



Rogue, the young Brittany, gets on pheasant scent drifting down from this wild grassy hillside just before a storm unleashes a torrent of hail. These fields are typical of the area, where pheasants are often found on cool October afternoons, sunning themselves. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)

Columbia Basin Mélange

Glenn Zinkus

We leave the cultivated green grasslands of the Willamette Valley, skirting the growing Portland metropolis to enter the western reach of the Columbia River Gorge. Winding eastward through the Gorge, the verdant, steep timbered slopes give way to gentler rolling hills and tawny tones . . . bird country. I am on my way to the upper Columbia Basin. This time, it is my wife – so often my hunting road trip companion – our brace of Brittanys and me.

This annual tradition started more than 25 years ago with my first Brittany. That big Brit liked nothing better than running over open spaces of cut wheat and corn fields hoping to pick up a whiff of pheasant or sprinting up precipitous slopes after chukar. When I had an invitation to hunt a farm that happened to be filled with pheasants, I jumped at the chance. That single road trip gave my young dog more wild pheasant experience than he had received during his entire first year. This farm turned out to be a sprawling ranch growing wheat, corn and potatoes, all separated by thick cover of grass and sage, spread out over thousands of acres. The owner of the ranch was a brother of one of my work colleagues. That serendipitous invitation opened my eyes to the upland hunting world of the Columbia Basin. I first made this trip before the days of GPS, plotting a course not through the Columbia River Gorge but across central Oregon with stops in some deep river canyons for chukar before veering east through unknown wild lands, the occasional town and far-spaced ranches.

A startled coyote running ahead of the Jeep in a narrow tumbleweed-filled playa signaled the entrance to the wild areas. Continuing on towards the farm and a climb up a series of switchbacks led to an open plateau of golden wheat fields and



Preparing for a productive day on publicly accessible land in a "Welcome To Hunt" area. Because this area includes some thick cover, we all "suit up" for the brambles and thorns. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)

indigo skies so wide and brilliant, unlike other areas I had ever hunted at the time.

The Columbia Basin is bounded by the Rocky Mountains on the east and north, the Cascades on the west and the Great Basin and associated high desert to the south. This mesmerizing topography originated when a giant meteorite struck southeast Oregon, splashing lava across the lowlands and creating the base of the Columbia plateau. The onset of the Ice Age cooled the hot lava and formed colossal glaciers that covered the entire Northwest. These glaciers created a mammoth ice dam, forming Lake Missoula. A catastrophic dam burst caused a great flood, inundating Oregon and Washington with hundreds of feet of water and forming the gorges and fertile valleys of Oregon today, including the lands of the Columbia Basin.

My home base after hours on the road was and still is to this day, Heppner, Oregon. Heppner itself is at the crossroads of some country highways and is the major settlement of this agricultural land. Heppner is the gateway from the Columbia River into the Blue Mountains. Heppner and its environs are home to a diverse range of upland birds including pheasants, Hungarian partridge, grouse, quail and chukar, further fixing this location as an upland bird hunting Mecca. That said, there won't be the numbers of pheasants that a hunter will see in South Dakota or grouse in Wisconsin and other grouse-rich locations, but there is diversity, and the birds are there.

Several years ago, Pheasants Forever deemed Heppner one of the top bird hunting towns in the United States. The moniker is not unearned, as anyone can attest who forays into and out of town during the lowlight hours, that magic time in late afternoon when gold beams of sun illuminate the wheat fields and signal "pheasant happy hour." Roosters and hens alike appear along the roads, in grassy paddocks and along edges of the cover, just strutting around and socializing during the remains of the day. I even encountered a rooster one cool evening, just



A California quail sentry on a fencepost overlooking the covey feeding along a harvested field. Quail populations are variable, but they are often found in the same places as rooster pheasants. (Photo/Glenn Zinkus)



Green signs indicate that hunters are "Welcome To Hunt" this area. Oregon's Department of Fish and Wildlife issues maps of the Greater Heppner Regulated Hunt Area that outline both "Welcome To Hunt" and "Hunting With Permission" properties. (Photo/Glenn Zinkus)



This gregarious coyote watched us from a long distance while we finished a pheasant hunt. Perhaps he was wily enough to understand that game might get pushed into his own hunting areas. (Photo/Glenn Zinkus)



Late afternoon near some Heppner area hunting properties. Winding back roads outside of town climb from pheasant cover on family farms to hilly chukar country. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)

Heppner is the gateway from the Columbia River into the Blue Mountains.

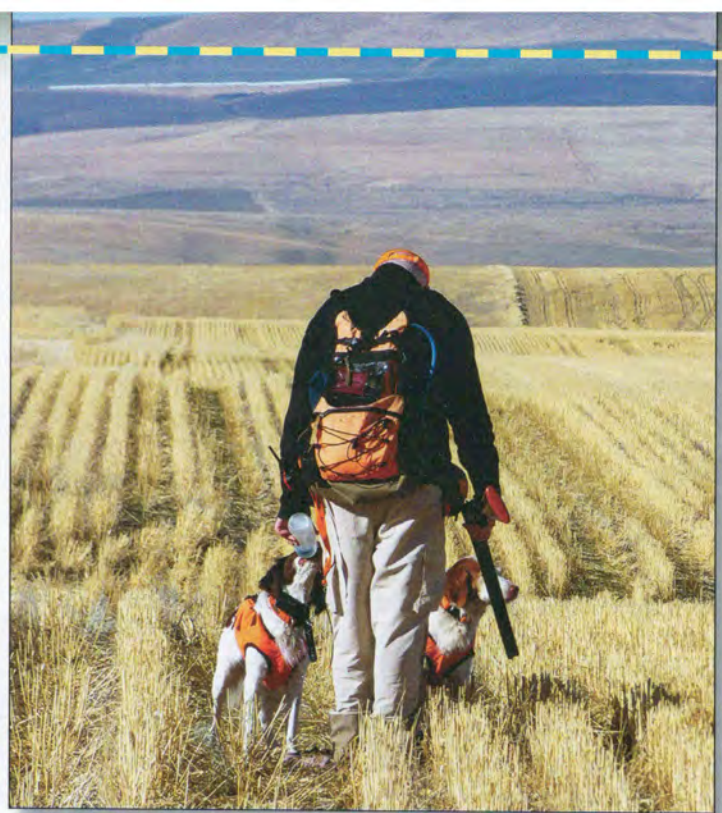
standing there at the very extreme of open hunting land, belting out a cackle while strutting amongst a herd of cattle. Likewise, chukar march onto the open slopes from their precipice hideaways, and coveys of quail can be spotted gravelling along the roadsides.

The greater Heppner area has large areas of accessible private land as a result of state-sponsored programs, including Regulated Hunt Areas, Open Fields and Upland Cooperative Access Program properties. There are "Hunting With Permission" properties, indicated by yellow signs. When hunters see "Hunting With Permission" properties, they can use the contact details on the signs to contact the landowner and schedule a hunt. There are "Welcome To Hunt" properties, indicated by green signs. On these lands, hunters are allowed to freely access these properties (at proper access points, of course) during the hunting season.

The birds in this area are wild, and they are long-distance runners, much akin to a 5,000-meter track runner. My first time in a Heppner area field, my Brit Parker picked up scent, turned downhill and made a quick descent. Sensing that this was a pheasant on the run, I also turned and picked up the pace to keep up. We dropped several hundred feet to the foot of the hill and then a hen pheasant launched from a clump of sage. This same fast-running pheasant behavior reoccurred throughout the day. In the shadows of an old homesteader's barn, Parker sprang up a hill on what could be nothing else than fresh bird scent. Given the pace and distance, it had to be a pheasant. I trailed Parker weaving between human-size clumps of grass. Parker was in full agility dog mode; as the scent cones became tighter, he increased his pace. Before he crested a hill against a sky darkened by storm clouds, a rooster rocketed straight up, hesitating a moment before flapping into horizontal flight slightly out of range, still quite a distance from Parker.

Another time we arrived at another high-country grassy valley that just screamed "Birds!" There, I've found pheasant on the verdant floor level, Huns in a transition area between the wild grassland and an adjacent grain field and chukar atop the basalt-rimmed slopes that surround this location.

Once released, the dogs snapped into bird mode after walking no more than the length of a football field. They crouched a little lower to breathe in scent and began to creep. Both of them converged at a thick, green, thorny bush, locked in a point. Each dog was on an opposite side of the bush, blocking possible escape paths. I closed in, but no cacophony of



Carry copious amounts of water. This rolling wheat field goes for miles, and the Brittans need water to stay cool and healthy and to keep their olfactory senses at their best. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)

feathers and cackles happened. I kicked the brush, and nothing happened. I dived into the brush because something had to be there. The search revealed nothing but a few feathers and some scratched up ground. Whatever birds had been there have "gotten outta' Dodge." Although it was just me and the two dogs, it was enough to push the bird or birds out.

While we collected bird stories from experiences in this country, we also had our share of encounters with porcupines. The very first up-close and personal porcupine meeting happened with the brace of Brits taking an intense interest in an irrigation ditch cut across a wheat field. Rogue, the younger Brittany, held a hesitant point, not quite sure what to do about this foreign scent. Parker, bird savvy and bold, was in the ditch. I jumped down and walked towards the two dogs. No birds flew out of the ditch. Rogue jumped down into the gulley, and I knew then there would be no bird. Hurrying along the brush-filled pathway, I saw the cause of what became a whirling

Coming back from miles walked in the cut wheat. Cut wheat takes a team of experienced dogs to stop running roosters. Hungarian partridge can also be found in the vicinity of some of the higher altitude wheat fields in this area. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)



ball of commotion. Parker was frozen for a moment in a play stance, front half down and up on his rear legs, barking at a black ball of quills. Rogue remained on the slope just above the porcupine. I saw a few quills in Rogue's snout. Drawing closer, I saw Parker had a few more quills in his snout, face and the front of his legs. I always carry a multi-tool in the hunting vest, so I went to work on removing those quills right there near the scene of the crime. There was one problem quill in Rogue, stuck under the skin but broken off very close to the outer skin and hidden in the fur. I just could not grab that quill with the multi-tool nor with tweezers from the tailgate first-aid kit.

We identify local vets in advance of any road trips in case of emergencies, and we deemed this circumstance to be one. We called and visited Dick Temple, DVM, in Lexington, Oregon. When we arrived at the modest office/home/corral that served as our veterinary headquarters in this corner of Oregon during our hunting season, we asked to see the doctor. We were directed outside where we found Dr. Temple clothed in full arm gloves, with one of those arms up the business end of a Holstein. Once Dr. Temple was available, he made quick order of stubby quill, and Rogue was free and clear to hunt again thanks to our country vet.

Interesting porcupine encounters continue around Heppner; some years there are more encounters than others. It's as if porcupines have their own population cycles, with some years being high cycles when there are several encounters during a week of hunting and other years free of any porcupines. At least these Brittanys learned their lesson, and we've never had a severe quill incident again. We've had the dogs run circles around a rolled-up porcupine in the field, and we've seen points at a tree that held a porcupine up in the branches. We've come across porcupines repeatedly in a favorite canyon just haunted with roosters, but the Brits know when to back off.

We've witnessed more interesting animal observations and behavior on out-of-the-way Columbia Basin farms than anywhere else. Some are perhaps commonplace but do raise the heartbeat of an upland hunter. Last year, I took great pleasure watching the corn harvest on a huge circle of corn and seeing the combine cut swaths back and forth across the circle, scaring up pheasants in numbers that local hunters would have never guessed. The best part is that a number of these birds flew to an adjacent field that was open to hunting, away from any other farm operation or building. The local wildlife can be fascinating and provides good diversions while taking a break from the hunting. One time a resident owl in a large oak near our parked Jeep swooped down only to pick up a snake. I never knew that snake makes good fare for owls, but this owl picked up the snake and successfully attempted flight until the snake curled its head back up to nip at that owl and then the snake was immediately dropped.

This Columbia Basin road trip has grown into a tradition, being far more about the trip, the experiences with bird behavior in this country and the evenings back in town. This year, the tradition changed. We made an upgrade and booked an Airbnb property overlooking town. Now the hunting day ends with an IPA on the front porch of the Airbnb watching the sunset over the hills of Heppner. 🍷

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