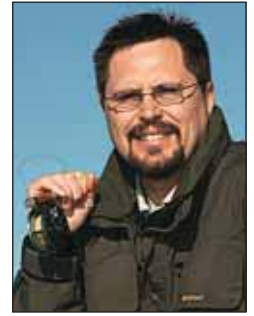




back cast

By Ron Wilson



Somewhere I have a plastic sandwich bag zipped tight and nearly full of an assortment of sharp-tailed grouse feathers from birds shot in fall. I can picture the bag with neck, breast, tail, wing and leg feathers, but like a lot of things, it is right where I put it, wherever that might be.

The idea to pluck pieces from the birds had everything to do with catching fish. I envisioned a talented friend, a West Coast fly-tier who has stuffed my fly boxes with imitations for years, to someday harness the feathers to hooks with thread and make something of them.

Creating artificial fishing bait from a native bird that has thrived in North Dakota for eons isn't on par with, say, calling in a strutting tom with a wing bone turkey call you made from a bird shot last season. I just thought it would be kind of neat to fool some fish with feathers from grouse the dogs flushed and we shot.

I do know there is a call among fly-tiers for Hungarian partridge feathers as I've seen them in fly shops all over the West. The intact partridge skins, which looked as if they were neatly unzipped from the birds' carcasses like little winter jackets, hung smartly next to feathers and furs from other critters I mostly didn't recognize.

Whether sharp-tailed grouse feathers are envied as fly-tying material is beyond me. In a perfect world, of course, the native prairie-born flies would, with a little weight added along the hook's shank, sink and undulate enticingly underwater or, sans the weight, ride dry atop moving water like a soldier at attention.

Then again, it probably doesn't really matter. I've caught bluegills floating over spawning beds with flies that looked like nothing more than dryer lint, and have hooked northern pike on incredibly gaudy feathered and furred imitations that would make a circus clown blush.

I have a thing for sharp-tailed grouse that got started about

two decades ago over a thermos of coffee shared in a plywood observation blind overlooking a sharptail lek. We'd hiked to the blind long before sunrise without flashlights, and with only a hint of where it was located. The fact that we luckily stumbled into the darn thing about a half-mile from the road on our first try was a silent harbinger of what the morning had in store despite the warnings.

Initially, we had been cautioned by the biologist we'd reserved the blind from over the telephone that we might not see a thing, that the birds are many times easily dissuaded from visiting their dancing grounds for a variety of reasons. Blame it on the weather, predators hanging around the area, take your pick, he said, but don't get your hopes up.

Whatever we witnessed that April morning would be a first for me. When I stepped into that plywood blind, I was doing so without the benefit of even watching the birds perform their spring courtship on a TV nature program.

What transpired was absurd. Grouse arrived in a rush before sunrise and kept coming after the sun slowly inched its way above the horizon. Combine the seemingly dozens of quivering tails and stomping feet, it at times sounded as if our wooden hideout was being invaded by an angry band of windup toys.

At the time, entertained as I had ever been sitting on a 5-gallon bucket in a plywood box, I couldn't think of anyplace else I'd rather be.

Since then, I've gotten up too darn early, wandered around in the dark and waited patiently behind the walls of a number of blinds in

hopes that the grouse would eventually show in bunches to match that early morning years prior. But for the most part, they haven't. Like the location of the sandwich bag of grouse feathers, I know the birds are dancing somewhere, wherever that might be.

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