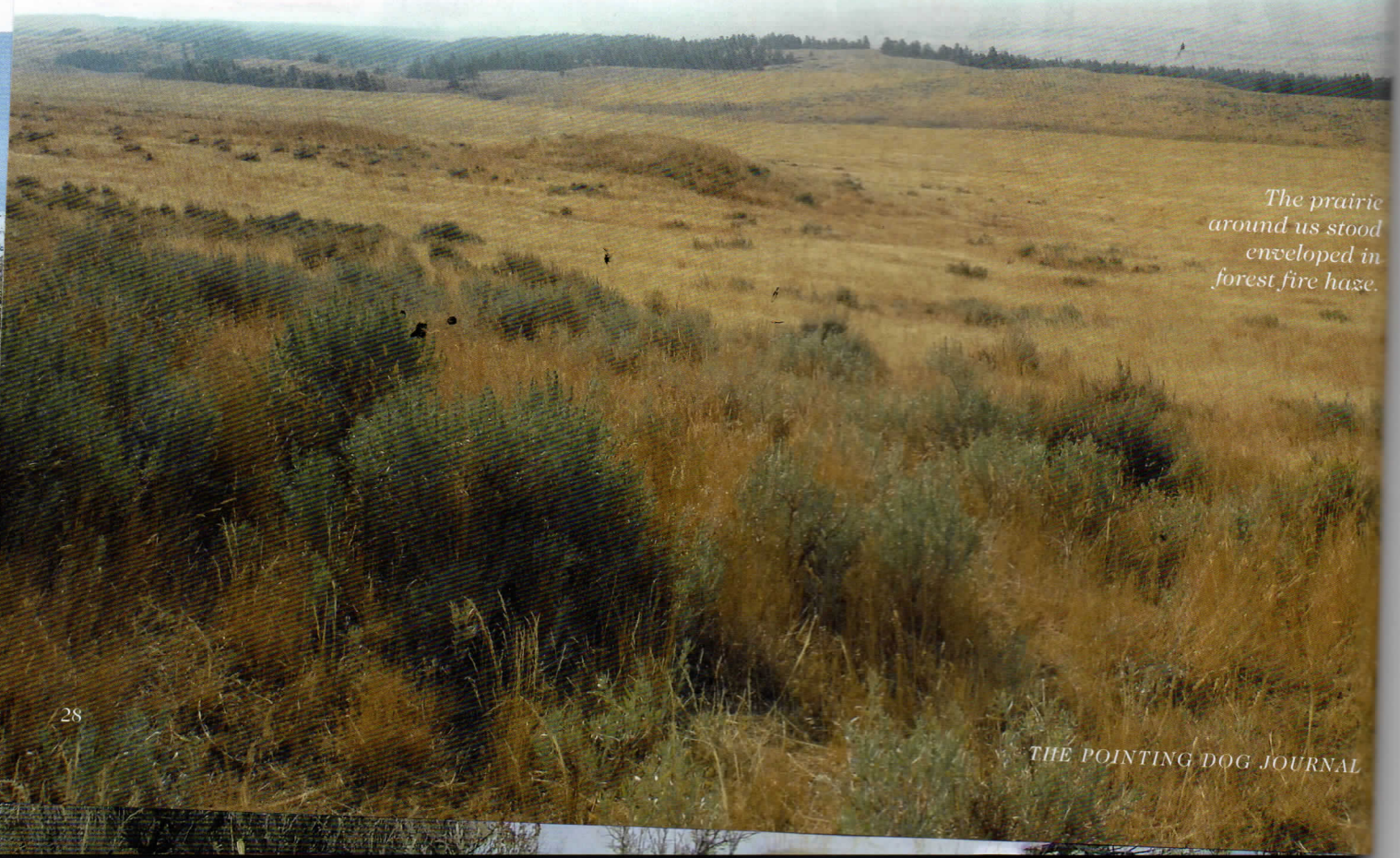


# MONTANA'S FIRE BIRDS

JONATHAN MOOR PHOTO, COURTESY OF BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT



*The Lodgepole fire.*



*The prairie  
around us stood  
enveloped in  
forest fire haze.*

by Scott Linden

The West was on fire. From British Columbia to New Mexico and all points in between, flames leapt and smoke blackened the sky. I watched the not-too-distant blazes every night from my own backyard, wondering if staying home with garden hose at hand would be wise. But some of the country's best sharp-tail and Hun country beckoned near Lewistown, Montana, and my hope was the fires wouldn't lay waste to the prairies and creek bottoms.

If nothing else, the sunrises and sunsets would make stunning video for my TV show. That cinched it.

Fire imbued every aspect of the trip, from highway warning signs to ad hoc firefighters camps on high school football fields. The Snowy Range, Grass Range, even the Missouri Breaks were ablaze. Stories of heroes and tragedy were front page news in every newspaper enroute to Montana. When four-month-old Flick's potty break time coincided with the location of a massive fire camp, we pulled in.

He peed. I peed, poured a coffee, and inventoried the hum of activity, the haggard looks on those returning from the fire line. Hollow eyes and drooping shoulders marked those shuffling in after hacking and digging against a relentless enemy. I clipped on the lead, and Flick toddled from bench to tent to truck, bringing a smile to smoke-streaked faces that had seen hell up close. Some stroked and petted Flick; he reciprocated with a lick or snuffle. Rugged men cuddled him gently in calloused hands, others sighed. More than one blinked away a tear, thinking of their own dogs far away, faithfully awaiting their master's return.

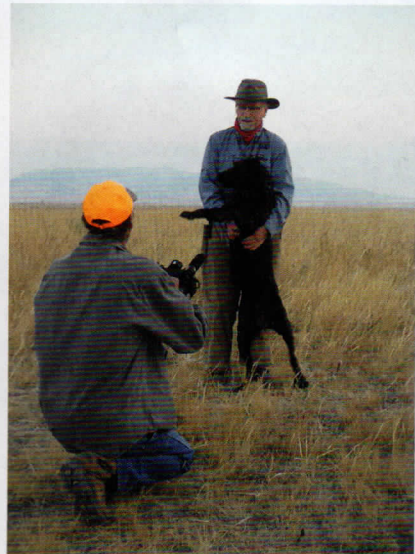
Our tiny, random act of kindness was rewarded the next day with news the fires hadn't moved closer to our destination. What followed was a series of epic walks, stellar dog work, and wily birds, enveloped in a surreal haze both literal and figurative.

Even in a "good fire year," Montana's prairie grouse season has two principal characteristics: hot and dry. Both were in good supply as Al Gadoury of 6X Outfitters off-loaded his senior dog, Sis. Slow but wise, the 12-year-old Brittany ambled toward the skyline, easing to a stop – or was it a point? The question was answered by a rusty-gate screech – a single Hungarian partridge beat toward a nearby ridgeline until felled by the crack of Al's vintage side-by-side. Sis delivered a

young bird to hand, a male so immature his chestnut-colored "horseshoe" breast feathers barely showed.

In the hand, they look so big. On the wing, quail-like. That's the shooting challenge: Huns are an optical illusion, vexing your eyes and your head. Their escape call is unnerving as well. Anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

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Guide Al Gadoury and Bigfoot smile for the TV camera.

I made my usual excuses, but Al saw through them all. "You can tell a new partridge hunter by watching. They shoot too close, and often their feet are not set up for the shot. Take your time; make one good shot," he reminded me.

Some water, a slow walk to the truck, and Sis was done for the day. She was dozing as we struck off again with Bigfoot the Labrador at heel and Two Dot the English setter already just one dot on the far horizon.

The air was still on the vast prairie, but the setter adapted, sussing out ground scent when breezes failed. A lot of sharpies ghosted away from the fleet-footed Two Dot, but enough stragglers stood for the elegant setter to make it a busy morning.

At every high spot where sharp-tails might congregate, sometimes after a shot and often because of the awesome display, we marveled at the hellish tableau surrounding us. Bands of orange flames licked hillsides



*In dry seasons, water is crucial, including keeping your dog's nostrils moistened.*

Like the legendary "fire bird" the phoenix, Montana rose from the flames last year; communities have bounced back. While threatened, the prairies never did sizzle like the surrounding forests. Wild bird numbers are strong. If this is your year to go, here is some advice.

Al Gadoury carries a quart-sized spray bottle to keep his dogs cool and enhance their scenting ability. A spritz to the muzzle keeps nostrils moist and fully functioning; misting ears, belly, and "armpits" cools them without wasting the precious fluid.

Montana's Block Management Access program provides public access to millions of acres of private land. Most are managed well because landowners get paid by the visit. Poor habitat means nobody hunts and nobody gets paid. Get the map books, plan ahead, sign in at the kiosk, and where necessary make reservations with landowners. Order your maps here: <http://fwp.mt.gov/hunting/hunterAccess/blockman>.

Only in Montana is there a place where you can sip your beer and look through the floor into a trout stream: Montana Tavern, 202 W. Main St., Lewistown.

Al Gadoury's expertise, on-the-ground scouting, and insights into everything from natural history to vintage firearms are worth whatever he charges for a few days in the field. One more shooting tip from this wellspring of wisdom: practice going-away targets (as in trap shooting) as most prairie birds will be doing just that. Book well in advance at [www.6Xoutfitters.com](http://www.6Xoutfitters.com).

Lewistown is a sportsman's paradise, with sporting goods stores, lodging, RV parks and nearby camping, restaurants, even a craft brewery. The best hamburger in the known world is at Harry's Place; for a treat, stay at Judith Mountain Lodge or Pheasant Tales Bed & Bistro (owners are setter folks!), each just outside of town.

on three sides of us. Midday became twilight, acrid smoke from the Lodgepole Fire affected the dogs' scenting and our haggard breathing. I've been among the crackling flames and choking smoke and knew what was happening up there. Were any of Flick's newfound friends on the line today, trying to slow the roaring flames?

We huffed toward the edge of a bench, watching smoke roiling like an incoming tide down a distant hillside. "A likely place for Huns," Al said, noting the shorter grass, brittle from drought. Sharpies like grass long enough to "bend in the breeze," according to one old-timer. But not this day.

We gained the summit without the inconvenience of a flush and were soon gazing down at an ancient riverbed reduced over millennia to rubble and sand. An incongruous green strip bisected the flat, a vestige of one rancher's failed effort to wrest an alfalfa crop from unforgiving prairie soil. Now, the few leaves on spindly stalks are a preferred food for grasshoppers, which in turn become sharptail food. We trudged down. Nothing stirred in the dense air but the hills ragged, smoke rising in columns like thunderheads on thermals created by the intense heat.

A brief pause, and Two Dot was again on the track. A wild flush was answered by Al's gun, and a single bird dropped at 50 yards. That was the signal for the setter to get more methodical, searching the tendrils of scent not wilted by blistering heat. A hightailed point, then creep, then repeat. The Lab heeled, hopping onto her hind legs periodically to vector her canine partner in case a retrieve was required.

Two hundred yards of anticipation and the setter's patience was rewarded. Her tail rose slowly as if the haze offered resistance. Then, one-two-three birds and finally the rest were airborne, one falling to my shot and two crumpling to Al's. Nondescript on the wing, a sharptail's striking mélange of brown-gray-white-cream stripes, dots, and bars are subtly beautiful up close to these color-blind eyes. Both dogs were rewarded with the taste of feathers, then a cooling drink and a spray from Al's bottle on ears and muzzle.

Stalks crackled underfoot. Dogs panted and we wheezed. The wind huffed eastward, and we were again enveloped in a netherworld of pine-tinged smog from the devil's campfire.

Skulking, skittering sharptails led us on a merry chase, ground-tracked by Two Dot over hill and dale. Bigfoot

tried to walk at *heel*, but cloudlets of scent and the setter's cautious work prompted an occasional yelp of excitement from the Lab and a veer from Al's side. The stark landscape offered little cover, so birds milled toward a bench that Al guessed would serve as launching pad.

The setter finally paused, lifted a front foot, and we hustled past. Most of the flock had peeled off, but four birds brazened it out until we were almost in their midst. They panicked into flight, two making little clouds of dust as they landed, dead. I made a beeline for their last known address, anticipating the lone known-out that always gets up when you're reloading. Al held me back. "Let them decide when to fly."

Right again, Al. And a well-handled blind retrieve by Bigfoot was a highlight of the day. She was in her element.

Below the bench, another green swatch beckoned, this a shin-tangling thicket of snowberry. Walking along a tiny creek, we spotted wild trout, gave wide berth to a surly red angus bull, and found sage grouse sign but no sage grouse. As the stream broadened and soaked a low spot, the cover thickened. The low-growing shrubbery caught our ankles and hampered the lithe setter's dance. Al turned the Lab loose in the rank bush, and she bruted her way to the edge of the creek bank where a single sharptail thundered skyward. Surprise led to instinct and a deadly shot; for a change, it was from my side-by-side.

We followed the feeble current downstream. Each meander offered enough moisture to sustain a single gnarled tree. "Birds will be under them to get away from the hawks," Al ventured, and his prophesy was good. Most flushed his way, so I could look to the burning hills and wonder if Flick's new friends were safe, sometime soon able to return safely to their own families, friends, and dogs.



Scott Linden is the host and creator of Wingshooting USA TV, blogger, podcaster, and author of the book *What the Dogs Taught Me*. His new website is [www.findbirdhuntingspots.com](http://www.findbirdhuntingspots.com).

March/April 2020

# Book Room

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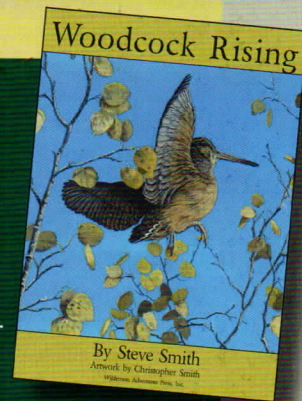
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