

Bringing the Hunt to the Hunter

Pheasant hunting stateowned properties

By Dick Ellis

Once already on this overcast October 25th Saturday morning, Troy Thorson had watched his seven year-old chocolate lab give in to the overpowering scent of pheasant hanging fresh on the grasses of Vernon Marsh. “Annie” had abandoned her “stay close” posture to take up the chase with an instinctive tenacity, eventually pushing a long-tailed rooster to the sky far ahead of her master.

The bird would not have been reached by Thorson’s shotgun. As is often the way with luck and skill in a hunter’s field though, the rooster broke cover and broke back directly at Thorson in escape. One shotgun report had placed a first rooster of the young season in the gamebag.

The game continued on, long tail feathers reaching from Thorson’s vest to tell another story of success; like other tales written across the ages since pheasants hunting in Wisconsin emerged in the late 1800s. Now though, the hunter welcomed the intrusion of a reporter to tag along with a camera, and Rocco, a one year old black lab with unending potential and an equal amount of field ignorance. With a little luck, Rocco would earn some apprenticeship points from the savvy Annie on one of the 71 state properties stocked with pheasants throughout Wisconsin,



Troy Thorson of Waukesha and 7-year old Chocolate Lab, Annie teamed up to tag this rooster raised at the state game farm in Poynette and released in Vernon Marsh for public hunting. The Farm stocks pheasants throughout Wisconsin on more than 70 public hunting properties.

and throughout the season, by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

“Whenever I try to hunt for wild birds in Wisconsin, I haven’t seen any,” said Thorson. “The state stocking program lets me hunt pheasants close to home.”

Wisconsin’s wild bird population does allow excellent hunting in certain regions or even

pockets of the state. This column will examine 2008 wild bird hunting in the near future. But, like Thorson knows, hunting wild birds can often mean relatively long travel and more ground work prior to the hunt like gaining permission on private lands. Birds released in the state stocking program on public properties, often called “put and take” be-

cause pheasants are raised and released specifically to be hunted, helps bridge the gap between those with a desire to hunt pheasants but with no avenue to do so.

According to an October 7, DNR media release, 70,000 pheasant hunters in 2007 reported harvesting 360,207 birds overall. Top harvest counties included Kenosha, Dane and Dodge. Last year, “put and take” birds stocked from the Poynette Game Farm numbered 58,000 birds which were stocked on 70 properties. Due in part, according to the release, to higher gas and feed costs, this year, the number of stocked birds was decreased to 52,000 pheasants.

The State Game Farm is responsible for stocking Wisconsin properties from the far south as far north as Eau Claire and Marathon counties. Wisconsin pheasant hunters can check the Special Pheasant Regulations and Maps on the DNR website for 2008 stocking information identifying public hunting grounds slated for pheasant stocking near them.

Planning at Poynette begins the spring before the next year’s hunting season with the selection of hen and rooster breeders. For example, 7,900 hens and 700 roosters were kept last spring to produce stock for the 2008 fall season currently underway. The



Troy Thorson and Annie continue their search for farm-raised pheasants at one of the 71 Wisconsin properties stocked by the DNR for hunting purposes.



Troy Thorson looks down to read the behavior of chocolate lab, Annie, hot on the track of another pheasant in Vernon Marsh. One rooster was already in the bag.



Rocco, a year old black lab, is introduced to pheasant hunting Saturday at Vernon Marsh by the writer.

hatching season begins in April and continues weekly until mature stock at 18 weeks old is sufficient to supply the properties from a week prior to the first day of the season October 18 through the final day of the season December 31.

In addition to creating excellent table fare and giving the hunter an opportunity to target pheasants, the stocking program allows hunters to train their dogs. This is the first time in 16 years

in which I enter the pheasant season without a dog. But, between my sister Patty Quigley's, Rocco and Dylan; an apparently gun shy, one-year old yellow lab belonging to my sister Barb Johnson, I will be kept busy in puppy love. My own puppy purchase looms somewhere close on the horizon.

Saturday, Rocco showed the undisciplined puppy playfulness that comes with not yet knowing what this game is all about. Play-

time stopped temporarily when Thorson pulled out the rooster already in the game bag and introduced the bird, face-to-face, to Rocco. Instincts took over and held the young pup transfixed for two minutes.

Annie would show her master one more rooster, her "birdie" behavior showing the way. When Thorson saw the bird though, it had crossed the Vernon Marsh refuge line off limits to hunters and utilized by the state as a wa-

terfowl production area. At day's end, the hunter, though, couldn't have asked for more.

"This is our third year of pheasant hunting public property," Thorson said. "We hunt on week days before work because there are not very many other hunters out. The decline of the wild pheasant in Wisconsin kind of makes me sad. But without this stocking program, I'd never have the opportunity to hunt pheasants at all." *OWO*