

Chasing America's Bird



Photos and story by Scott Linden

Like partygoers on their way home, the birds flushed reluctantly in dribs and drabs. Left and right, in front and behind, a covey fat with fruit of the prairie. The Brittany quivered until the crack of my shotgun put one on the ground. Then a late riser hooked away, shuddering as it took one pellet and soared straight up, dropping 100 yards away.

It was a good day hunting sharp-tailed grouse, America's bird. This flock's ancestors clucked and dusted on the dry Montana plain when buffalo roamed it centuries ago. Sharpies fed Native Americans and Custer's cavalry. They nourished California-bound pioneers and sod-busting homesteaders. And still, the tenacious birds maintain a foothold on our Western and Midwestern prairies, offering sport and sustenance for hunters and dogs willing to invest boot leather and energy.

Tympanuchus phasianellus embodies America's unspoiled heartland and by virtue of that and their accessibility to anyone willing to invest time and effort, they are "our" bird. Vast swaths of publicly owned grasslands ensure hunting for everyone. Private landowners unlock their gates for varying incentives. Sharptail hunting may be a living, breathing example of a natural treasure...but it's not a walk in the park.

Our climb began at 6,000 feet and rose another 1,000 before we glimpsed the dog, panting harder than us, stub tail high and vibrating like a tuning fork. Sharpies clucked skyward before we reached the point, but one made a fatal turn.

That was a rare example of sharptails cooperating with their human pursuers. Usually, we are the ball while they are the Louisville Slugger. Late-season bunches can number in the hundreds, and all it takes is one pair of grouse eyes to spot a predator and incite a wild flush at 100 yards. Early season, the battle is between blazing sun and parched bodies.

Dogs don't seem to mind. Unclip the lead on a big-running pointing breed and put fresh batteries in the GPS tracker. Short cover and far horizons unleash the beast within. Yep, that speck skylined on the horizon is your dog, and you'd better beat-feet because he's on point. Bring your steadiest dogs and tighten your bootlaces.

Sharptails are conceived, hatched, and fledged far from the influence – or interference – of man. A hunter looking for the untamed, natural world distilled to its essence can't go wrong heading west. Out of sight of the truck, you are a hundred years away.

Finding Sharptails

Find huntable populations in the Dakotas, Wyoming, Nebraska, Montana, Alaska, even Idaho. Sometimes you'll see limited seasons in Minnesota, Michigan, Colorado, and Wisconsin. Canada's Prairie Provinces are legendary.

Start with the eastern half of Montana, South Dakota along the Missouri River westward, North Dakota's Missouri Slope region, Nebraska's Sandhills into the Panhandle. In Wyoming explore the eastern slopes of the Bighorn Mountains and Laramie Range.

You are a small dot on a big map. If you'd like help finding birds, I can recommend these outfitters from personal experience:

Pete Rogers, Pigeys Outfitters, Moccasin, Montana: (406) 423-5332

Al Gadoury, 6X Outfitters, Bozeman, Montana: (406) 600-1835

Bob Tinker, Tinker Kennels, Pierre, South Dakota (horseback hunts): (605) 224-5414

There are really two sharptail seasons. One begins auspiciously in mid-summer, hopes high and verdant growth a riot of new life. Pro trainers pitch camp on the prairie and introduce pups to a naïve bird that holds well for innocent points. When the season opens in September, count yourself lucky if there are a few of those birds in your patch. Your dog will shine, dazzling you with trembling points.

Wait until pheasant season to hunt sharpies, and you'd think they were a different species altogether. Broods reunite with past generations, convening in massive flocks that flush at the sound of a truck door's slam. They're in steep coulees populated by chokecherry, offering shade in a sun-baked landscape or shelter from harsh winter winds. Bringing one to bag requires stealth, patience, and different tactics.

The clack of wings signaled a wild flush at the knoll's crest – a frequent hangout for sharptails. Some lit a few hundred yards from us, and we marked them through binoculars and put on our best elk-in-woods sneak. The ghost-white setter was soon firmly planted downwind, drinking in scent. We puffed our way around her. One bird towered like a ringneck and fell to Al's weathered side-by-side. Another snuck out the backdoor, but his counterpart lingered just enough to give me a straightaway shot. The edge of my pattern caught a wing.

That's another reason to have enough dog power. While the country may look manicured in magazine photos, there are plenty of places for a wing-clipped sharpie to hunker. Force-broke pointing breeds are best-equipped to handle these birds before and after the shot. The good news is your dog will get plenty of chances for long-distance marks.

Let's give him a rest and look at where these birds roam....

Worth the walk: undulating ground at the foot of a mountain range is ideal habitat.

Pete Rogers' Britts: ready, willing, and able.

Rolling foothills often harbor the components these hardy birds need: prairie grass that is tall enough to "sway in the wind," says Montana Department of Fish & Wildlife's Graham Taylor.

Pigeon Outfitters' Pete Rogers offers a grocery list of grasshoppers, snowberry, rose hips, and cinquefoil. Leafy greens (including alfalfa) are a summer staple, willow buds and wild plums supplement the birds' winter diet. They can eke moisture out of their diet in all but the driest years.

America's bird dwells on our version of the Serengeti: limitless plains rolling toward distant horizons. Bison and pronghorn roam there, grizzlies, too. Watch for them all when you visit this cornucopia of game and ground untouched by the plow.

Sharpies darkened the sky as Conestoga wagons creaked their way toward Oregon. Young Native Americans polished their bowhunting skills on them, General George Custer pursued them with his ever-present dogs, and homesteaders scraped together a last meal of grouse before abandoning their sod homes. They have all gone, but the sharptail remains, a vestige of wild in a changing America. That's good enough reason to open the tailgate and turn the dog loose.

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Crack-of-dawn hunts take advantage of cooler temperatures early in the season.



Different Tactics

Birds of the prairie take the long view, literally. Pigeye Outfitters' Pete Rogers believes using your dog as a "blind" may keep birds on the ground longer. Traditional "pinching" or approaching from an oblique angle may launch them sooner than coming in from behind your dog.

Our inclination is to point the dog right into the breeze, drop two in the pipes, and get ready for an adrenaline rush. Rather, Rogers hunts in a circle, angling into the wind away from the truck, directly into it, across again, then with a tailwind and more crosswind on the home stretch. I wish I'd thought of it. Your dog gets some type of crosswind almost the entire hunt.

I carry my ideal sharptail gun, a 12-gauge over-under, choked IC and Mod. While Pete agrees that might be a good choice for most hunters, most times, he contends that accuracy and shot size are more critical. He's right. I killed two birds stone-dead on one hunt with a single No. 6 shot. In those cases, I was glad for all the metal in the air from a 12-gauge, and if I wanted to maximize my bag, I'd maintain a tight grip on my thunderstick (forgive the cultural appropriation). On another hunt, a 28-gauge worked just as well.

But there's another reason. You and I own much of the land sharptails call home, so admission is free. A good map and some research will put you in sharptail country: national grasslands in North and South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska are a good place to start. Alluvial plains spilling from mountain ranges and national forests, too. Folded, wrinkled ground administered by state wildlife or forestry departments, and the gem in the sharptail crown: private land open to hunters.

Most sharptail states link hunters with ranchers and farmers willing to share their land. North Dakota's Private Land Open to Sportsmen, Nebraska's Open Fields and Waters, South Dakota's walk-in areas, Montana's Block Management Areas and "Open Fields" – all are worth a go. Some of the best sharpie hunting I've had is in the pockets of grass dotted among cornfields in North Dakota owned by the local ethanol baron.

Navigating the tangled bureaucratic web of public/private land administration can be a grueling lesson in what's wrong with government. It is also worth the headache. Start planning early, and verify everything you are told by minor government functionaries.

The checkerboard of public and private land near Ft. Pierre, South Dakota, was ideal for horseback hunting – wide sky and a sea of green were the canvas for a painting of lithe setters working to the front. A white dot at the bottom of a draw caught my Tennessee Walker's eye, and he ambled toward the younger dog. I went along for the ride. The senior dog in the brace soon trotted to

an elegant halt honoring his son, pivoting his elegant head in search of humans.

Grasshoppers flushed in waves before us as we moved briskly, loading as we went. One bird up, a shot fired but not before the brown blur had topped the ridge, untouched. Similar scenarios played out most of the day but for a single coulee where the tri-colored setter cat-danced into a 12-o'clock-tail point. My foot caught in a stirrup, it took a lifetime to untangle and load up. The bird must have felt sorry for me, though, giving his life to a grateful hunter who didn't deserve such consideration. When delivered gently to hand, I gave thanks to bird, dog, and horse.

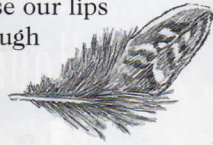
Your dog will bedazzle and bedevil you. He'll lock up in the midst of a loose flock, whirling at rises behind him while you're tracking a going-away bird. When valley floors heat up, he'll point from ridgelines, scent pushed from birds below him. A tight family group will short-circuit your dog with so much stink, he'll crash in wild-eyed, scattering them to the prairie winds. Late season birds cluck farewell before your dog winds them, hundreds of yards in the distance.

Eventually, you'll get your photo. Quivering tail, fur stirred by a faint breeze. Birds stuck well in knee-high snowberry. Snap a couple then close your gun and walk in. Keep your cheek on the stock and eye on one grouse – your dog deserves a bird on the ground.

Condition your dog for high-mileage hunting in heat and cold. Lungs, legs, and pads should be ready for five- to 15-mile days. Bring as much water as you can fit in your bulging vest, and dole it out generously to man and beast. There may be cactus or rattlesnakes. On a vast landscape, your sense of direction will abandon you so bring a GPS and compass.

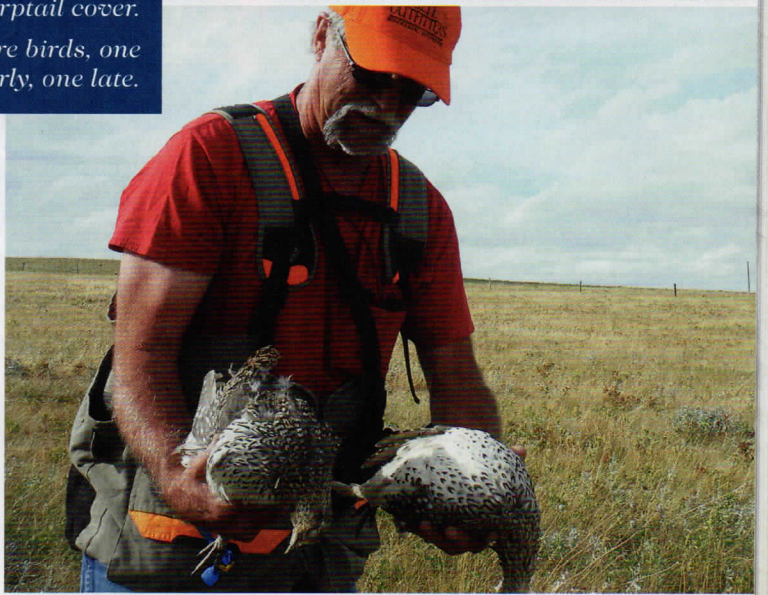
Rogers' compact Brittany seemed to be admiring the view until his brace mate honored what we finally guessed was a point. We'd been ogling the snowcapped mountains, talking blue grouse and playing who-do-you-know when we should have been watching the dog. Earlier, he'd admonished me to pay attention, one of the principal rules of sharpie hunting. Once a bird was pinned, his other suggestion was get to the dog safely but damn fast.

Those were among the many lessons learned that day, and every other day I've spent chasing America's bird. Long walks and big skies lend themselves to introspection, from who walked here before us, to where the heck the dog is. In a good year, we have time to contemplate bird behavior over and over as we jump coveys or watch them glide over a point of land. We kick the dusty earth; purse our lips at the bitter-sour bite of a rose hip. But enough navel-gazing – the dog is on point and we'd best put on the hustle.



Food, in the form of rose-hips, among low-growing shrubs and knee-high grass ... perfect sharptail cover.

A brace of mature birds, one flushed early, one late.



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