



Reader Stories

REAL STORIES OF THE EVERYDAY SPORTSMAN



Winter morning pheasant hunt has healing quality

By Christopher Ross
Glenside, Pa.

Of all the mornings to go out hunting in January, we had chosen one of the coldest.

My father and I arrived at a frozen parking lot in Royersford, at 7 a.m. My friend John was already waiting, his 6-foot, 5-inch, lanky frame stretched against the side of the car.

Birdie, his German short-haired pointer, paced nearby, impatient to get started and unbothered by the 9-degree weather.

We trudge alongside one another: two worlds in tandem and in motion, animal guiding men to uncover what the humans cannot on their own.

As we exchanged greetings; we did not talk about John's father, who had passed away three weeks before from COVID-19. At this moment, John wanted normalcy, and a pheasant hunt - with its reas-

suring ritualistic elements - offered comfort.

Hunting these heavily pressured lands outside Philadelphia was hard enough to begin with. To go out in the dead of winter on a frigid early morning, the odds of kicking up any birds dropped to almost nothing.

The pheasants that survived or had been restocked in the winter hole up in the most difficult places - in tough, dense thickets that afford protection from foxes and hunters, as well as from cold and wind.

When we got started, Birdie was a blur of motion - galloping all over the harsh, frozen landscape - long, sloping fields, everything dead and white - stopping here and there to sniff at the base of a stone or a tuft of grass.

Having grown up hunting with his own father, my father does not do much hunting these days. But he will almost always come out for a pheasant hunt - these he likes best, probably because they involve dogs.

And he has great affection for John. "He looks like a warrior," he said when we returned home after the hunt. "If I was in a foxhole, I would want him in there, too."



A early morning pheasant hunt on a cold, crisp day offered respite for the writer's buddy, who lost his father three weeks prior.

Illustration by Michael Kensinger

You never see light as you do on early morning hunts. Glimpsed through a window, those soft cherry and tangerine blotches in the sky don't pierce you in the same way.

You have to drink in the spectral morning light

amidst a great open space - not standing, but moving across it - while breathing in throat-burningly cold air to see those colors come to life.

Birdie was a beauty in her own right: sleek and brown, leaping like a horse, muscles

flexing beneath the short hair.

Our shotguns are beautiful, too, in their own way: lean paragons of functional elegance. The sight of these long guns in the field awak-

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Deep-water Crappies

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and technique works when you can quietly get over the school without spooking the fish.

On average, I'd say the water depth has to be at least 10 feet deep and when you attain the right position, shut down the electric motor and silently drift. Also don't bang

around in the boat. Don't drop things and don't slide you tackle box across the deck.

Of course, if you aren't over the fish, or they start to move off, you can cast a jig to the school. I really like a soft plastic with an action tail in this situation, so I can swim the bait accompanied by slight lift and drop movement.

Actually, when I can't get directly over the school to vertically jig, I prefer to run a small crankbait through the collective. A lot of lures will work but I'm partial to the 4-inch, tight-wobbling crankbaits as opposed to the wide wobblers.

If it's safe because the bottom is not too wonky with snags, use a deep diver that will dig at the lake floor; if not use a short-billed diver.

This time in the crappie year it's all about locating

schools in deeper water. Then watch for the pyramids.



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Reader Story

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ens a sense of inherited tradition.

Pursuing pheasants takes us to the edge of our knowledge. We proceed through the mystery of tall wheat or cornstalks. We rely on the dog and her nose.

We trudge alongside one another: two worlds in tandem and in motion, animal guiding men to uncover what the humans cannot on their own.

There is a time-stopping quality to those times in the field, when you are squinting into winter-morning sunlight so bright and orange, one can barely see anything in any direction.

Sunlight scalds your vision - you blink through it as through a driving snow, and yet there is something ticklish about it. You want to laugh at the utter relentlessness of the light streaming into your eyes.

The wind blows and the wheat sighs. With each step there's a papery crunch, the huffing of your breath elevated with the effort of walking.

You stop and listen, feel your fingers growing numb against the cold of the gun barrel. Somewhere to your side, moving twice as fast as you, the dog searches for pheasant scent.

It could go on like this forever, and it seems to: step after step through open fields under a blue sky, walking toward the taunting glare of the sun. Anticipation, curiosity and hope pulls you forward.

Time follows at your heels.



JPT Member

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Include this form with photo. Include a S.A.S.E. for photo return.

DO NOT PUT SUBSCRIPTION FORMS IN WITH YOUR PHOTOS.

Photo composition is the most important aspect of a good shot. No beer cans or cigarettes/cigars in photos. Do not hold fish by eyes or gills. Stringer shots and hanging deer shots are not accepted. This form is for general reader photos. Specific photo contests will have their own form. Send to:

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People in photo (L to R): _____

PLEASE LIST NAMES ON BACK OF PHOTO ALSO.

Age of youth if under 19 ____ Member of Junior Pro Team? Yes No

Address: _____

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Date of kill/catch: _____

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Was fish released? Yes No

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