



Llewelin setter Yuba pointing birds on a frosty scablands quail hunt.

Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

TIPS FOR TRACKING LATE-SEASON BIRDS

Finding birds late in the season requires creativity



BRAD TRUMBO
UPLAND PURSUITS

By the time the snow flies on the Palouse, upland birds have wised up from months of dodging dogs and gunners. Finding birds in the late season requires creativity and a willingness to explore, hike further, and gamble on new covers. I typically make a hard switch from chasing pheasant to seeking covey birds like quail and Huns, and this means scouring On-X maps, driving farther from home and hiking new territory.

Parcel size means little to me past Christmas. Distance from the road to popular hunting areas and habitat quality are the metrics under scrutiny. The smallest parcels can hold a surprising number of birds. They can just as likely be vacant. It's a crapshoot. Striking it rich requires trial and error, cataloging sites, and expanding your collection of coverts both good and bad for future reference.

In a good partridge year, every acceptable patch of short native bunchgrass holds a Hun covey, particularly when flanking a wheat field. These areas are easy to find with aerial imagery by zooming into the cover to see the small grass tufts that appear khaki-colored on aerial imagery, but don't be fooled by monocultures of common rye, which show up golden and unbroken, like a paintbrush smear. Similarly, yellow starthistle shows up drab brown, almost gray, and covers vast swaths.

One January morning, Yuba and I struck out across a parcel of Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land in Washington we had yet to lay eyes on. Aerial imagery suggested enough native grasses to tempt a Hun covey along the eastern boundary with a wheat field. We worked the boundary that we found covered in hairy vetch and starthistle, then dropped into a shallow draw. Cattle were grazing along the distant ridgeline among the bunchgrasses.

The weedy cover held nothing, but at the convergence of cattle, bunchgrass, and setter, Yuba came to a jerking halt. I



Trumbo and Yuba with a brace of late-season creek bottom quail.

Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

closed in on Yuba, smiling with the anticipation of a covey rise. Yuba relaxed as I approached and peeled off in pursuit over 200 yards across a saddle in the ridge. This was no Hun covey. Her final point came with confidence and I circled widely to pin the bird between us, but the bird was not about to quit. I caught a glimpse of the rooster low-crawling through the sparse bunches and couldn't help but laugh as the bunchgrass faded into starthistle, exposing the rooster, and pressuring him to take wing. Yuba stood steady to flush with an exasperated look.

A year later I dropped two setters in that covert and their teamwork put a wily rooster in the bag. The main lesson was that good pheasant coverts need not be brushy, wet, or draw-bottom habitats. I've since found a number of unsuspected back-pocket pheasant sites in what I would call prime Hun cover.

Grazed lands add an element of randomness as you can never predict the condition of the parcels. Many times, I have parked at the foot of a steep slope, gnawed to the soil, and thought, no way am I plodding up and over that greasy grassless mud mound. But I never let myself get away with a lazy mindset. You never know what hidden gem may lie on the other side of the hill.

My older pup, Finn, ran a parcel like this one New Year's Day. It was a muddy slope with a perennial creek along the road, denuded of vegetation. I nearly drove on to the next parcel, but Finn and I hoofed it up and over, crossed a few fences, and found a single 20-acre strip of beautiful Hun cover between two wheat fields.

This day, the cover was empty, but recent scat suggested a covey may have been present with better timing. Two whitetail sheds provided consolation, laying on the wide-open hilltop among a struggling rabbitbrush community.

Draw bottoms thick with woods rose and blackberry nearly always hold quail. Bunchgrass islands among sagebrush can hold a surprising number of pheasant. Riverside bluffs on the Snake and Owyhee are known for chukar. Not every new cover is a good find, but when the stars align, you can stumble upon a covert so fine you don't dare expose it, not even to your mother as she gabs over the phone from her Del Ray Beach retirement condo — like the wild pheasant stronghold I found last month, again while seeking Huns.

Go into every late season hunt expecting to hike longer and harder, experience the unknown (maybe only to you), and come away with valuable information. Catalog your new covers and don't be too

COVERS AND COVERTS

Although the two words, both of which are used in this column, are almost identical, their meanings aren't. Brad Trumbo said that in most of the classic upland bird hunting literature, "covert" is used when referring to places that always hold birds, regularly visited hunting spots and sometimes secret spots. "Cover," by contrast, refers to habitat with potential to hold birds but that he has not yet hunted.

quick to judge. New sites often warrant a second look before writing them off. Not all covers will be worth even the first look, but crossing off terrain that's not worth your time can be just as valuable as finding a new gem.

Aerial imagery is an amazing tool for mapping out covers across the season, but it takes ground work to validate the imagery. Each parcel is like a new mine claim. Will you strike it rich or bust? The unknown is part of the fun. And one thing about gambling is certain: if you don't play, you can't win. It takes homework, boots on the ground, and endurance to score wild birds in the late season public covers.

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Tom Claycomb/Contributed Photo

It's always good to see the Diamond Blades/Knives of Alaska crew. They're the leaders in the hunting knife world. Their products have stood the test of time. Sure, they come out with new products but you can trust them because of their past history.

If it's winter, then it's show season



TOM CLAYCOMB
BASE CAMP

I had planned to write about varmint hunting, but maybe next time.

A more time-sensitive topic popped up. I've been writing columns for this paper since 2014. You might think after a year or two I'd run out of topics to write about. But if you love something there's always something new, a new angle or maybe you just get up in the mountains and get refreshed and have five more articles you're dying to write.

Like right now I'm sitting in the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport leaving the Dallas Safari Club Convention and Expo. Suddenly it hit me. I miss Katy. I'd pay \$100 if she was setting here with me right now for 10 minutes holding hands.

It's weird, we just celebrated our 38th anniversary and I think I love her more now when we got married.

OK, I better switch back to hunting because if Katy sees that I'm comparing our love with my love for hunting this could be my last article!

Anyway, now is the show season and it makes sense. Hunting season is pretty much over so due to being a dead time, January to March is the perfect time to schedule the shows. The SHOT show is the mother of all shows. It's Jan. 17-21 so everything else falls somewhere around it. Although this year for some reason the Safari Club International Convention moved back to Vegas and is on the tail end of the same week at SHOT. Usually, it is in February.

But with all the above said, let's talk about why you ought to hit the shows. We'll start with the SHOT.

Monday is Media Day at the range. They invite writers to test out all of the new (and old) rifles, pistols, shotguns, crossbows and ammo. Of course, that's a fun day. The show actually runs Tuesday-Friday. All of the big manufacturers are there. Worldwide. I don't know if every country is there but nearly.

Firearm manufacturers, ammo, backpacks, knives, optics, outdoor clothing, backpacks — you name it.

The reason I'm there is to see all of the new gear for 2022. I'll be finding new product to test and write about, lining up sponsors, trips etc. It is by invitation only but if you ever get to go, you should.

Next let's talk about the club conventions like SCI and DSC. Probably two-thirds of the booth are

guides. If you want to book the hunting/fishing trip of a lifetime, these are the shows to hit. I want to take Katy and Kolby on a South Louisiana redfish/spec fishing trip and to Alaska fishing so I hit some of those booths. I met a good sounding group of Cajuns that run Saltgrassoutdoors.com. Then I talked to Waterfalls Resort, which is where I went for my first Alaska fishing trip years ago which instigated my writing career. I may take them there.

Then you have the state shows like the Idaho Sportsman Show, The Great Northwest Outdoor Expo (I hope they're having it this year) and so forth. I love these shows. They're local so you meet a lot of local manufacturers with a new product that they've invented. That's how I met the Sneaky-Hunter BootLamps crew.

Then of course there are a lot of guides there too. You can usually tell by talking to them if they're legit but check references. You don't want to save your pennies for the trip of a lifetime only to end up with some bozo for a guide.

Then I love hitting the seminars. But take with a grain of salt seminars put on by celebrities if they're promoting their sponsors products. Like any shopping check around and do some research. I conduct 40 to 60 seminars each year. I had a seminar at the DSC, two at SHOT and three at the SCI convention. I try to give honest reviews because if I say this airgun is the best some kid may be saving up his paper route earnings to buy that airgun. If it's a dud he's stuck with it until he gets out of college and gets a real job.

But still, here's a couple of words of warning:

- Remember the old proverb — A gift blinds the eyes of the wise. If the speaker is sponsored, the gift will sway his opinion.

- Marketing is made to create discontent. A few years ago the .300 Win. Short Mag was advertised as the best rifle ever and the .30-06 was relegated to the museum. Then the 6.5 Creedmoor came out and overnight the .300 Win. Short Mag was deemed worthless. Manufacturers have to breed discontent or you'll use the same rifle your dad did, you kid will use it and your grandkid will. That's bad for business. They want you to buy a new rifle every year.

Everyone likes new inventions but products also have to stand the test of time. So investigate and make wise buying decisions.