

Ending a disappointing month in 2020 with a pair of grouse



BRAD TRUMBO
UPLAND PURSUITS

September 2020 was our worst on record for upland birds. Wildfires canceled road trips while poor habitat ruined others. Meanwhile, not a bird moved in our local covers. Sept. 29 was the final day for us to put a bird on the books for the month and I did a risky thing — I trusted my instincts.

Loading up Finn, my oldest and only capable pointing dog on the bench at the time, we went all-in and headed for the only local creek bottom with a gated road weaving through the riparian. My spirits were high as the amber glow of the morning sun cracked over the eastern horizon. The cover was fairly new to us, but immaculate with young red alder stands, flanked by sparse dark timber, mixed pockets of grasses and an understory of hawthorn, rose, snowberry and young fir. An absolute thing of beauty.

The alders shimmered in a soft morning breeze as Finn and I departed the truck. As we strolled up the road, I encouraged her to check an embankment of mature serviceberry with a crimson snowberry toe. She gave it a meager sniff and strolled on gleefully.

Splitting from the main road onto an old, washed out two-track, we were surrounded by grouse thickets amid dark timber. A small opening ahead to my left presented a lush labyrinth of emerald ferns and grasses meandering the length of an old creek channel. Finn lazily disappeared into the opening about 20 yards out, followed by wingbeats against the greenery. My side-by-side 20-gauge rose quickly to shoulder and I sighted down the old road cut, prepared for quick shooting. The sound of the grouse piling into the understory suggested that they had not flushed far.

Knowing Finn would check up, I carefully jogged closer, and in perfect time. As my Garmin GPS receiver beeped “point,” the birds flushed again. This time, a young gray-phase male angled low across the old road. Quickly swinging, I jerked the front trigger as the

barrels covered the bird, tumbling it into the pine boughs.

Finn seemed a bit confused by the ruckus, having spent the better part of a month in the covers without hearing a single shot. Appearing briefly and casting an inquisitive Hey, whatchya shootin’ at? glance, I ordered her to find the bird, which she immediately noticed as it gained its feet. Moments later, the Garmin beeped “point” again as Finn stood over the young ruff at the base of a fir.

I’ve spent far more time in the grasslands than forest covers and have bagged relatively few ruffs in my upland career. I had never had the pleasure of taking a gray grouse before that moment. This young bird was gloriously colored — storm cloud gray with streaks of cream and feathers edged in chocolate and caramel with a coal-black neck ruff. Unfortunately, Finn plucked its tail clean of all but two feathers as she secured the bird, but the significance of the moment was not sullied on that minor detail.

Pressing on, it wasn’t 100 yards before Finn was into another bird. Having picked up the main road again, a circular opening in the timber led to a miniature meadow about the size of a large house. Candy-apple shaded hawthorn was immersed in an almost char-treuse-colored grass with mahogany rose and snowberry scattered throughout. On the edge of the opening was a steep drop where the creek had scoured the bank during high flow at some point in history.

On the far side of the opening, I walked with Finn as she ambled to the point where the grass faded into timber. The scour channel pinched into the road, forcing it up against the mountainside, and a grouse sat at the convergence of terrain, grass and timber.

Suspecting the birds had been flighty all morning, Finn’s posture suggested she was on the scent. The moment I anticipated her point, a sizable ruff jumped from the grass, angling left across the road and directly behind the double barrels. Squeezing the rear trigger spurred the modified choke barrel into action, depositing the ruff on the edge of the road.

Recovering the bird, I marveled over its contradictory humble, yet



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Finn tolerates a photo-op as I captured the results of an epic day in the grouse cover.



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

The beautifully-striped, gray tail fan of the “king of the woods,” a ruffed grouse.

intense hues. Boasting the same glorious color palette as our first young bird, the size and flawless plumage were a sight to behold. I had dreamed of this bird since first jumping one while archery hunting about eight years prior. At that moment, a specimen more fantastic than I had imagined lay softly in my palm, taken over my first and oldest pointing dog, who has been the pillar of my upland hunting career.

I could have pushed for a third bird to round out a limit, and if we were ever to take a limit of ruffs, it would have been that morning. Instead, I turned back with Finn at heel. We had disturbed the cover enough for one day, and the second bird was too beautiful to see the inside of a vest. With the little double broken over my shoulder, our final grouse in hand, and Finn trotting at my side,

MORE INFORMATION

Regulations for ruffed and blue grouse

Season: Sept. 1, 2021, through Jan. 31, 2022

Bag limits: Daily limit of 3 birds of each species; possession limit 9 birds of each species

we savored the walk out to the tune of songbirds and the babble of the creek.

Success was nearly guaranteed as we entered a fine cover on a perfect day with the mindset of singular fashion. It was our day. We had earned it over our longest streak of consecutive hunts without so much as seeing a game bird. Reading the cover, trusting the dog, and anticipating “the king of the woods” brought September salvation.

Brad Trumbo is a fish and wildlife biologist and outdoor writer in Waitsburg, Washington, where he also actively serves the Walla Walla-based Blue Mountain Pheasants Forever chapter. For tips and tales of outdoor pursuits and conservation, visit www.bradtrumbo.com.

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Our 2021 fair saw an unprecedented amount of support from all of you! Families attended the fair and rodeo with unparalleled excitement with all three of our Commissioners aligned and standing alongside our volunteers: the Umatilla County Fair Board, The Sale Committee, The Fair Court, Superintendents, helpers and staff! In a time of discontent and widespread political division, our communities were unified in their generosity for all things fun and youth related here at the fair! It was clear that **A GREAT TIME TOGETHER** was the only remedy needed to cure the cancellation blues from 2020. Thank you to all of our Sponsors who provided much needed income in order to continue our fair traditions. It is an enormous relief to know that we can count on you through thick and thin!

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