

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Wild and Wary

Rooster hunt proves challenging, rewarding

By Dick Ellis

The search for wild roosters far to the south in Grant County near Lancaster wouldn't begin for another 45 minutes or so. But the hunt really began when the old truck rolled to a stop in the parking lot of East Side Sports & Liquor in Fennimore. Small and far too-often disappearing Wisconsin businesses like this one owned and operated by Dennis Friederick pull at a hunter on the road to stop in, shoot the bull, spend a buck, and maybe hold a gun or a fishing rod or two.

I found Friederick tending to his merchandise, which he hopes soon to expand to firearms sales. A future deer and turkey registration station for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is also on his wish list. After a bit of small talk about local pheasant numbers, I bought a new box of Federal #4 shot, and turned the Chevy toward Lancaster.

Wisconsin sports shops do add to the overall experience of any hunt. The people of this state do too. Grant County farmers and other landowners are a rare breed down in the southwest. They like to talk, they still smile a lot, and if you treat their land with respect and leave small gift of appreciation, there's a good chance you'll be invited back again.

We come back often. Although we have experienced fabu-



Twelve year-old Yellow lab Gunner works a grassy field next to standing corn for wild pheasants October 31 in Grant County

lous wild bird hunts over the last decade in Wisconsin, pre-season DNR reports told us to expect fewer wild birds in 2008. Spring crowing count surveys and the rural mail carrier pheasant survey conducted over 32 counties in Wisconsin wild pheasant range showed 30 percent and 18 percent declines respectively compared to 2007.

Brood survey information collected in July and August, according to the DNR website, also showed a 42 percent decline in the number of broods seen per observer and a 12 percent decrease in the average size of broods. Brood

rearing conditions in 2008 were slightly cooler and much wetter than in 2007. While wet and cool conditions did not occur statewide, they likely did have an impact on local brood survival.

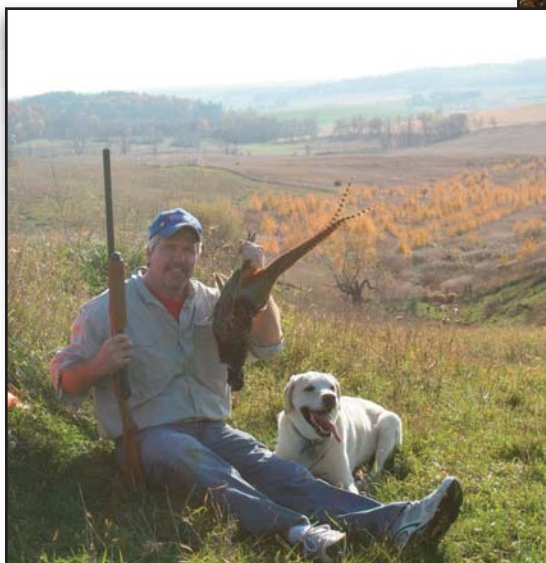
Although the southwest part of the state initiated habitat planting essential to the bird's success prior to stocking wild strains of birds over the last 20 years from Iowa and China, 2008 showed most of the region with significant decreases in bird numbers. St. Croix and Polk counties in the far northwest were the number one and three counties respectively this

year in the wild bird population surveys. Green Lake and Washington counties in central and southern Wisconsin and Lafayette County in the far southwest rounded out the very geographically diverse top five.

"Wisconsin's wild, naturally reproducing pheasant population experienced a challenging winter and nesting season this year," said Scott Hull, DNR Upland Game Biologist. "Conditions that favored some species, such as waterfowl broods, were tough on others. Still, there is no substitute for searching out good habitat, scouting and se-



Gunner works tall grass for wild pheasant in Grant County on the afternoon of Halloween



Ellis used a timer on his camera to capture this shot of hunter, Gunner and the wild rooster taken the afternoon of Halloween after a long hard hunt in the Grant County valley seen in the distance



Gunner rests after a long hard hunt under a hot sun in Grant County finally produces a wild rooster October 31.

curing land owner permission in determining hunting success.”

I had secured permission to hunt for wild pheasant from a landowner several days before the trip. I had met him the year before while on a last hunt with Blue, and now Gunner, the 12 year old yellow lab belonging to my sister, was in the back seat of the truck as we rocked up the dirt road to begin the hunt. Gunner still looks for Blue, his lifelong hunting partner and I still feel him. Especially on this first hunt after our last hunt. But I will say by now that I’m getting to be an expert at hunting with geriatric canines, and I eased Grandpa Gunner down into the grasses and turned him loose.

Atrophy and time may rob the muscles and joints. But time, it seems, so often cannot steal the enthusiasm or even the sense of smell of an old dog. Gunner and I began our quest with a well-thought out game plan. Because temperatures on this uncharacteristically warm Halloween afternoon would see temperatures approaching 70 degrees under still, cloudless skies, we would hunt slowly and take many water breaks. I would make Gunner rest in the shade, and he had plenty of doggie treats packed courtesy of my sister and a time-tested favorite; one ripe banana.

The hunt was long, hard and hot despite the precautions. Hull had stated that wetlands are one of the most important year-round cover types for pheasants. Areas within the pheasant management counties that contain adequate winter cover such as cattail and shrub-carr marshes and well-established native prairie fields are a good place to start. We had mainly rolling grasslands in the southwest with standing corn and blow-

downs on fence lines providing ample food and additional cover to seek out scent.

Scenting conditions were dry and poor. We did not see any hens that serve as the lifeblood for future bird populations. Three hours into the hunt, we also had not seen any roosters. With Gunner showing wear and tear, we set a course that would take us through a final valley and to the truck parked high on a hill in the distance.

Gunner went birdie for the first time where standing corn met tall grassland. It didn’t take long for the old veteran to push the long-tailed bird from a fallen tree. Two shotgun reports from an .870 rolling down the valley successfully punctuated one more tale from the fields of Wisconsin.

Gunner made the retrieve. I praised him for his fine work and we headed down the valley.

“I’d say you just earned one banana and a cold drink, Gunny Boy,” I said.

Gunner agreed. He just wasn’t sharing. *Wo*