

My Favorite Gamebird

You're Not a Complete Upland Hunter...



**Until You've
Hunted
Sharp-tailed
Grouse**

You're not a complete upland gamebird hunter until you've hunted sharp-tailed grouse," an old-time and obviously opinionated hunter informed me at a Pheasants Forever banquet last year. Though the old guy was obviously a fan of pheasant hunting, he was just as obviously a proponent of sharptails as a "special kind of upland gamebird."

"Why's that?" I asked, playing dumb (something I do well and naturally), in order to keep him talking.

"Because the sharptail is the only 'truly wild' gamebird in America. Most all the others, from quail and chukars to Hungarian partridge and ring-necked pheasants, can be partially domesticated, successfully pen-raised, released, and hunted. But not the sharptail. They just don't do well in confinement, won't lay many eggs, won't produce many chicks, and just don't make it if 'liberated,' even in the best habitat."

"Like I said," he added for empha-

sis. "Sharptails are the only 'truly wild' gamebird in America. And no one can be a 'complete' upland gamebird hunter until they've hunted sharptails," he confidently assured me.

Though a provocative and potentially controversial assessment, I didn't argue, though I've hunted sharp-tailed grouse, going on four decades, for many other reasons. One main motivation is that these "prairie grouse" are wildly exciting, a real challenge (and occasional humiliation) for any shotgunner and a great joy (and sometimes a real frustration) for any gun dog owner.

"Antelope with wings," Datus Proper, an outdoor writer from Montana, once called sharp-tailed grouse when he described how these birds in the wide open spaces of the western prairie would flush wild, then fly seemingly forever to disappear, like wild-running antelope, off the edge of some distant horizon.

The "antelope with wings" metaphor has flown through my mind

Open spaces define the places most commonly known as sharp-tailed grouse country. Native prairie grasses in huge hayfields and endless pastures typical of the Great Plains are where sharptails are born and raised...and hunted by shotgunners and their dogs. Sharp-tailed grouse may be the most under-hunted of all upland gamebirds.

many times when, with gun in hand and gun dogs at my feet, I have stood somewhere on the great western plains and watched sharptails literally fly out of sight. From some provinces of Canada to parts of Montana and Wyoming and from North and South Dakota to Nebraska and Kansas, my pointers and I have hunted sharptails—usually with great success in years with good populations, and always with some success even during population down-swings. No matter where I've hunted sharptails, like most hunters of these birds, I am fascinated by their "wildness."

by Jerrald Thoms



Wide landscapes and long distances are at the center of any sharptail hunt on the Great Plains of the upper Midwest or parts of Canada and Alaska where the prairie grouse are listed as gamebirds. Picking places to hunt is sometimes difficult because there appears to be just too much habitat. The standard procedure is to walk "edges" where short grass meets up with tall grass or where pastures border croplands.

Sharp-tailed grouse and wide-open country are synonymous. Always have been, always will be. And that association of these birds with the "big-sky" land they live in is another reason many hunters love to hunt them. All this "space," however, can be daunting, even intimidating for those new to hunting sharptails on the western prairie.

"I gotta tell ya, my mind is boggled," a first-time sharptail hunter once said the first time he looked at the wide-open western landscape, trying to decide what direction to go in search of these prairie birds.

"Everything seems the same out here," he concluded, after scanning the habitat in 360 degrees. "There's grass and rolling hills and low ravines and a few fencelines, and some hay and alfalfa fields and some crop stubble—everywhere. So where do you go to hunt these sharptails, where will they be at dawn, or during mid-day, or around sundown?"

"What happens if the temperature goes from 40 degrees at 7:00 a.m. and

peaks out at 80 degrees six hours later? And what do you do if the wind blows 25 miles per hour all day, or doesn't blow at all for days on end? How does a hunter find sharptails when it's dusty and dry or maybe raining or snowing? What are the rules for hunting these prairie birds?" All these questions and many more were aimed at me, the so-called "sharp-tailed grouse hunting expert."

The answers are easy. First, there are no rules because sharptails are almost always where you find them, with no absolute consistency as to why they are there. There are some general guidelines, though, for finding sharptails, with the emphasis on "general." Second, I've never met a real "expert" on sharp-tailed grouse hunting, myself most of all, included. However, I've certainly met some sharptail hunters with long-term and wide-ranging experiences in pursuing these birds. These hunters make "observations" that can be helpful anytime when hunting sharptails.

"Walk edges for sharptails" is common advice to new hunters from old-timers who know these birds. "Hunt close to where short grass runs into tall grass along the damp bottoms of broad ravines...Run your dogs down weedy fencelines and work them where grainfields meet up with pastures. On windy days, hit the downwind sides of anything



Lightweight double-barrels and hard-muscled pointers are basic requirements for some sharptail hunters on the prairie where long walks for the birds are common.



Sharp-tailed grouse (left) sometimes cross paths with prairie chickens (right), their close cousin. The result may be a hybrid (middle).

from treebelts and tall stands of sorghum to hills and cornfields.”

I repeated all this advice one day as a hunting partner from Texas and I headed out early in the morning to walk all the most likely spots we could see for sharptails. “Avoid flat, featureless, low grass pastures,” I adamantly advised as we skirted a mile-square tract of such stuff where cattle had munched the cover down to a few bare inches.

“Call in your dogs,” I suggested after watching his two long-tailed pointers charge across the obviously barren pasture landscape. “But they’re on point,” he answered. Thirty minutes and two flocks later, he and I walked out of this “unproductive” plot of chewed up grass with two birds apiece...and I had a new attitude about making “rules” for hunting sharptails.

Sharptail hunting and long-distance walking are also synonymous for those who pursue these prairie grouse.

“How far is that butt?” a hunting guest from Michigan once asked,



For sharptail hunting, any dog will do, but some will do better than others. Whether pointer or flusher, any dog will get better with experience.

referring to a giant hill on the far horizon.

“That’s ‘butte’ with a long U and a silent E,” I corrected him. “And it’s about 10 miles from where we’re standing. Between here and there, there’s about 20 square miles of rolling hayfields and pasture flatlands all covered with native prairie grass—and that’s just in that direction. Turn around and there’s more of the same kind of real estate behind you.”

“My butt—and that’s ‘butt’ with a short U and no E—is going to be dragging if we have to walk that far to shoot a limit of sharptails,” the northern woods ruffed grouse hunter decided as he put on his game vest, picked up his gun, and aimed himself and his dog across the western grasslands.

“We probably won’t have to walk that far to get into some shooting action. But if this is a typical day, we may have to walk a long ways if you need to kill a limit,” I admitted. “Seems like you’re getting the picture of prairie grouse hunting already,” I added.

As targets for shotgunners, sharp-tailed grouse can be the easiest to hit of any upland game species—or the most difficult. When it’s early in the

season, sharptail hunting sometimes seems real simple. If pointed up close by a German shorthair or flushed by a springer spaniel, for example, these prairie birds will usually hit the air with a vocal "cuk cuk cuk" warning sound. This alerts any shooter, even those with the slowest reflexes, that it's time to bring up the gun and point it at a bird that seldom flies more than 25 to 30 miles per hour.

There is no blurred whirling rush of wings as with excited bobwhite quail and no disconcerting cackle or color-filled commotion as with a ringneck rooster. It's just the soft cluck of a gray and off-white grouse the size of a hen pheasant gently winging its way across open space. No need to wait for the bird to clear some tangled cover or to look for an opening in some trees before you shoot. Just swing through and in front of the target, pull the trigger, then watch your dog retrieve a two-pound prairie grouse with a sharp tail and a broad meaty breast.

This is how a hunt can go with ideal conditions, like, let's say, on a calm, sunny day during opening weekend in a year that produces plenty of young sharptails. Return to this same place a month or so later and everything from the birds to the landscape can be different.

"Late season" sharptails—and that usually means the last two to three weeks of the season in nearly every state where the grouse are listed as a gamebird—are considered by many as "too wild" to be easily or profitably hunted. At this time of year, the common story is of huge flocks of up to 100 sharptails flushing spontaneously and disappearing in the distance the second they see approaching hunters. In addition, weather can often be bitter, with below-zero windchills making long walks across the snow-covered plains a lot less pleasant than earlier in September when sunburn and too much heat are more typical problems.

In some years, though, late season weather can swing back from the extreme temperatures, with daytime temperatures in the 50s and 60s and no big winds to speak of, much less any blizzards. Sharptails then may sometimes slip back into late-summer, early-fall modes of behavior. The normally big flocks might even break up into small bunches that will allow dogs into pointing distance and

hunters into decent shooting range.

In one such year when I was still guiding for upland gamebirds, a pair of hunters from New York hired me to put them on to some "trophy" sharptails, that is, just a few "mature birds" for taxidermy mounts. I conscientiously explained to them how tough harvesting even a couple of sharptails could be this late in the season. But, given the mild weather pattern, I told them hunting conditions would at least be tolerable.

Not only was the weather good, but the grouse hunting was terrific. Sharptails were everywhere with singles and small bunches scattered across the grassy pastures and in weed-filled fencelines. Enough birds held for my pointers so that we all shot three-bird limits for three days running.

At the end of the hunt, the two New Yorkers had their trophy sharptails and were satisfied. They did, however, look at me with "what do we need a guide for?" expressions. I couldn't blame them, given the easy birds all around us. But I wouldn't bet the farm on this happening every season, once in a decade, or even once more in a lifetime.

Any dog will do, but some will do better than others when hunting sharp-tailed grouse out on the open prairie. This overview of the contributions gun dogs make to a grouse hunt applies to canines of both the pointing and flushing variety. What this statement suggests is that any hunting dog with any degree of productive experience on other upland gamebirds will do okay on sharptails. With enough experience on these prairie grouse, that same dog probably can become proficient, and in time, possibly expert.

Most pointing breeds new to sharptail hunting will soon learn that coyotes and other four-legged, furry and toothy predators have taught these prairie birds to flush wild when approached too closely. Pointing from an appropriate distance, therefore, is important. And it's a lesson that can be reinforced with a properly used "remote training device"—an electric collar, in other words—that every pointer owner should carry when making a first trip for sharptails.

"Should I bring my flushing dog for a sharptail hunt?" is a common ques-



Though late-season sharptails tend to be extremely wary, the birds occasionally can be found "under" snow cover where they will roost at night or hide during the day.

tion from first-time grouse hunters with Labradors, golden retrievers, spaniels, or other flushing breeds. The answer of course, is "YES!" Flushing dogs are trained to hunt close to the gun, as opposed to many pointing breeds that are big runners, sometimes cutting multi-hundred yard sweeps as they quarter across the grass-covered prairie.

Though your Labrador or spaniel may not run over as much real estate as an English pointer or setter, that doesn't mean your flusher/retriever can't find sharptails. Just put these dogs into denser habitat, hunt fencerows, work the edges of croplands or take them any place that looks to you like "grousy" cover. The range may be less and the pace a little slower, but the final result in a day's time could be quite rewarding.

"I'll bet you \$5 that grouse didn't run out of this buffalo grass," a frustrated springer spaniel owner told me after his dog and my German shorthair took off down a cow path in search of a wounded sharptail.

"Prairie grouse don't run when winged. They always stay right where they fall," he assured me as he called and cursed out his springer who, along with my pointer, was already 50 yards away and still moving. "I'm sorry I brought her out here," he added.

"Get out your money and tell your dog you're sorry," I said as his springer came bouncing back with a still lively sharptail. "Who told you a broken-wing sharptail will never run?" I asked him.

"I read that in a hunting magazine," he said.

"Well, this grouse and your dog must not be subscribers," I replied.

In choosing shotguns for sharptail grouse, I've gone through a couple phases, beginning nearly five decades ago with a Model 12 Winchester pump in 12 gauge. At the time, I was convinced this was the only gun for the purpose of killing "sharpies" that often flushed way ahead of a half-dozen or more walkers who hunted these western prairie birds the same way we "drove" pheasants in cornfields 200 miles back in the eastern part of South Dakota.

When I discovered pointing dogs for hunting sharptails, my gun preference switched to double barrels in over-and-under and side-by-side with 12 gauges giving way to a 20 and, for a few seasons, a 28 gauge. The romantic element of these wispy little guns and their miniscule loads soon faded, however, particularly during a period when I hired out as an upland hunting guide.

As a guide, I soon learned that many clients determined success by the number of birds bagged, even though they might have claimed otherwise. Adding my share of grouse to the daily bag took me back to the 12-gauge repeater. Now, several years after I've quit guiding for money, these semi-automatic shotguns still do the best job for me of shooting high-velocity, 1-1/8-ounce loads of 7s, 6s, 5s, and 4s at sharpies and killing them with authority through the various phases of the season.

Today when someone asks me what gun to bring to the prairie for grouse hunting, I tell them a 12-gauge if I think the questioner really wants an honest recommendation. Many others who inquire already have some preference, usually for the lesser gauges. "Bring whatever you think will work, but bring a 12-gauge automatic if you have one, just in case," I say.

A few seasons ago, a friend from Alabama came out to "prairie country" to hunt sharptails for the first time. On the first day in the field, he took out a 20-gauge side-by-side and dumped a box of yellow-colored shotgun shells into his game vest pocket. "Uh-oh," I remember thinking. This wasn't the sort of gun and ammo I had advised him to bring for this kind of shooting.

A couple of hours later, he decid-

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ed that he "should have brought a rifle instead of a 20-gauge." This he concluded after the third flock of prairie grouse flushed a little wild nearly 40 yards ahead of us and he had already fired several rounds of "dove loads" and had killed nothing.

"You should have brought a 12-gauge and some shells with bigger pellets like I recommended," I told him as one of my German shorthairs retrieved a "long-shot" sharptail that had dropped dead after being hit by a half dozen copper-coated #4 pellets out of a high-velocity 12-gauge shell.

Later that morning, I got to eat my advice when my dogs pointed a flock of sharpies at about 10 paces and the 20-gauge shooter slam-dunked two of the birds with his first shot and a third bird with his second.

"There are hunters who live out here all their lives, gun these birds 20 days out of every season, and have never done that with a 12, much less a 20-gauge," I told him. "You are very lucky."

"Better lucky than good," he admitted. "And before my luck runs out, tomorrow I'm going to borrow a 12-gauge from you," he promised. The next year he returned with his own new 12-gauge and some "speedy" ammo with #6 and #4 pellets.

Cleaning and cooking sharp-tailed grouse requires some special measures to ensure a wild game dish that can be delicious. Because all prairie grouse eat a wide range of vegetation and insects, some of which can be very "aromatic," their gut tract is often particularly putrid. Get some intestinal fluid on the meat and most people can't eat it, or, if eaten, no one can enjoy it because the tainted flesh will taste rotten.

This situation is most easily avoided by carefully cleaning the birds in the first place. One effective method is to use a knife or better yet, poultry

shears to cut the back out of each freshly killed bird, then to lift out the guts, heart, lungs, and all other innards along with the backbone. After doing this out in the field, back at a campsite, or at a motel cleaning station, put the still fully-feathered birds on ice, then later finish preparing them for the freezer. If you choose to skin sharptails, remember to leave the head, one wing, or one leg attached to the whole and intact carcass to legally transport them.

In cooking sharp-tailed grouse, use any recipe suitable for gamebirds with dark meat. Many wild game cooks will marinate grouse in teriyaki sauce or something similar to tenderize, moisten or flavorize the meat. Marinating can be a good idea when the age of the birds or the cleaning method used on them is uncertain. With young birds carefully processed, much or long-term marinating may not be necessary. Though some hunters take only the breast meat from sharptails, the wings and legs should also be cooked because they are particularly tasty.

Can you be a "complete" upland bird hunter without ever hunting prairie grouse? It's a question that doesn't really matter, except as a way to start a friendly conversation or maybe an interesting argument. No one should argue, though, that sharp-tails are uniquely "wild" gamebirds living only on the wide-open North American prairie. Or that hunting sharptails is a wonderful experience.

Spread out from some of Alaska through much of Canada and down into the USA, starting in the north from Washington State and extending east to Minnesota and reaching south from Kansas to New Mexico, sharp-tailed grouse have been, are still, and will be very viable gamebirds. Isolated by their distinct and rugged habitat and protected by their wild habits, "sharpies" are perhaps the most under-hunted upland gamebirds on the continent.

"Every year, the vast majority of sharp-tailed grouse go through the hunting season without ever seeing a gun dog or hearing a shotgun," says Ben Williams, a fanatical grouse hunter from Livingston, Montana. "Isn't it our duty as upland gamebird hunters to try to change that?"

Maybe there's a message here for all of us. □

THE GUNRACK

by Aaron Fraser Pass

Old Guns in the Uplands

If you want to shoot an old shotgun safely, there are several safety aspects you should consider.

Almost every upland gunner dreams of acquiring one of the classic American doubles as described by William Harnden Foster, Havilah Babcock, Nash Buckingham and other renowned sporting writers.

Likewise, the light and beautifully balanced British Game Guns are lusted after by many upland addicts. Many older English double guns are finding their way to our shores and offered at fair prices. (These may not seem particularly good buys until their prices are compared to those of more modern or new models by British makers.) Of late, Vintagers' Shoots, focusing on shooting old "period" shotguns at Sporting Clays, are becoming very popular. All of this brings up the safety and sensibility of shooting old shotguns.

Suppose Great-Uncle Bob goes tramping off to the great covert in the sky and leaves you his vintage BHE Parker. Or perhaps you come across



an older Boss or Purdey at a price that seems within reason. Can you safely shoot such a gun in the field?

Safely shooting old guns is a serious and complex issue. Let's get one rule on the table right up front—NEVER SHOOT AN OLD GUN UNLESS IT HAS BEEN THOROUGHLY CHECKED OUT BY A COMPETENT GUNSMITH AND YOU ARE CERTAIN YOU HAVE THE PROPER AMMUNITION.

This is the real thing, an English-built Webley Scott Model 701. At 6-3/4 pounds, it is just right for the standard British 12-gauge upland load of 1-1/16 ounces of shot. Heavier loads would eventually damage the gun.



Even though it is a modern gun, if you consider 30 years-plus to be modern, the author would never consider shooting heavy loads or steel shot in this Italian copy of a lightweight British-style Game Gun.

