



# **Mixed Bags** *in the* **Columbia Basin**

## **Private Land for Every Hunter**

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**D**eemed one of the top bird hunting towns in the USA by Pheasants Forever, the town of Heppner provides an ideal base camp location for Columbia Basin upland bird hunts. A vast majority of the hunting cover in this region is in private hands, but fret not, for there are numerous opportunities to hunt this land.

Not only are there premier hunting lodges in the vicinity, but there are private lands open to every upland hunter available through various Heppner District Cooperative Access Programs that allow hunter access to private land in exchange for incentives to landowners. This program is active throughout Morrow and Gilliam counties in the Columbia Basin. Hunters in Oregon pay for this with a \$4 surcharge on hunting licenses, as well as funding from other sources, including an annual auction and raffle, and other enhancement and restoration programs.

There are two types of walk-in hunting access on private lands. There are “Hunting With Permission” properties, indicated by yellow signs. When hunters note the “Hunting With Permission” properties, they can use the contact details on the sign to contact the landowner and schedule a hunt. This allows landowners to control hunter numbers, and ensure responsible hunters are granted access to the property. There are “Welcome To Hunt” properties, indicated by green signs. Hunters are allowed to freely access these properties (at proper access points, of course) during the hunting season. Both of these sign types identify which species on the property hunters can hunt.

Hunters need to seek out the cooperative access properties. You can contact the ODFW Heppner field office (541-676-5230) for an information packet and general map identifying property locations. You will need to get out in the field, locate these properties, and obtain contact infor-

mation from the signs to reserve time on Hunting With Permission properties.

### **Hunting Opportunities**

The Upper Columbia Basin is a hotspot for upland bird hunting because of the diversity of hunting opportunities in the area. Besides hunting with a gorgeous backdrop of rolling hills, fields of grain, rugged canyons and mountains, there are viable populations of pheasant, Hungarian partridge, quail, and chukar throughout the Basin. Properties change from year to year, and while it’s heartbreaking to see a favorite covert exit the program, there are new properties becoming available. Pay attention to signage and scout this area out before the hunt.

The greater Heppner area is a popular hunting destination, hosting upland and big game hunters. These access programs attract Oregonians and out of state hunters to the area. Hunter numbers educate the roosters, even to the extent that these birds evade being cornered by a pair of experi-





a creep; both of them intersect the other's path at a thick, green, thorny bush. Both dogs lock in on a point, Rogue raising his right leg into point resembling a dog frozen in time in a Kirmse etching. Each dog is on opposite sides of the bush, blocking possible escape paths. I close in, but no cacophony of feathers and cackles happens. I kick the brush and nothing happens. Curiosity ensues, and I dive into the brush because something has to be there. The search reveals nothing but a few feathers and some scratched up ground. Whatever birds were there got out of Dodge. It is not as if I made much noise. It's just myself and the two dogs. It was enough to push the bird or birds out.

Despite these guileful birds in the Welcome To Hunt fields surrounding Heppner, I never get over those birds that come out to strut their stuff as sunset approaches. It's a regular pheasant social hour. More than once I've emerged from a brushy canyon to find a rooster or two walking amongst the cows on a grass-covered slope soaking in the last rays of sunlight.

Be ready for any sort of weather, from days that are just too hot for dog work, to snow squalls that descend from the sky without warning after what was a fine October morning. I've faced this in recent years. Plan for weather variations by dressing with multiple layers that can be shed throughout the day as the temperature climbs. Hunters experience foggy and frosty mornings, to bluebird days with the thermometer touching 80 degrees. This is especially noticeable on early autumn days. There often is a rapid drop in temperature during the late afternoon in the shaded canyons. Just as noticeable is the rise in temperature as we drive back into town from these higher elevation canyons.

I don't hesitate to take advantage of the opportunity to hunt private land. Hunting opportunities and experiences are equally good on the land that is both Welcome To Hunt and Hunting With Permission. There is a sense of more privacy when hunting properties that require permission, as many property owners limit these properties to one hunting party in a day, but we find birds on all of types of land.

Perhaps most of all, hunting this diverse cover after multiple species provides us with great, memorable hunting days, and richer stories and experiences than we get close to home.



*The Columbia Basin is one of the few remaining strongholds of wild pheasant hunting in Oregon.*

enced hunting dogs. I've witnessed all the signs of departing birds before reaching the holding cover more times than I can count.

First off, these birds are long distance runners, somewhat akin to a 5,000-meter track runner. The first time I was in a Heppner area field that was new to me, my 6-year-old Brit picked up scent, turned into the 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 down to the base of a knee high golden grassy field, when a hen launched from a clump of sage. This sort of incident repeated itself several times over during the day; and not at just that location, but other fields in the area.

At another location, within the shadows of a homesteader's barn, my Brit 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, and probably a rooster. I trailed Parker weaving between mammoth clumps of grass. Parker was in full agility dog mode, running with the scent cones becoming tighter as he neared the bird. Before cresting a hill, against a sky darkened by storm clouds, a rooster rocketed straight up, hesitating a moment before flapping into horizontal flight.

Other times, I hunt a grassy valley that just screams birds. I've found pheasants on the verdant floor level, Huns in a transition area between the wild grassland and an adjacent grain field, and chukars climbing

the tops of the basalt rimmed slopes.

Parker and Rogue go into immediate bird mode after walking no more than the length of a football field. They crouch just a little lower to breathe in scent, and begin



*Welcome-to-Hunt properties allow open access, while others require permission in order to regulate hunting pressure.*