

A SOUTH DAKOTA FIRST

by John Heiner

As I kid, I remember hearing about pheasants and the Dakotas in tandem. To us it was a place of legend. You see in Utah the most probable venue to harvest a cackling rooster is at your local pheasant club. The birds are planted a short time before you arrive. The birds hold. The birds are simply scared and confused. You can even afford to chat with your hunting companions as you work a field. It's the Dakotas that held a different type of bird. This bird wouldn't allow such behavior. This bird was truly wild. It is the Dakotas where birds flush a hundred yards out at the sound of an opening truck door. It is the Dakotas where to clear your throat in an active bird field is to clear the field with flushing pheasants. It is the Dakotas where your club dog becomes a bird dog. I had to go, but how would I find the time?

On Oct 25th, I sat in my office frustrated. 2020 had been a year. The grind was exhausting. I was frustrated that each time I had planned to go on hunts, life got in the way. It was in that moment that regardless of the obstacles, I decided I was going. I was clearing my calendar and I was going to do it in less than a week. If needed, I was going at it alone.

I told my dad about my plans. Deep down I hoped he'd get a wild hair and say, "well I'm coming too." That said, I didn't expect it. He is regimented, successful, calculated, and at his core a planner. A week's notice goes against his very DNA. As it turns out, on that Sunday his hair was wild. He said he wouldn't let me go alone and therefore he was coming. Within a week, we were loaded up and on our way to South Dakota with Karlos vom Klepelshagener Forst, Isobel vom Hidden Creek (Izzy), and my girl Braya vom Hochland (Rey). It was happening and I could hardly contain myself.



We made our way to Casper, Wyoming and stayed the night. The drive was beautiful. The Wyoming plains always get me. I recalled many trips with my Dad to the Wind Rivers of Wyoming backpacking and fishing with our springer spaniels by our side. It's in these moments you feel a huge sense of gratitude. How lucky was I to have lived the life I have lived? Already this trip was turning out to be the perfect remedy to an otherwise turbulent year.

The next day we made our way to Sturgis, South Dakota. We picked up our licenses along with a South Dakota pheasant hunting atlas and quickly continued on towards

Pierre, South Dakota. We were making good time. Our hope was to get an evening hunt in with an hour or two left of remaining light. From Pierre and an Arby's sandwich, we made our way North to Gettysburg. Along Highway 83, something magical happened. We received a warm South Dakota welcome into pheasant country. A rooster flushed on the East side of the highway in front of us. Naturally, I shouted "rooster" as I barreled down the highway. In that moment I nearly killed our first South Dakota rooster with the front corner of my Dad's Ford F-350. In that moment I knew it was going to be a remarkable week.

I had done my research. My OnX maps were heavily marked with target fields. We were actively searching for cover, food (bordered corn and sunflowers), and water. Upon arrival our first stop was a Game Production Area. This area seemed to have the desired recipe. While preparing for the trip, I received some good advice which we utilized throughout the whole week. "If you aren't seeing birds, they aren't there." As we pulled down the dirt road, a rooster scurried into cover. We were seeing birds! We identified our parking area; however, we pulled down the road to get ready vs. doing so right where we wanted to hunt. We readied the dogs, our guns, and our gear. Naturally the dogs exited their dog boxes and were high strung. It was all we could do to contain them. I couldn't blame them. We were all high strung. We placed their collars and put them back in their boxes. We drove to our parking spot. Quietly we all exited the vehicle.

We were doing it. After 14+ hours of driving and a hotel stay in Casper, we were working a field in hopes of harvesting our first South Dakota rooster. We pushed our way to a break in cover brought by a marsh and a small stream. The dogs were sporadic and inconsistent in their search. Things were slightly chaotic and sure enough at about 80 yards out that chaos turned to flushing pheasants far from range. This wasn't going to be easy.

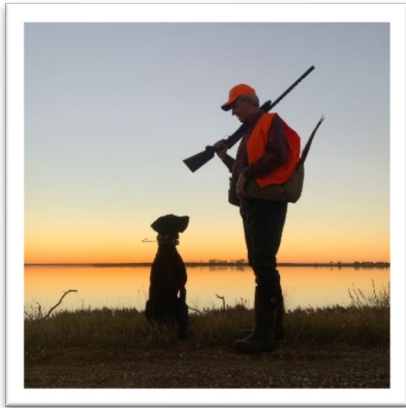


We worked our way along the marsh and worked to keep the dogs within range. We casted them into the cattails and both handlers and dogs were starting to settle in. Despite our early failures in working the field, all 5 (human and DK) were ear to ear grinning. After about 30 minutes and additional birds flushing out of range, my dad broke off to the left to work a tree row with Izzy and I continued along the marsh and cattail. Rey and Karlos continued to

work with me. Karlos was more strategic and reserved. I guess that is what you get out of a seasoned veteran. Rey was still settling in. Sure enough, they heard us coming and Rey worked a bit too close for pheasant comfort. An additional 5 roosters flushed just out of range. One of the birds banked to my right. I could see my dad on the horizon and

this bird was heading his way. I couldn't believe it, this bird was going to land in his lap. Sure enough I see feathers, the bird was hit and began to drop, the sound of his gunfire followed. We had downed our first rooster with Izzy retrieving to my Dad's hand. I rushed over to take a look. Although not textbook, we were on the board! The sun set over the water to a spectacular calm view and we took it all in.

We settled into our motel that evening excited for the remaining four days. We quickly realized there were little to no options for dinner past gas station fare. It's important to plan for this if staying outside major cities like Aberdeen or Pierre. We'd packed a Yeti when we left Utah, so we were fine but still craved a splurge of steak and potatoes.



The next morning, we continued down remote dirt roads scouting pre-marked locations. I'd marked a bunch of public land North of Gettysburg that didn't pan out. No cover and clearly no birds. As shooting time approached, we identified another area that clearly held birds. Once again, we moved along the marsh and cattail. We knew a little more about how these wild birds moved from the night before. We worked a little better together as a team. Things were still slightly chaotic. Our shooting was sub-par and we missed a few birds. A rooster held strong and Rey was birdy. I still didn't feel like I got a rock-solid

point but the bird flushed to my right, its tail rolling like an ocean wave, I'll never forget that scene.... rooster down. It is etched in my mind. The rest of the day played out the same. Dogs learned more, we learned more. We were in birds all day and our dogs pointing game was improving giving us adequate distance to move it.

The following day we moved down closer to Pierre and on the river. We ran into a lot more hunters. The bird hunting wasn't that great. We worked to salvage our day and ended with a few roosters. We licked our wounds and took advantage of our proximity to Pierre by getting a ribeye at Cattleman's. After 2 ½ days, we were having a real meal. Learning that our cooler wasn't as plentiful as we'd like, we also hit the Walmart on our way out of town and stocked up for the remaining days knowing we'd prefer to stay away from the crowds.

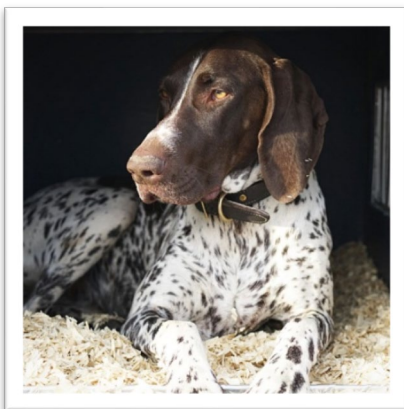
It was into our last two days when things really turned up. We set a goal to not hunt the same area twice as the purpose of our trip was to learn and explore. We found some walk-in access bordering uncut corn, and this was the moment I had my first legendary South Dakota pheasant experience. We pulled down a dirt road and pheasants darted on both sides. There was some sort of small worm that had seemingly hatched as we saw several in the road. We suspect this brought in all these birds, but we still aren't quite sure. Either way, I exited the vehicle and watched in disbelief as nearly 100+ roosters



and hens flushed right before my eyes and with 50 yards or less. We worked this area with the dogs and encountered times when so many birds exploded out of cover that you literally could not focus in on just one. It seemed their power against the flustered hunters was power in numbers. Behind the gun we were confused, excited, and flustered. Our shooting was subpar again, but we managed to connect on the needed roosters. Our dogs had learned to hold point and do so at a sufficient distance such that we could move in as a

team. Things had finally come together, and we were all jelling in an orchestrated fashion. We celebrated another remarkable day with an extended drive to Bob's Supper Club for another Steak.

Our last day found us ending in a public game production area. We hunted public land the entire trip including CRP, Government Lands, Production Areas, and Walk-In Access. We encountered rooster after rooster. Our dogs delivered point after point once they found their groove. We missed several seemingly easy shots. We should have limited by noon, but it took us working until about 2pm to get the job done on the last day. At nearly 2pm we were 1 rooster short of a limit. As we neared the parked truck our dogs went on point. This is it; this is the last bird of the hunt. Sure enough, a rooster flushed. My dad made a distant shot and the bird dropped. It was wounded and running. The dogs went into full wounded game recovery mode. They searched for several minutes and nothing. We joined in the search and still nothing. We were disappointed. We didn't want to end the trip on this note, so we kept at it. Soon Karlos went into full point. We crept in but no birds flushed. Karlos remained on point as if saying "guys its right



there!" We knew the bird was somewhere near either dead or wounded. I pulled away some cover and caught a glimpse of the bird burrowed into some thick grass. I reached in and grabbed our last wild, wounded, yet still alive South Dakota slammer by the neck. The moment was picture perfect, the bird in nearly perfect condition. This one is going on the wall. We ended with high fives and patting recognition of our 3 DKs. Together with 6 roosters in tow, we made our way back to the truck beat and tired. Our dogs quickly found their place in their boxes too tired to consume even a treat.

Interesting how things had changed from their first day as they exited their boxes. They had given their all. We'd come and in a way we had not only conquered South Dakota, we had conquered 2020. We had conquered a turbulent year by getting out and experiencing life despite all the whirlwind around us. A tradition has been born and if not between Christmas and New Years of this year, we will be back again next year and every year after.