

Blue Grouse in Colorado



*(Background) Colorado is the eighth largest state in America. It's 280 miles long by 380 miles wide, which is bigger than my native Scotland. And although we are only hunting in one small part of it, this habitat alone measures 2.3 million acres.
(Left) This is the author's first time hunting Blue Grouse in Colorado.*

Hunting Blue grouse in Colorado requires a little bit of luck and a whole lot of pluck.

Text and photography by Melissa Volpi.

"This country could kill you, says Marc Patoile as we start our uphill walk through the sagebrush towards Chateau Peak. And it never ceases to remind me of that cowboy gun-slingers quote that it's 'better to be carried by six than judged by twelve.'"

Marc's words may seem a tad pessimistic, especially at the beginning of a hunting expedition, but they're true, nonetheless.

Colorado is the eighth largest state in America. It's 280 miles long by 380 miles wide, which is bigger than my native Scotland. And although we are only hunting in one small part of it, this habitat alone measures 2.3 million acres.

It's not just the savage expanse of this landscape that's daunting to the uninitiated like me either; it's the 79 degrees Fahrenheit heat, the thin air and the knowledge that Black bears roam these hillsides, evidenced by the frequent reminders of large paw marks on the Aspen trees.

As Marc calls for Émile and Rémy, his French and American Brittany's, I do a quick safety check – just to be sure.

Shatter proof sunglasses ready to shield my eyes from the harsh glare. Check. Whistle hanging loosely around my neck in case of an emergency. Check. Water pouch stuffed into my waistcoat pocket. Check. Plenty of cartridges overflowing in the other. Check. Spanish 20-bore side-by-side shotgun open and resting on my arm in preparation for shooting three grouse – which is the daily limit here. Check. And thorn proof chaps to protect my jeans/legs from the sagebrush and yuccas. Check.

All I need now is a Quarter horse and a Colt pistol and I

could join Hailee Steinfeld and Co in the remake of True Grit.

My 'Western' daydreams are soon quashed when an all too familiar accent reaches my ears from out of nowhere, as two other hunters walk up to us on the side of the mountain.

"How do you do, it says. I'm James Wall, a friend of Marc's. Is this your first time grouse hunting in these parts?"

Maybe it's my safety gear that's the giveaway – as all this Englishman seems to have is two fluorescent orange patches on his waistcoat to make sure he's visible. Oh well.

I introduce myself and take a photograph of him – as it's not every day that you meet an Old Etonian in the Wild West.

Marc looks on in feigned disgust.

"You're not going to put this Englishman in your article, are you!" he says teasingly.

James Wall owns a PR company in Denver and has been out in this deserted valley since 6.30 am. Kent Lemon, a friend and famous Sporting Artist, is accompanying him and has already shot his daily quota.

"Did you hear that? Says Kent in soft tones before handing me a piece of dark chocolate containing shreds of bacon, it's Elk."

The first thing I notice about Kent Lemon is his fluorescent orange sun hat and t-shirt. It made me smile for a second when I heard his surname, as he really is brighter than a still life by Peplow.

The second thing I realise is that he is passionate about grouse and wants everyone to shoot some.

Kent points towards the Douglas Firs down below.

"That's where the grouse are," he says.

He strides past us and we all follow.

"Blue grouse always fly downhill, Marc tells me, which should be familiar to you if we are walking uphill, as it will be

Marc Patoile with Rémy, his American Brittany, and his first Blue grouse of the season.



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(Left) James Wall and Marc Patoile walking up the mountain towards Chateau Peak.

(Below left) James Wall walking towards the Douglas Firs.



As the terrain steepens I begin to lag behind, which worries me as I lose sight of Marc.

Just when I reach the crest of the ridge, at 7200 feet, I hear two shots from the other side of the hill. It's Marc.

"I shot a double, he shouts happily, come and help me look for them, as the dogs are having trouble scenting them in this heat."

The grasses are long at the top of this hill, reaching my shoulders in places, and they hide large clumps of sagebrush.

This makes it difficult for the dogs to smell, or us to spot, the fallen grouse.

One comes quickly to the dogs but the other takes nearly half an hour before we locate their mottled brown feathers and begin the walk back down the ridgeline towards the massive jeep.

"Follow Émile, Marc says, he'll find you some birds."

As morning becomes lunchtime, and Émile begins to tire, I feel like I'm all out of luck today.

Just to add to my sadness, a shot is heard to my left. It's Marc. Again. Emile and I look at each other in equal astonishment.

I can't believe it. We've been out here for hours and I've yet to see a covey fly out in front of me. All I've seen is dead grouse.

I shout across to Marc, who is stuffing his last grouse into his rucksack.

"I don't care if I miss them, Marc, I just want to see them!"

"We'll find more tomorrow, Melissa, he says in positive tones. You have to stay closer to the dogs."

Marc's friend Paul and his girlfriend, Michelle, are joining us in Avon this evening for Dinner. So we decide to call it a day and go back to whip up a feast.

Marc plucks his three grouse while I boil some stock and start preparing the wild mushroom risotto.

Once the meat has been cut into chunks, Marc dips them in flour, egg wash and Parmesan infused breadcrumbs before placing them in a pan full of hot oil.

There is a knock at the door, which is perfect timing as the finishing swirl of cream has just been added to the risotto.

After the feast we all decide to have an early night in preparation for our 5.30 am start tomorrow.

Michelle is the first one up and by the time we are all kitted

something of a driven shoot. It's when we are walking back down that the shooting is more chancy."

I follow Émile, the French Brittany, who is staring enthusiastically at a small patch of undergrowth.

A shot is fired. But it's not me. It's 30 yards to my right.

"Third grouse of the day," shouts James, "that's my hunt over."

Never has the saying, 'the early bird catches the worm,' made so much sense.

I must remember not to drink half a bottle of Edrour by myself this evening and get to bed before 3.30am... but one of the great joys of being a writer is staying up by yourself, after everyone else has gone to sleep, to let inspiration do its work.

It's only 10.30am just now so Marc and I decide to brave the rising heat and head further up the mountain to a chorus of grasshoppers.



(Above) Snowberries are a popular source of forage for Blue grouse.

(Right) James Wall with his third and final grouse of the day. The laws of Colorado dictate that you may only hunt three Blue grouse per day throughout the season from the 1st of September to the 20th of November.

(Right below) Paul inspects how many wings are in the container. There's only two. That's not a good sign, as the season has been open several days and this is a huge expanse of forest serviced by this one road with just one container.



Antelope grazing along the hillside. I get out to take a picture and spot swarms of butterflies flying across the road. It's a bizarre sight. But lovely all the same.

The last sign that we pass before parking up says: 'Attention Grouse Hunters, please deposit one wing from each grouse harvested in the above container.'

"It's just so the Wildlife Division can keep a

check on harvests," says Paul.

We all get out of the pick-up to see how many wings are in the container. There's only two. That's not a good sign, as the season has been open several days and this is a huge expanse of forest serviced by this one road with just one container.

"It has been really dry here, Paul informs me, in fact, it has been the hottest August on record in Colorado. And when this happens, the grouse head higher to find food."

We try to stay positive as Paul parks the pick-up.

It feels like only ten minutes has passed before two shots are heard to the right of Paul and I. It's Marc. He waves us over as his dogs retrieved his two grouse to hand, having shot another double. We look for the remaining bird that Marc saw fly down nearby before heading further up the hills, but Paul and I have yet to see any sign of movement.

This is the first time that I have seen Bella out in the field. Her trot is fast and long, like a French trotting horse. Those horses can trot at the speed of a gallop and Bella looks like she could do the same. They train these dogs to stay in the trot, rather than galloping along as most other pointers do.

We walk up and down vertical inclines and pass a herd of sheep being watched over by a Pyrenees dog. I'm beginning to struggle. Manoeuvring yourself through large clumps of sagebrush

out in hunting gear; she has already made four batches of French toast. Yum!

After breakfast we gather outside Paul's office, which is five minutes from the Condo, to collect the dogs.

Émile and Rémy run up to Marc as they are dying for a walk and Bella, Paul's Bracco Italiano, strides serenely towards the massive pick-up.

Bella is five years old and a beautiful orange roan colour. It's easy to see that she and Paul have a very close relationship, as she is always looking longingly at Paul for the next command.

The dogs are loaded into crates in the back of Paul's pick-up before we start the two-hour drive to 'the best hunting location in the White River National Forest.'

We are after sharp-tailed grouse and the limit of these is only two per day.

As we get closer to their favourite hunting area we pass large green signs with white writing saying 'Attention Hunters, stay within posted boundaries.'

"Paul and I hunt mostly Public lands here in Colorado, says Marc. So we like to keep these coverts secret."

That's interesting. And just to remind you that you are actually in the Wild West the sign also reads: 'Report all violations to the Routt County Sheriff.'

I'm now picturing a cowboy wearing a Stetson, chinks (leather chaps), and large spurs sitting in a small building that resembles a saloon bar more than a police station – which Marc assures me isn't far from the truth if you get caught poaching in these parts.

Paul stops the car suddenly and points to a herd of

requires an elegant high stepping action, not unlike a Hackney horse, if you are to keep up with the dogs.

I did 10-mile hikes, four times a week, back in Scotland to prepare for this trip. But the combination of heat and hills is making me feel unwell. And it reminds me of what Marc said at the beginning: "This country could kill you."

Paul manages to shoot a woodcock that makes a surprise pass when we walk around a small watering hole. But we don't see any grouse and after listening to me pant profusely for some minutes, after climbing the third hill, Paul decides we should head back.

I sleep longer than I ever have that night and don't properly awaken until we arrive at the Old Deer hunter's Camp the next day. We walk along a track with a sharp turning at the end.

"That's Black Bear Bend, says Paul while pointing towards the turning. It's either plentiful with bears or grouse. So keep your fingers crossed for the latter today."

My apprehension must be obvious. "Don't worry, adds Marc. Black bears don't kill you like Grizzlies, they just maul you. The only problem we have is no mobile phone reception. So just don't get lost." he tells me while grinning manically.

I let Paul and Marc take the lead and watch them disappear around the corner. Everything is silent, but I don't know if this is a good sign or not.

Just when I'm about to dash round the corner to see what's happening, I hear four shots. I tilt my heads upwards and look at the cerulean sky. Please let it be the grouse...

When I see the look on Paul's face, it tells me all I need to know.



(Background) The author, searching the landscape for coveys of grouse.

(Right) The author, with her first ever-Blue grouse. It took three days of arduous hunting in heat similar to the Bahamas before she spotted a grouse.

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“There’s plenty of grouse here Melissa, says a jubilant Paul. I shot three from this covey and Marc shot one. So let’s find some for you now.”

Marc is less talkative than normal and walks off to our right with Émile and Rémy, while Paul and I head downhill to a small patch of trees.

I’ve walked this country for three days hoping to spot one of these. And there it is, perching on a fallen Aspen, 30 yards in front of me.

It looks miniscule in this landscape. And less exotic. It resembles our Red Grouse, albeit an insipid version.

It’s 10.30am now and the temperatures are rising steadily into the mid 80’s, which is hotter than the Bahamas in July in this thin air.

I must shoot this grouse. If I don’t, it’s over and I fly back to Scotland without a worthy tale to tell.

So I’m not going to take any chances, as this is my first time shooting walked-up grouse.

I stuff two cartridges into my Spanish side-by-side, snap shut the

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(Left) Paul bagging up our harvested grouse.

“OK Bella,” whispers Paul as he points at the grouse.

And she’s off. The grouse spots her and flutters into the air at speed. But before it has a chance to fly down the hill, out of my sight, I shoot it.

My shot penetrates the area between the right hand wing and the breast.

We all watch on as the grouse crashes to the ground and into Bella’s mouth.

“Good shot Melissa, says a smiling Paul, what a relief!”

Marc gives a quick nod of the head in agreement before heading back to Paul’s pick-up with Émile and Rémy.

It wasn’t his moment today, but it was mine. And I can honestly say that I have never been more grateful for small mercies.

We leave the public lands and drive back home for a second helping of deep-fried breaded grouse. But this time it will taste that bit sweeter – even without the creamy mushroom risotto as an accompaniment.

Note: The season dates for Dusky (Blue) grouse are 1st of September to the 20th of November. All grouse hunters have to purchase a license from the Colorado Division of Wildlife, plus a habitat stamp. You can purchase the license online at: <https://www1.co.wildlifelicense.com/start.php>
Marc Patoile is an Attorney and Writer. He lives in Castle Rock with his wife and daughter.



barrels, press the stock gently beneath my shoulder and walk towards the grouse – hoping to entice it to fly out in front of me.

My movements are so slow that it feels like an hour has passed each time I take a step forward.

Bella comes to my rescue. She scents the grouse and creeps towards the Aspen tree, before stopping and raising her nose.

She looks at Paul, who is watching to her left, and waits for a command.

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