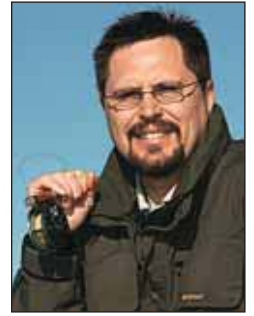


# back cast

By Ron Wilson



It's early October, not long after sunrise, as I shake what remains of a box of shotgun shells into empty vest pockets. But I'm obviously not doing it nearly fast enough, according to the high-pitched whines and wet noses banging against two travel kennel doors.

I love my dogs, and certainly appreciate their enthusiasm. Even so, I still appeal for a little restraint while I fill a water bottle, then double-check that I have my hunting license and keys before locking pickup doors. I see that I left my cell phone sitting in the cup holder, which is fine. I get a certain amount of grief from those who care for me for not carrying it into the field, but I don't like the thing, especially out here where I don't want to be connected.

Thanks to a friend, we're hunting an area new to us. He pointed it out on a map while sitting around a campfire in the Turtle Mountains a week or so earlier. We were hunting ruffed grouse and having darn little luck at it before retiring midday to lawn chairs to poke at the fire. He circled three or four places – the number of places outnumbering the ruffed grouse we'd flushed in two days – which he promised would harbor some sharp-tailed grouse once we headed south out of the timber in the direction of home.

The place is not nameless, but certainly overlooked by some, me included. It's one of those places you'd drive by and think right away that it looks birdy, but the odds of driving by in the first place are not great. It just feels like it's off the beaten path, tucked away from other prying eyes,

but that can't be the case because there are no public land secrets any longer.

I turn the dogs loose and the older of the two is all business once he hits the ground. He shivers with anticipation, and whines when I kneel to scratch the younger, unpolished hunter behind the ear.

We walk down a prairie two-track, eventually dropping into the ditch before crossing a fence – the dogs duck under the lowest strand, while I throw one leg over



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the tallest, carefully followed by the other. Prairie stretches out in front of us, but not on a plane like people who don't live here envision this part of the world looking like.

It's not long before the dogs slow, noses into the wind. The older hunter stops abruptly as if he's run out of leash to point something unseen. The bird scent the

dogs inhale greedily must be remarkably unambiguous and intoxicating. While never knowing for certain, I imagine it to be the human equivalent of catching the unmistakable and irresistible whiff of bacon frying.

A half-dozen sharptails flush from where you'd imagine finding them, out of the wind on the side of a hill. The first shot, the one I don't contemplate, does what I intend it to do. I whiff the two follow-ups.

I really enjoy hunting ring-necked pheasants. They're noisy, gaudy and thrilling as they flush at your feet, sometimes from cover too skinny to hide loose change that escaped through a hole in your pocket. But give me sharp-tailed grouse any day, even though I don't fully understand why this is.

Maybe it's because I like the idea that sharp-tailed grouse have been around for centuries, and don't usually bunch up in ditches, but away from roads where they stand with too-long necks outstretched looking for whatever might be after them next.

I dig how in early September when my dogs stumble upon a covey of grouse that the birds don't flush all at once, but get up in singles, twos and threes. Or how we can mark the ones I missed, now three prairie hilltops in the distance, giving us another opportunity if we're up for it.

So far, we have been.

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