceptable results.

That being said, the positive thing is that we went into winter with what I would consider a good ratio of roosters for the high number of hens we

have. With a nearly 100 percent survival rate going into spring, things look very positive for a great hatch as we are now seeing plenty of always-ready-to-breed roosters with the large groups of hens. As I write this (early June) we have more than adequate moisture, having been fortunate enough to have avoided the drought conditions last summer and receiving moderately heavy late-winter snows combined with some timely spring rains. The grass is already knee-high for great nesting cover as well as providing plenty of newly emerging insects for the young hatchlings to thrive on.

Barring some kind of catastrophe such as a heavy hailstorm or torrential rains, I would confidently predict that we should be in excellent shape come fall. Once again, the varying weather patterns we see in the different terrain on either side of Highway 281 helps to mitigate this as well. Should one area get hit hard, the other is typically fine.

HUNTING ACCESS

A good portion of the private land is locked up with outfitters like myself or is allocated to hunting for family members during the early portion of the season. But it sure doesn't hurt to politely ask and you will find that your success rate will increase as the season wears on. There is an adequate amount of some surprisingly good public land available and this is also a better option later in the season for a couple of reasons. One is there is far less pressure on it and much of it is in the form of heavy cattaail sloughs, which the birds will migrate to as the temperatures and snow start falling.

A reputable outfitter is always a good choice as you are all but guaranteed a limit. There are some very attractive and affordable operations to choose from and if you have your own dogs, search out those who offer self-guided options. This will keep costs minimal and may be your best bet to ensure you get on quality land.

WHAT TO BRING

You'll need hunting clothing with blaze orange or a suitable orange vest, as well as several layers of clothing as fall weather conditions can and do vary. Shooting gloves and eye pro-



Good habitat and low hunting pressure often combine to result in a fine dinner of roast pheasant. ■ Photo by Dennis Foster.

tection are always a good idea. Very importantly, arrive with hunting boots that are well broken-in. Believe me, the field is not the place to do this! Dog owners should have plenty of fresh water and basic first-aid supplies on hand. Cameras and or video equipment is helpful as you will no doubt want to capture some valuable memories as a South Dakota pheasant hunt is truly a treasure you will want to document.

SUGGESTIONS

Please try to condition yourself and your dogs — if you bring them. It will make the entire experience much more enjoyable. If you have a physical ailment or handicap, work this out with your group and/or outfitter and have a plan in place. Dedicated blockers are always needed.

Twelve-gauge guns and hot loads of #5 or #4 are strongly recommended for our wild birds as they are wily, fast, and tough — particularly later in the season. The lighter gauges can and do work, provided you have experience handling them. Beginners do best to start out bigger. A little practice at the range sure doesn't hurt, either.

RESOURCES

<http://gfp.sd.gov/>

This is the home page for South Dakota Game Fish and Parks. You will find a wealth of information, including

how to obtain your license online.

<http://gfp.sd.gov/hunting/areas/>

Here you will find downloadable and printable maps of all the public-hunting areas. There are also some super phone apps with the maps as well as versions for the major GPS manufacturers.

<http://huntfishsd.com/>

This is a great site containing just about everything and anything you would ever want to know or need for hunting in this area. Check out the Million Dollar Bird that is released every year and the Shotgun Giveaway. Both are free and darn sure worth entering.

Or, you can take a moment and check out my website at www.dakotapheasantguide.com as I always have time to talk hunting, and if I can't personally help you, I can certainly refer you to someone who can. □



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