

Know your quarry and hunt like a predator to increase your odds in the pheasant fields.

BY DENNIS FOSTER

## HUNT PHEASANTS LIKE A

# Predator

**A**s a pheasant hunting guide, it's been my experience that too many pheasant hunters underestimate how difficult it can be to achieve success in the field. In short, far too many hunters expect to find, flush and kill pheasants every time they step into a field. No matter how many birds may be present, success still depends on having complete comprehension of all the variables that play into achieving results while pursuing wild, cagey and often hard-to-kill birds.

To find more success in the field, change the way you think and consider the role you are playing, which is that of a top-line predator.

### Run-First Mentality

Pheasants are powerful in flight, with an average cruising speed of 38-48 mph according to data from Pheasants Forever. When pressured, they've even been clocked at flying at speeds closer to 60 mph.

However, hunters should always remember pheasants are built to run and are much more comfortable on the ground than in the air. I would estimate the amount of time any pheasant actually spends in the air doesn't add up to more than a couple minutes in an entire day, if they ever leave the ground at all.

To become a more efficient pheasant hunter, always remember that a pheasant's first survival instinct is to run rather than fly when encountering pressure of any kind. In fact, pressured birds often scurry away from the first signs of anything that resembles danger, such as vehicle brakes squealing, doors slamming, shotgun actions closing, dogs barking and human voices hollering. Even birds that seem to jump out of the end of the field just as you start walking have simply ran themselves out of cover and were forced into flight. With that in mind, it helps to think of things from a pheasant's perspective before your boots ever touch the ground.

Park and enter each field you plan on hunting with caution, thinking what your approach looks and sounds like to wild birds in the field. Doing so will make your entrance more subtle and counter the birds' ability and instinct to run first, which, in turn, will lead to more

shot opportunities throughout the entirety of your walk.

Also, always remember the clock in a pheasant's head is ticking as soon as you pull up to a field. A pheasant won't sit around and wait for you to get geared up. Instead, they'll use those precious seconds of wasted time against you by running toward safety. Thinking about your approach helps minimize the down time and spurs you into quicker action.

Keeping a pheasant's run-first mentality in mind can also help you predetermine the preferred escape routes birds often take. It pays to think ahead and cater your hunt to focus on these areas as possible pinch points where shot opportunities are more likely. A lot of times these escape routes depend on wind. It pays to thoroughly plan your approach to specifically target areas in any given field that birds will likely funnel toward before flushing.

Pheasants are creatures of habit, and these escape routes have been programmed into their brains not only during the pheasant season, but also throughout the rest of the year as they evade other top-line predators such as coyotes and fox. Man, however, is the ultimate predator, and we have the advantage in our cognitive ability to turn the tables and use the tendencies of pheasants against them.

Examples of likely escape routes include any breaks or transition areas between different habitat types, as well as field edges, fence lines and water sources. Basically, any type of cover that's different than its surroundings is a likely flushing point for birds. The difference in the habitat or landscape typically freezes them or forces them to flush. Either way, your best chances likely will occur in or along these likely escape routes where pheasants simply feel they've run out of room to run, and that's where you need to focus your attack.

### Scouting Matters

Perhaps there's no greater rush of adrenaline in the upland fields than a rooster flushing at close range, where the sudden fury of motion and the unmistakable sound of wingbeats seem to simultaneous-



additional flushing point for birds.

For example, one landowner I work with mowed the middle of a large section of CRP, but left strips that were about 50 yards wide along the fence lines. Two of the strips ran along gravel roads bordering the field, but the other two strips that extended toward the middle of the field ran adjacent to cornfields. As a result, the mowing created ideal stretches of cover with defined edges that were easier to hunt efficiently compared to the entire quarter-section, or 160 acres, of untamed CRP.

Plus, if Mother Nature cooperates and sends timely rains throughout the spring and summer months, I know that the habitat will rebound quick-

ly and those mowed areas will bounce back and provide prime light cover for early season birds this year.

This summer and fall as you scout, pay particular attention to areas with cover types pheasants need all year long and also identify CRP or grassland areas that were managed for various reasons. You'll be glad you did.

### Hunting Big Fields in Small Groups

Although I run an outfitting business, I prefer to guide smaller groups of six hunters to perhaps 10 on the high end. Big groups can certainly be fun, but hunting in smaller groups promotes safety and helps me efficiently manage all of the key players — hunters, dogs and, of course, the birds themselves.

However, it is inevitable to run into a big block of cover with no that's difficult to tackle with a smaller group. I avoid this scenario if at all possible, but there are times when I know a quarter section of CRP, for example, is holding a significant amount of birds that's worth taking a shot at, even with a



Good dog work that results in a solid point, close flush, clean shot and quick retrieve might seem like the main ingredients of a great pheasant hunt, but, like most recipes, the prep time involved needs to be considered as part of the whole.

Photo by Andrew Johnson

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smaller group.

If you've hunted pheasants enough, you've probably encountered similar situations where you haven't had enough manpower to effectively and efficiently hunt a big block of cover. Most times, hunters will tackle these situations in parallel walks from one end to the other, using blockers at one end of the field as the walkers drive toward them. It's a tactic that sometimes works, but in reality it leaves a lot to be desired.

As mentioned, pheasants are creatures of habit and are conditioned to expect hunters approaching from certain areas and angles. If you think like a true predator, it's easy to see how they're accustomed to hunters starting at one end of a field and working toward the other before turning around and making another pass. Because they have become conditioned to this method, it's easy for them to run circles around the hunters with each pass. Good dogs can help contain the birds to a degree, but long walks with limited hunters simply leave too much room for birds to escape out the sides and never flush within range.

Instead of walking the large patch of cover in strips from one end to the other like hunters have done for decades, consider breaking it down into six sections and work diagonally toward

the corners, creating your own pinch points along the way. If you're hunting hard-pressed birds, working diagonally in cross-sections can throw wild birds for a loop and catch them off guard, forcing them to get confused birds to flush at your feet or escape by running to a corner or other pinch point where blockers are lying in wait.

This tactic might mean taking a few extra steps to get into position on some of the walks, but throwing the birds a curve ball like this with a small group of hunters is one way to turn their conditioning against them. We've tried this tactic several times with success the past few years, and, like anything else, the more you put it into practice, the better it works.

It's worth noting that a game plan of this nature takes some planning, so be sure to choreograph your hunt and make sure each hunter knows where he or she needs to be and what to do. Do this well in advance. Hollering instructions and adjustments to hunters in an effort to properly position them will quickly foil even the best laid plans.

Pheasants are used to vehicles and farm equipment traveling the gravel roads that run adjacent to the fields they call home. The only vehicles they really notice or fear are those that stop.

With that in mind I often drive right



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on by fields in advance of a hunt that requires extensive game planning. While doing so, I'll point out various landmarks to my hunters and ask them questions to ensure they understand the approach we're taking. When I'm confident everyone in the group is on the same page, I'll then circle back and drop hunters off to block before I park and let the dogs and walkers out in a singularly smooth motion, getting the hunt underway as quickly and quietly as possible.

The size of a pheasant's brain in tiny compared to ours, yet they continually outsmart legions of big-headed hunters. It all boils down to survival. Not

getting shot or eaten are what drive them to safety.

Conversely, we need to devise methods to supply ourselves a meal or two. In other words, hunt hungry — not just figuratively, but literally.

Bloated bellies (and egos) lead to lazy, haphazard hunting. A little belly growl will have you moving more deftly and can kick in some primal instincts that are resting just below the surface. Let your inner predator out and take it for a stroll through the fields, and I am firmly convinced you will soon find yourself becoming a much better hunter with the reward of more birds in your bag.



**About the Author:** Dennis Foster is an avid outdoor communicator, guide and tournament fisherman. He welcomes input and can be reached at [www.eyetimepromotions.com](http://www.eyetimepromotions.com) or [www.dakotapheasantguide.com](http://www.dakotapheasantguide.com).  
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