

Fashionably Late

Armed with common sense & premium ammo...

...You can capitalize on closing time roosters

PHEASANT HUNTING

By Dennis Foster

Late doesn't mean late to the party. If anything, it means the party has just begun. A holiday, for the birds, as the hordes of hunters have largely packed it in for the year. Leaving what amounts to the cagiest birds of the lot, the survivors, to start settling in to predictable cover options. And in great numbers too.

Many hunters simply do not realize how many birds are quite at ease lounging around in minimal amounts of cover while it is still warm. There is really no need to tuck into the thick stuff until absolutely necessary for thermal protection. In reality; it is a detriment to them to be in anything too course as it just tends to block their vision and dampen sounds that alert of approaching danger in the form of both 4 and 2 legged predators. Not just us ambulatory types either. They also face an aerial attack from the ever present and vastly over populated swarms of hawks and owls that are continually looking to swoop down upon their avian brethren. All they need is enough plant life to break their outlines on both a horizontal and vertical plane to be completely content early on.

I simply cannot tell you how many times I have had the frustration of hunting during warm spells where it was difficult to scratch a few birds out of the absolute best of cover or food plots. Only to bust birds here and there while travelling to and from classic habitat. They simply do not need, nor do they care, to be in anything heavy. This is an adaptation that I see becoming increasingly frequent each season. I strongly feel that our wild birds are taking the concept of Darwinism

to new levels. Darwinism in fast forward, if you will. Big time dating myself here, but over the last 40 plus years of chasing tail here in South Dakota, I have seen our birds adapt and overcome many of our (as the hunter) supposed advantages in this deadly dance of pursuit.

You see, they have taken their already formidable natural defenses and now have them finely tuned to regularly give us the slip. Natural selection is working to perfection here. It is immediate and permanent. The genetically inferior pheasants quickly fall prey to all manner of predators. They may elude the furry four-legged critters and winged menaces for the first few months of their lives. But, once we as the ultimate predator arrive on the scene each Fall; the last of the dumb ones are quickly eliminated. Some of what I am witnessing is that although well known for their running nature, today's roosters are relying on their ground game even more. Basically, they seldom hold well (just ask any good pointing dog) with flight generally being the very last option. And, that is only when pushed and pinched into spots where air provides the only means of escape.

Inferior genes are quickly eliminated leaving the survivors to propagate their superior traits. These are the real trophies too. Big birds carrying a little fat and even more of their beautiful plumage to protect against the elements...and shedding soft shot in the process. Tail feathers are at their longest stage as well. There is absolutely nothing better than seeing an oversized rooster in his full regalia literally dragging the tip of his tail through the snow. You can even see the tell-tale (or tail, you choose the spelling) signs of this in the snow on the outside of cattail sloughs and heavy tree claims in the form of two distinctive foot prints and a fine line right down the center.

All roosters at this time of year can be considered to be mature. They are comprised of 2 and 3 year old veterans along with the new crop that has learned to survive to a completely adult state. With all of them at full strength in preparation for winter. These are the most explosive (and exciting) pheasants you will ever encounter. You can literally feel the powerful wingbeats as half a dozen, up to dozens, blast through small windows in the thickest of cattails and quickly catch any available breeze to be well out of range in a blink. The sensory overload this provides is what I relish as the very best upland bird hunting can offer. Proper preparation is most definitely in order to ensure you are knocking down a few and not just watching them sail away.

Eliminating slamming doors, barking dogs, jabbering hunters, etc. is all common sense. Basically, all forms of stupidity should stay at home. Parking vehicles far from cover is key as well. A quarter of a mile away is not too far. Perhaps not enough on certain days. I have seen far too many times when blockers lazily pull the vehicles right up to the edge of cover with birds immediately popping up and away. Once this starts, there seems to be an upward domino effect as every single bird in the area will soon follow. This is the one scenario where they can be more prone to flight than foot.





A good strategy is to focus on small patches of heavy cover. Therefore, you can effectively surround the habitat and have all hunters start towards it at the same time. Dogs should be kept at your side until in the cover. If they like to bark or need continual voice control, leave them in the kennel as they are dosing out more harm than help. There is also absolutely no need for talk of any kind. Done properly, even if the birds prove to be extremely flighty, there is a good chance someone in your group will get some reasonable shots as they depart. Tight chokes and hot loads of heavy and hard shot are critical to harvesting limits in these conditions.

On the subject of shots and shooting, I will relay a style I refer to as instinctive shooting. Meaning, one fast movement of the gun to your shoulder as you are swinging on the first bird to flush and almost simultaneously pulling the trigger. This is not time to be pondering leads, etc. The less thinking the better. No time for analysis or second guessing here. Quick shooters with killer instincts excel in these conditions. Practice in the offseason on clay targets with your gun held in a hunting position. Done properly, you should be instantly turning them to powder at close range.

The next factor is what you are actually shooting at these tough old roosters. The smaller gauges in lively over and unders are all good and fine if you are an excellent shot in early season. Now is the time to break out the big guns. Namely, 12 gauge autos that are fed hot and heavy loads of hard copper plated shot. These birds often do not succumb to just one dose of pellets. A quick double tap is often needed to bring them down dead enough for retrieval.

By far, the largest mistake I see hunters making is using inferior ammo. At this time of year, it is more important than ever. I will make an admittedly prejudiced recommendation on shells. As I run a pheasant hunting operation right in the heart of it all here in South Dakota, my very livelihood depends on the performance of premium ammo. To that end, I have collaborated with the folks at Rio to introduce the Royal Pheasant line. After witnessing my clients cleanly down several hundred late season roosters with the initial offering late last year, I am sold on the real world results.



I start the season with the two and 3/4 inch 12 gauge version with one and 1/4 ounces of super hard and tight grouping number 5 shot at 1,400 fps. Within two weeks this is bumped up to number 4s. This soon gives way to 3 inch magnum loads of one and 3/8 ounces of 4 shot moving at 1,300 fps. This season when encountering extremely spooky birds, I will be using the Royal Turkey line churning out a full ounce and 3/4 of buffered copper plated shot at 1,250 fps for the super tight patterns and long-range killing power provided. Please note that premium does not need to equate to pricey. We want maximum shock to the roosters. Not sticker shock to our wallets. The beauty of these shells is that they retail for below 20 bucks a box and outperform most, if not all others, at any price point. There really is no excuse for not using the very best.

If you are looking to bag some true trophy ringnecks this season, take my word as late is indeed great as it relates to roosters.

Dennis Foster is an avid outdoor communicator who utilizes and is heavily involved in all forms of media, including Focus Outdoors TV. He welcomes questions and comments and can be reached via either of his websites www.dakotapheasantguide.com or www.eyetimepromotions.com.



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