

“I Have Questions”

Pheasants Forever

Fall 2025

By Mark Neužil

This is pheasant hunting.

There are three of us, with two flushing dogs. We walk a low, grassy meadow dotted with clover or alfalfa (without flowers, I can't tell them apart) and enough big bluestem, milkweed, goldenrod and switchgrass to make it interesting.

No animal or bird life has shown itself except the dogs, who seem to get more excited as we pinch across the property toward a corner of the field.

I have questions.

Are the birds holding tight, or are they spooky, nervous and liable to run and flush out of range?

A few moments ago, one of our fellows downed a bird, hit on his second shot. The pheasant flushed close but not underfoot, and *aha!* We are now certain to have this hunt figured out.

What happened was this: We chased it with the dogs and the crunch of our footsteps, and the bird ran and flew from a corner, pinched with nowhere to go. Or was it already in the corner?

My questions are just getting started.

Should I be using a different choke tube? My second barrel is a full choke, but a tighter pattern and more umph than I need because that last bird was close-ish.

What about shot size? Maybe a #6 shot, instead of the #5 (top barrel) and #4 (lower)? Such thoughts – minutia, really -- swirl through your brain when you should be watching the dogs.

We know from science that pheasants have a brain the size of a large legume. Does that make them stupid? If they are stupid, why do they double-back and flush behind us? Or never flush, just vanish?

Does evolution, instinct and experience make them smart? Have they been hunted this year? Do they remember? Do they mind their own business until getting jumpy from the shadows of owls, hawks and eagles or the smell of coyotes? Can they smell coyotes?

Two hunters eventually notice our dogs. A third, me, is daydreaming about pheasants, or worrying about life, or worrying about life without pheasant hunting.

The dogs are a little too far away now because all three of us have been, in that wonderful British expression, wool-gathering. Someone shouts “a birdy dog!”

I have more questions.

Do you run to catch up? Does that instill bad habits in the dog? Likely. Buzz the dog to slow it down? What if the bird keeps moving? And then if flushes 20 years ahead of the dog and a full 75 yards ahead of you, was that the same bird the dogs winded?

Justification settles in. You may have missed the bird anyway; worse, you may have dinged it, and the pheasant did not die right away, so you feel magnanimous in not running up to the dog, not shooting, and not wounding the bird.

Besides, you are older now, and your running days are reduced to a brief, quick stride followed by deep breaths. Your altruism is balanced by a slight egoism for not watching the dogs more closely. Curt Gowdy watched *his* dogs. You daydream about happy hour.

The questions continue.

Are the birds in the thickets? Near the picked cornfields? In standing corn? On the fence row? (“Fence-line roosters” is remembered as the title of every American Sportsman pheasant segment, with Iowa Governor Harold Hughes.)

Are they hiding out of the wind? That east wind is good for hunting, or is it bad? The sun is high, which is... something, or the skies are soon cloudy with a chance of showers, which is something else. Expect no special favors from nature.

At the end of the field come the figurative postmortems -- not literal because nothing was killed, or shot at, on that pass.

The empty-bag analyses can be divided into at least three categories, all weak but excuse-ready:

- 1) "You can't hit 'em all anyway."
- 2) "I've shot plenty of pheasants in my life."
- 3) "It's just nice to be outside."

You've got 20 yards of ankle-high brush to walk before you settle on one, two, or all three. Sifting through the reasons/justifications, you waffle between the definitive (#1) and speculative (#2), #3 being too namby-pamby.

The hunting partners, if they are good comrades, don't care much. They've gone through the same theorizing.

I still have questions.

Should our food plots be corn? Soybeans? Milo? Sorghum? Are they too small? Too large? Chopped or left standing? And what about these coyote signs? Should the predators be trapped or shot? Or is that useless because others will fill their niche in the ecosystem? At least I think I know the answer to that one.

Size does not matter, much, in bird hunting as it does in deer hunting or most types of fishing.

Last year's pheasant is a little larger, with bigger spurs and a longer tail, but two sizes seem to be their only variant: young ones ["chickens"] and old ones ["aircraft carriers"].

Near the end of the day, the statistician in a group invariably speaks up; also invariably, the data shows "we should have" 25 percent more birds in our bag. The data does not reflect the birds in the bag from successful long hits, any remarkable retrieves, or just plain dumb lucky shots.

Pheasant hunting, like all outdoor sports that I can think of, is a series of decisions based on a hunter's experience, gut-feelings and peer-pressure.

What do we know from experience? Damn it, we shot three roosters in this patch four years ago; why are they not here today? All questions to be considered while hunting this fall. And the last time I had all the answers was ... never.

There are some answers we are mostly certain of, from hours in the field. You know "for a fact" that there were more birds in that field than the ones you saw. And then there are questions we have not thought of yet, the unknown unknowns, to paraphrase a former defense secretary. But if we take pheasant hunting seriously, we love the mystery.

It is the golden hour now.

There is another field, with a nice draw, ahead. Perhaps we should pinch them.

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