

BAG MORE RINGNECKS

These tips and tricks will help you find success in the field.



AS BIG and as downright gaudy as a Chinese ringneck pheasant rooster can be, the truly wild version often humbles even the most seasoned of hunters and their canine companions. Knowing and fully comprehending this in advance will allow you to get your mind and body right, greatly boosting your odds for success.

As I live in the exact area where pheasants were initially introduced into South Dakota and provide both full and self-guided hunts for wild birds every day of the season, I will convey some hard-earned common sense advice on what works in the real world.

The first guidance I would offer does not have a darn thing to do with pheasants, their behavior or where to look for them. This is all about preparation. What you do before your hunt will have an enormous impact on how happy you are after the

hunt. Skimp on preparation, and expect skimpy results. Put a lot into preparation, and expect a lot in return. The two largest factors are skill and conditioning ... for man and beast.

Skill translates into whether you can shoot and if your dogs can provide you with the opportunity to do so. An all too common scenario I witness is fired up hunters with inexperienced dogs that get a snoot full of scent and instantly break for the opposite end of the field. They now have all the pheasants popping up far out of range and have effectively ruined the hunt. If there should be a bird gracious enough to hold for this fiasco, a largely unaimed salvo of rounds is quickly augured out. This leaves the birds, more often than not, safely sailing away and cackling in defiance. Our well-intentioned hunters now resolve with even greater determination to do better on the next go around. This is where the conditioning factor comes into play.

Physical shape dictates just how many next go arounds you get before you and your dogs are left bodily and mentally exhausted. Let's face facts here, harvesting birds the size of chickens and as subtly colored as a psychedelic stop sign requires more effort than most folks think. Wild birds are exactly that ... wild.

Expect to do some walking through various kinds of cover and terrain. If you aren't prepared for this, you will quickly be reminded of your age and or lack of training. This is not to say that you need to be the proverbial 25, 10 foot tall, and bullet proof in order to effectively hunt pheasants. In fact, I often see the graybeards do as well or better than the younger crowd. Find some determination, and get you and your dogs walking long before you arrive in the fields.

I continually see hunters with dogs possessing the best bloodlines complete with Ivy League type training that quite frankly do not do their breeds or trainers any great service. Not their fault, as they have been taken right out of the classroom, practicing with fake fowl, and then thrust into the real world with wily birds that hold a distinct home field advantage (pun intended). Pheasants only know one thing ... survival. And this is where working together with your

most important partner — your dogs — gains you good old-fashioned experience and increased success.

Hopefully this brief discussion has struck a cord, and you will have yourselves and your furry friends ready to go come season opener. Now let's discuss some basic hunting tactics so you, your friends, and canines can display your newfound prowess.

Early season generally means warmer weather. The birds can be, and most likely are, just about anywhere. This is

where the conditioning factor comes into play, as even in areas that are heavily populated, it is rare to see large numbers of birds tightly bunched up the first few weeks of season.

Look for sparser cover such as grassy areas near food sources. Pheasants are hardy and do not need any kind of heavier cover until temps consistently drop into the low teens at night and or snow cover is present. Therefore, all they require is enough to break their outlines to feel comfortable. This also allows

them to easily see what is coming from some distance. They know full well what your intentions are, and they will simply hunker down in light vegetation confident that they are well hidden. Do not give them any reason to become nervous and bolt. Avoid dallying when approaching your hunting fields by having a firm plan in place with all of the hunters completely understanding their roles. Once you arrive, go in with a steady and concerted plan of attack. As quickly as possible, get you, your dogs and guns out and walking. Leave the smart banter to be shared over cocktails after a successful hunt. By moving steadily through the sparser cover types, you are not only quickly covering easily walkable ground, it also keeps the birds in hiding mode with heads down versus having time to look around, get antsy, and bolt. Allowed to do this, they will make the decision to simply run out the sides of the cover, often without you ever knowing they were there. Linger and start and stop while continuously barking commands at errant dogs and I can guarantee you this will happen ... every single time with wild birds. Steady always wins the race in these conditions. Get over some acres, trust your dogs to find the birds for you, and you will soon be experiencing greater success.

Later season hunts see the birds hunkering down into thicker cover, including cattails, brushy areas and even trees when cold and snow persist. It sounds ominous, but this is best time to see large flushes of plump, puffy, and downright pretty mature birds. Hunt with an educated and dedicated purpose, and you can expect to have the kind of success that will make you a lifelong enthusiast

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Extra pre-hunt preparation can often translate to success in the field.



Once arriving at the hunting site, it's best for dogs and hunters to begin covering ground.

of mid to end of season hunts. If there is a drawback to a cool weather hunt, you may just find yourself bagged out in the first walk. But, in order to do this, your game plan and its implementation are more important than ever.

Now, another dimension becomes critical. Coordinated timing is needed,

with walkers and blockers arriving in their respective positions at the same time and getting to the task at hand with as little noise as possible. No yelling at dogs or hunting partners, slamming of doors or delays of any kind. These are educated birds that know exactly what is up. Even the smallest mistake will send

them all boiling out in an instant. For inexplicable reasons, they may even do this no matter how careful you are. By blocking strategically and quietly placed blockers, some of your party will at the very least, knock down of a few of the wise ones. These are typically older roosters sporting long tail feathers and elongated spurs. If you were to be inclined to have a pheasant mounted, these are guys you will want for a keepsake.

A favorite tactic of mine is to concentrate on small cattail sloughs that can be effectively surrounded by your group. Instead of just blockers, it is wise to have "wingmen" ahead and to the sides of your walkers. Think of a "V" formation heading toward the blockers. Pheasants seem to bust well ahead now, and they can be intercepted in this way. We can also slow down, stop at times, and by keeping our dogs close and really working out the cover, we let the jumpy nature of the birds work to our advantage. Expect large, noisy, and startling flushes of birds in scenarios such as this. That kind of excitement never loses any appeal. ■

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