

September salvation



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Finn works over an old creek side channel in search of ole ruff.



BRAD TRUMBO
UPLAND PURSUITS

Ending a disappointing month in 2020 with a pair of grouse

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-



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

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

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

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

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 chartreuse-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 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, 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.

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Dove hunting can be heavenly



TOM CLAYCOMB
BASE CAMP

Some of our hunting trips are intense. You get up two hours before daylight, slam down a fast breakfast and hike up a mountain so you can be in your secret spot before the elk start moving. You hike/hunt hard all day and get back to camp well after dark so tired you barely feel like cooking dinner.

Two hours after falling asleep you wake up freezing. The temp is down around 8 degrees. You sleep fitfully until your alarm goes off. You gingerly step out of your sleeping bag and pull on your frozen pair of blue jeans. The legs are like trying to slip on irrigation pipes. The snow slightly melted when you took them off and then froze hard overnight.

By the third morning you are so sore you can’t hardly roll out of bed. Ahh, this elk hunting is the life! No doubt, elk hunting can be tough. Much less when it’s snowing so hard that the tent keeps collapsing overnight and you have to push it up to make the snow slide off.

Compared to elk hunting, dove hunting is heavenly. The weather is nice and warm. You don’t have to be hiking up to the top of a ridge before the sun has even woken up. Just be at a water hole a little bit after daylight, hunt the feeding fields during the day and hit the water holes again in the evening.

You don’t want to camo up too much, sure don’t wear scent cover, and you can set on a stool behind a tree, fenceline or brush.

Details depend on where you hunt, but here are some general rules to make you successful.

- Generally doves like to fly down fencelines/treelines.
- They like to hit water holes early/late. They don’t like to water at fast moving streams. They like ponds, sloughs etc.
- Hunt feed sources. Grain fields (milo is the best) or sunflowers.
- They like to sit in dead trees and on power lines.
- Eurasian doves like to congregate around barns and corrals. A couple of years ago three of us shot nearly 100 in two hours around an old barn/corral.
- Nowadays we have decoys and mojo decoys that help. Sound people use calls.

Doves can be hard to hit. They’re cruising along a lot faster than they appear. The best description I have ever heard of their flight pattern is how an old outdoor writer, Cotton Ward, described them 20-something years ago. He said when they come “dipsy doodling in” that they are hard to hit.

The gear you’ll need is pretty simple. A lot of people use a padded top five-gallon bucket. You can carry your shells, water and doves home in the bucket and sit on it while hunting. Get one with a swivel top. You’ll also want a shell vest. When they’re coming in hot and heavy, you’ll want fast access to your shells. And definitely a cap to cover your face and shield you from the sun.

Most people use a 20-gauge or 12-gauge and a modified choke. On good days you’ll have a lot of shooting so it’s smart to wear ear protection.



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

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