

# back cast

By Ron Wilson



People go for walks in the woods all the time for the simple joy of it. They do so without shotguns, shells and bird dogs. Their load is maybe a walking staff – a nifty piece of work carved from hard-to-find diamond willow or simply a stick of the correct length and weight picked up at trailside – to lean on or to poke at stuff in their path.

For the past three autumns, we've left the prairie in our dust to camp and hunt ruffed grouse in the Turtle Mountains. And, for the past three autumns, I could just as well have been armed with a stick.

In sum, I've shot one grouse and flushed another. The latter, a noisy confusion of wings and brush, was safe from any sort of heroic shot through the small windows of leaves and limbs in which it vanished. I was caught so off guard, the bird was up and gone before it occurred to me to unsaddle the 20-gauge thrown over my left shoulder and get in the game. (For the same reason I refuse to calculate the cost per trout on a week-long fly-fishing trip to Montana, I don't want to know how many miles I've walked in three autumns to flush just two grouse. The result misses the point entirely of being in the woods and experiencing an uncommon slice of North Dakota hunting.)

Biologists tell us that ruffed grouse populations run in cycles, working to a high every 8-10 years. Yet, even at their apex, ruff numbers fall considerably short of native

sharp-tailed grouse and other upland birds because the forest habitat the birds require is at a premium in North Dakota.

Ruffed grouse hunters enter the timbered oasis on the state's northern tier knowing all of this, of course. Even so, they return annually with renewed optimism – or darn short memories – and certainty that this will be the year of

heavy game bags and the chance to knock the dust off their favorite grouse recipes.

No doubt there are some ruffed grouse hunters out there who do quite well (in 2008, for instance, roughly 1,000 hunters bagged 2,160 birds, which sounds like a bunch to me) but I don't know any. Nor am I angling to hear from them, even though I suspect I never would, as I imagine they guard their hard-won experience and coverts much like the forager guards a morel mushroom hotspot.

From the fire pit at ruffed grouse camp we can first hear, then glimpse passing traffic as people hustle down a gravel road to work and school. Sitting there in a folding chair finishing a second cup of coffee, it's hard not to feel like we somehow have it all figured out, that we get to wander in the woods all day while everyone else, well, doesn't. At those times, I don't remind myself that I'm burning vacation time to hunt a bird that I have such trouble finding, but rather this will finally be the day it all comes together. Then, about half-way through the first walk of the day, the caffeine buzz wears off and the renewed optimism vanishes like campfire smoke.

Our reward, I guess, the reason we try to gather each fall on North Dakota's northern tier is because the Turtle Mountains is such a beautiful place to take a walk, bump into the occasional moose or stand in an aspen clear-cut with one boot in North Dakota and the other in Canada just for the heck of it. The ruffed grouse, maybe, are simply a bonus.

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