

## Blue Grouse Are Where You Find Them

“If you turn the imagination loose like a hunting dog, it will often return with the bird in its mouth.” William Maxwell

I know very little in terms of the British gunner, having only seen photographs and the odd film with scenes of driven pheasant. It's true that the idea of hunting partridge in the high country of Scotland holds great appeal, but it's considerably beyond my means. Arriving at our rendezvous a little after dawn, I was surprised when Rupert pulled up in a fire engine red Austin Mini Cooper. A tall and lanky man with dark hair and blue eyes, he was wearing everything one would expect a British hunter to don except Wellingtons. Packed into his sporty Mini were his young son, and his professionally trained Springer Spaniel.

“It's blue grouse mecca! It's the honey hole of all honey holes!” exclaimed my acquaintance Rupert Parkis a week earlier. “Birds everywhere. You've simply never seen anything like it!” Now Rupert, as you may guess, hails from across the pond and the British aren't known for hyperbole. Some years back I met Rupert, initially as a client, he ran a PR firm in Denver. Working together on a project it was revealed that he enjoyed both fly-fishing and bird hunting and we happened to have a mutual friend, who at that time was a field editor for a national sporting magazine.

As the dog days of August were nearing I sent an exploratory email to Rupert and got an immediate reply about his discovery. When queried, where exactly was this Mecca, he became cryptic? As it wasn't his discovery he couldn't very well invite me to the opener, but he seemed sincere in an invitation to take me there sometime in the first week of the season. He talked about limiting out in an hour; an abundance of birds that defied the imagination. I thought back to the old outdoor columnist, Bill Logan, who used to write for the now defunct Rocky Mountain News in Denver. “Grouse are where you find them.” scribed Logan dryly. The meaning here is that there is no real rhyme or reason when it comes to actually coming face to face with our rocky mountain partridge. Just make sure you've laced your boots on tightly because they are going to be in for a workout.

Rupert's declarations were certainly contrary to my thirty years of wearing out boot leather in high Colorado basins.. The evening before our rendezvous I received a call from Mr. Parkis. “Steve, would you mind awfully if I brought my young son, Phillip along? I'm sure he won't be a bother”. Graciously, I agreed as a slight alarm bell triggered. Having two older sons myself I welcomed the idea in principle. After all, he knew the spot and this was going to be almost too easy.

So, when Rupert showed up in the Mini Cooper, I was surprised. I wasn't under the impression I was going to be driving. Actually, I thought I was just coming along for the ride, though I, like Rupert, had my dog, Roxie, an untrained Brittany (more about Roxie later). Rupert had highly sung his Springer's praises.

“Steve, sorry about the mini Cooper, but my wife needed the SUV. Would you mind driving?”

What was I supposed to say? I have a four wheel drive truck so we loaded up dogs and their gear, which also included fishing tackle. Rupert introduced me to his son Phillip, a charming tow headed and slightly built boy of ten. With no little sense of

anticipation, we pulled out, heading west and up into the foothills. The adventure now qualified as a 'cast and blast'.

"Where to, Rupert?"

"Well actually, Steve, we can't go to the honey hole." responded Rupert sounding sheepish.

"What do you mean, we can't go to the honey hole?"

"Well, I wasn't aware but my friends decided at the last moment that they were heading back up today and there simply isn't room for us all." was his explanation.

I'd be lying if I told you I didn't go into reaction. I didn't think I had hackles but up my back they went. Gritting my teeth and trying to wear a mask of indifference, which may or may not have been detected I evenly asked if Rupert had a fall back?

"Sorry old boy, but I don't." revealing a set of smiling white teeth. "I thought with all your outdoor experience you'd have some places in mind?"

With my mind reeling, the pedal floored to pass the ubiquitous semis traveling westbound on I-70, I began an inventory of possible destinations. A funny thing begins to happen when we age and for me it's a blurring of the lines of time. In memory, one can feel as if time is eternal, that nothing really changes- that if the birds were there twenty years ago, they're still there. Things haven't' really changed that much, have they?

I suppose I long for the safety of continuity. How did I now find myself in this position? The tables had been neatly turned and it was me who was now guiding, not just my adult friend who would have to accept the outcome but his eager young son who carried a hopeful gleam in his innocent blue eyes. Bollocks!

Bucking up the forest road, I was unprepared for the roughness. Deeply washed out in places it required all my concentration to not high-center the pickup. Poor young Phillip was getting bounced around back on the jump seat of my extended cab and may have banged his head at one point. I began to consider perhaps it would be best if we were to turn back? Rupert wouldn't hear of it. Of course, it wasn't his truck, was it?

I eventually fought my way up to my destination. My memory had apparently erased the road's difficulty. We were there! I was hopeful Rupert's Springer would earn his keep and had little expectations about my Roxie, a dog apparently bred for show, not the field.

Side- hilling our way along to the spring fed drainage I felt buoyed by optimism. The day was picture perfect. With the young boy in tow, and Rupert with his fine English double gun, they presented a classic sporting picture, the kind illustrated in the magazines. In his English field attire it was easy to imagine the father and son hunting the moorland of Scotland. Paradoxically, on such days I am never able to avoid the feeling that I am failing miserably to take it all in. The dogs were stylishly busting the cover, which was on the dry side, now that I noticed. I just hoped if we found some birds I wouldn't require bulletproof tweeds.

In the thin warm air, young Phillip began to labor. While he didn't carry a gun, he simply lacked the mass and muscle to beat these hills. I was kicking myself for nixing them carrying water. The hike began to feel like a trek. I'd guess the elevation at 9500 feet and we had no cloud cover to shelter us from the sun. The second drainage was actually a considerable distance that required elevation loss and gain. The dogs began to lose interest, as they encountered no scent. Thankfully, when we eventually got to the

spring the dogs could water. I sensed Rupert getting antsy and for some reason he split off from me and began to work the thin broken line of Aspens up the slope of the mountain. It wasn't long before he was out of sight.

"Where in the hell is he going?" I thought with irritation? I began to call out and then used my thunder whistle. After about 20 minutes of nothing, and in a slight panic I fired my gun. Shortly I heard an answering blast a considerable distance away and trudged up the mountain towards the sound. I eventually found them. Phillip was worn out. They'd encountered no birds. The hike back to the truck was long, a death march and I felt badly for Phillip. A wild flush or two would have supplied some needed adrenaline.

Back at the truck we hydrated and watered the dogs. Rupert, rooting around in his stylish game bag, located some kind of energy bars. I had a couple of sandwiches in my cooler and ate one. Was the sun beyond the yardarm?

I now knew what professional guides felt like when they could not deliver the goods. It was irrational for me to feel responsible in this situation, but I did. Slowly laboring our way down the primitive excuse for a logging road, Rupert inquired if perhaps, I had another spot in mind? And if so, was it nearby?

This was my last chance to get them into birds. Rupert mentioned that Phillip, a very driven young angler, also wanted to fish. As he couldn't carry a shotgun, fishing, what with our fruitless foray, took on added importance. I recalled a sympathetic rancher in Kremling who granted access to a meadow stretch of the upper Colorado River. Perhaps the private land fishing would salvage our day?

Just past the cattle guard I found a spot to pull over. I had this odd impression of myself as seen through young Phillip's eyes. An aging windbag, tall and darkly featured. A liar of the first order, totally without charm. Based upon our trek perhaps everything I said was a pathetic fabrication? I didn't like the way my imagination was working. It was time to make game, to make good.

This time Rupert took some water and we headed up the sage dotted pitch. Steeper than I remembered, inexplicably we encountered a barbed wire fence. "Wait. I 'knew' this was public land." There couldn't have been a land status change, or could there? Deciding, there was some mistake I hopped the fence. Rupert became very tentative at this point but I'm afraid I bullied him and he came along grudgingly. I could see what little will leaving him. As a father perhaps he was pushing his ten year old too hard? The slope was extremely steep requiring frequent rests. Of course we were going to need to make mountain goats of ourselves to gain the pine-clad ridgeline. This was blue grouse hunting after-all. I had the advantage of my past history to lure me upward.

Rupert, now breathing heavily, said he was sorry but they were done in and would have to descend immediately. They 'd had enough of my anecdotes. We had worked ourselves into a lush little basin of downed timber, serviceberry, kinnikinnick, and wild rose. A grouse paradise if I ever saw one. I pleaded that he should humor me. We'd circle the small basin and call the hunting chapter over. I didn't wait for his confirmation and dove into the basin following my hound. Looking back I saw they no choice but to follow. In the bottom of the heavily vegetated depression was a spring and Roxie worked into the deadfall. Rupert and Phillip were on my flank when out of the corner of my eye I saw a bird flush. At the same time Roxie went on point and wonder of wonders, up flushed a grouse! Without thinking the gun came to shoulder, the safety thumbed off and I fired. Roxie fetched the bird. As I admired the mature blue grouse Rupert and

Phillip were speechless. The term I believe is ‘saving face’. Roxie, the dog bred for show had saved mine. It was Rupert’s expensively trained Springer who was supposed to save not only my face, but also the day.

On the long drive back to their vehicle Phillip fell asleep. I wondered if Phillip would remember our day? And if so, what his impressions were of this older acquaintance of his father who told a great many stories about various days afield? No mention was made of Roxie’s triumph. (Precious few triumphs since!) It was as if the harvesting of the grouse never happened. Upon further thought, perhaps Rupert’s friends, upon hearing of his plan, dissuaded him, swearing him to secrecy? If so, this was perfectly understandable. Sharing one’s coverts could be equated to sharing one’s bed.

Several weeks later a few grouse feathers still littered the garage. The flame from the ignited wine and bourbon almost reached the exhaust vent. The grouse had been browned in a Dutch oven. The aroma of the seared and flambéed bird wafted throughout the house. The little Brittany was asleep on her bed in the kitchen quivering, no doubt reliving a pleasant day afield. As for his “blue grouse mecca”, I’ve never heard a peep.

**Post script:** A recent inquiry to Rupert after the pheasant opener this season resulted in a flurry of emails. Exchanging notes we both had disheartening experiences for the opener, which revealed a dearth of birds in eastern Colorado. When I made mention of a stab out to the Holyoke area I received a response that he had permission to hunt a vast private farm out there and was going to be heading out the day before Thanksgiving. As for an invitation, “I’ll keep you posted,” he promised...

Colorado Blue Grouse en Casserole  
From the ‘Colorado Cache Cookbook’

4 medium potatoes  
4 tablespoons butter  
6 raw carrots  
2 tablespoons oil  
1/2 pound small white onions  
peeled.  
1 or 2 mature grouse, dressed  
(save giblets)  
1/2 cup dry white wine  
1/2 cup bourbon  
2 tablespoons instant beef bouillon  
1/2-pound fresh mushrooms.  
6 whole carrots cut into sections.  
2 tablespoons flour

Cut potatoes and carrots lengthwise into 4 sections.  
Melt butter and oil in flameproof skillet or casserole over direct heat. Add potatoes, carrots and onions and sauté until golden. Remove vegetables and set aside. Brown grouse. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Add wine and bourbon and ignite. When flames subside, add instant bouillon and blend well. Add mushroom, onions, carrots and potatoes.  
Cover tightly and bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes or until tender, basting occasionally with juices in casserole.  
Drain pan juices into saucepan. Stir in flour to make thick gravy. Pour sauce over grouse before serving.

(Note: be careful not to overcook birds. The juice should run clear at the joints. These birds have already been browned so are partially cooked.)

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