

REGRET, RELIEF & REFLECTION

■ Looking back at another season of hunting upland birds around the West

The rich aromas of a moist, finely blended pipe tobacco drifted from the crooked briarwood clenched between my teeth. Taking a slow pull, I puzzled over the two spent 20-gauge shells lying before me, signaling a close to the 2020 upland bird season. Each season brings new and unique experiences, and lessons learned, and re-learned.

Unique experiences of 2020 included a road trip to north-central Montana for sharp-tailed grouse, and making a new hunting buddy from Almira, Washington, on the basalt-channeled scablands chasing quail and pheasant. Both experiences offered complete surprise and education.

A tip from some Helena residents led me to the Conrad area of Montana, only to find it a complete bust. Having hunted sharp-tails in far eastern Montana and finding coveys thick as starlings, I was confident in my setter's ability to find birds. Map scouting for large grasslands and sagebrush tracts had me a bit concerned, but I identified a few areas that looked good among the patchwork of cropland.

Upon arrival, I found a single tract in 50 square miles with semblance of the native prairie I sought. Over the course of a few days, my



UPLAND PURSUITS
BRAD TRUMBO

setters never once got birdy. We saw not a single game bird along farm roads or public access. Thoroughly disappointed, we packed it in early, headed for Flathead Lake, and camped in a beautiful lakeside state park for a pick-me-up.

On the contrary, in December I met a social media acquaintance near Grand Coulee, expecting prospective covers to resemble our local bird numbers. Darren McCall and his daughter Kinzie were gracious enough to show me some of their best covers, while I ran my best dogs. Wading into the first field of the day, dappled in Great Basin wild rye and other choice grasses, a scene reminiscent of the Dakotas erupted as waves of pheasant took to wing hundreds of yards ahead of us and the dog.

Moving on to the quintessential quail cover of the scablands, every grassy pocket held pheasant, but we put up not one quail covey. The sagebrush and bunchgrasses were cloaked in ice and the landscape a glimmering prism, punctuated by



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

The cinnamon hues of the Hungarian partridge tailfeathers beautifully accent a classic double gun.

the milky green of sage and chocolate basalt outcrops. Darren claimed a single rooster, and we enjoyed an exhilarating hunt behind Yuba as she taught a clinic on pinning hens.

The common lesson relearned from both Montana and Grand Coulee was that quality habitat produces birds. The Montana habitat was abhorrent, while the scablands were characterized largely by native vegetation.

Also noteworthy, the western wildfires may have kept me from the Oregon sage grouse season, but exceptional mourning dove flights on my homestead amidst the smoke were a fair consolation. Finn and Yuba hunted at peak performance, Yuba in particular. Following a second surgery in August to correct hip dysplasia, she now has no hip sockets. I feared her stamina and stability would prove a challenge over the fall, but being freed of crippling arthritis, her exuberance, determination and skill were redefined.

Yuba's pheasant savvy comes as a result of passion and drive that have helped hone her skills over the years. I lost count of her finds this past season, and the tenacity



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Finn taking a quick break out in the channeled scablands.

in which she pursued downed birds was an inspiring spectacle.

Taking another pull, the sweet aroma triggered further memories. The time has past to hang up the vest, stow the side-by-side, and box the pipe for another grueling nine months of anticipation. And, as always, it was done with a pang of regret, yet a sigh of relief.

Season's end signals a close to the crack-of-dawn, frozen finger mornings, and cutting, combing and

plucking a thousand invasive weed burrs from the notoriously tangly setter coats. It also brings halt to the sight of high-tailed points beneath the golden rays of the crepuscular hours, and the rush of wings against crackling grasses and shrub limbs.

My girls and I are getting no younger. The same can be said for my upland brethren. And to me, a picture is worth 1,000 birds. It's going to be a long wait for September. May the memories of the stellar days afield, and time spent toting the scattergun with friends and family, simply following the dogs and admiring the splendor of the uplands, see us through to the early 2021 grouse season.

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Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Darren McCall approaching Yuba for the flush.



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Yuba sits, content with the rewards of her performance.



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Darren McCall approaching Yuba for the flush.

Forest Service reminds drivers about snow hazard

■ Groomed snowmobile routes are closed to wheeled vehicles

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest officials are reminding travelers that wheeled vehicles aren't allowed on groomed snowmobile routes, and that venturing onto those routes could leave drivers stranded in the snow.

In a press release the Wallowa-Whitman focused on the Wallowa Mountain Loop Road that connects Baker and Wallowa counties, between the Wallowa Mountains and Hells Canyon.

This winter, local authorities have assisted with multiple search and rescue efforts along the road, also known as Forest Road 39 and North Pine Road, after cars and trucks got stuck in snow.

The road is a snowmobile route between Highway 86 east of Halfway, and the Salt Creek Summit Sno-Park southeast of Joseph. The ban on wheeled vehicles also applies to the 39 Road from its intersection with the Imnaha River Road just south of the Imnaha Fish Weir.

The road remains open to snowmobiles and to people accessing private property. The Forest Service has installed barricades on the south end of the road, in Baker County, to deter wheeled vehicles.

Although the barricades are painted bright orange and are reflective, drivers should be especially careful after

sunset or before sunrise.

"We plan to accommodate spring recreators and hunters by moving the barricades up the mountain as the snow recedes," said Dan Story, road engineer for the Whitman District. "This is a popular destination during all seasons, and especially for summer motorists, so we will be removing the barricades as soon as we can clear the road of down trees, boulders, and other obstacles."

Snow-covered roads, including those that aren't groomed snowmobile routes, might appear accessible until the vehicle confronts an obstacle such as a down tree or snow-drift.



Wallowa-Whitman National Forest/Contributed Photo

Barricades at the junction of the Wallowa Mountain Loop Road and Highway 86 near Halfway in late February 2021.

Many vehicles become stuck when the driver is trying to turn around, according to the Wallowa-Whitman's press release.

Forest officials also remind navigations systems don't take into account routes that are blocked by snow during the winter.

Other tips for driving safely in the mountains include:

- Use snow tires or chains as snow, ice, and water can create dangerously slippery roads.
- Be prepared to spend the night in your vehicle.
- Bring extra layers, handwarmers, sleeping bags, food, water, flashlights, extra batteries, and a kit to start a fire if necessary.
- Bring a satellite-based phone or emergency beacon in

- case you are out of cell range.
- Make a plan and tell somebody else where you are going, your travel route, when you plan to return, and when you will check back in with them.
- Expect snowpack conditions to change as roads change in elevation and know that conditions at high elevations may remain impassable into July.