

mountain (grouse) man

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It's cold for early September and it's snowing. Pushed a few inches of snow off the rocks when I crossed the creek. It's early, still dark in the forest growing up around the creek at the bottom of the steep canyon. The switchbacks start up one canyon wall, rising above the forest and the creek. My dog is with me. Not really a bird dog, though she is a lab mix, probably the runt of the litter, that we drove down to Dillon's animal shelter to get. Put her in a milk crate between the kids in the back seat after we picked her up that first day. She's 6 months old now. This is her second hunt, climbing into the mountains to find mountain grouse: blues, ruffies, spruce, and Franklin grouse. I'm glad she's with me in the forest in the dark leaving her wee paw prints in the snow. Illumination by headlamp. That stump doesn't look like a stump in the light's sweep. At the first switchback I put the light away, there's enough above the trees as the sun rises a little more. Saw a black bear run up the side of the canyon. Last year?

Encountered another black bear on opening day last week on my dog's first hunt. She was on a ridge top on the other side of Bozeman from where we are this morning. I was a little lower hoping she would flush a bird down to me. Instead it was the bear. I'd seen bear sign up there before. Broad shallow freshly torn holes on the ridge's apex. The bear was chasing my dog like a dog chases a cat. Full of intent. Bearing down on me with that look of intent on its face. I shouted loudly and leveled the shotgun at that face. When the bear saw me it did what black bears have always done when I've encountered them in the Bridgers, the Hyalite, the Tobacco Roots, the Spanish Peaks: it ran like hell in the other direction. This time the other direction was straight down the ridge. I had to call after my dog who thought that now was a good time to chase instead of being chased. Then came the crash of gravel and brush above me from whence the bear came. The announcement of a second black bear about the same size as the first, the sound of chase-come-turn-around quickly. The second bear ran like hell back over the top of the ridge, urinating into sunlight as it went. Were they juvenile siblings, once cubs suckling the same teat? Foraging for grubs in the dirt at my favorite mountain grouse spot? Never would have seen those bears but for my dog. Maybe more of a bear dog than a bird dog. Heard the bears calling to each other the rest of that morning. Eerie bear bellows from either side of the ridge.

Mountain grouse men have to hike in a few miles to reach the good bird spots. While hiking the miles, these thoughts of my first hunt with my dog are welcome. Easier to focus on as the light grows stronger and the tree stumps become easier to recognize. I gain the ridge line and look out where there ought to be views of the other side of the canyon and the mountains beyond. But this morning there is only the falling snow. No sound. Cold. I am grateful and weary of the miles that pass under our feet. Without the miles Bubba and his purebred-to-hunt dogs would be here.

My kids like grouse. The meat is white like chicken. My wife and I prepare it deep-fried or grilled, in fajitas or pasta, on pizza or sandwiches. Reminds me of spruce and junipers when gnawing on sinewy legs while my kids gobble the breast meat and "grouse tenders." I love when my kids run out to greet me after a grouse hunt. We line the birds up on the old pick-up's tailgate and Mom snaps a few pictures as we gather there around the grouse harvest and the grouse gun. Grouse are regal and beautiful even in death lying on the tailgate.

When the ridge flattens out I take the two pieces of the gun out of my pack and screw them together and load 5 rounds of steel shot. Steel shot because of my kids. I read a journal article once about lead contamination in deer meat. Statistics described the lead content in the meat as a function of the distance from where lead pierced flesh. So I shoot steel. Bubba needs fast lead shot because partridge are fast. Mountain grouse men don't hunt (or at least find it difficult to hunt) partridge (and pheasant and sharp-tail). Because you need a real bird dog to hunt those low lying fields of alfalfa. Because Bubba is there. You don't need a dog to hunt mountain grouse.

I know where the birds are. I know the tree where they flushed from last year. A large covey flushes from that tree today. Separate explosions of wings as the birds flush in separate groups. Mountain grouse are creatures of habit. I am a creature of habit. They flush early behind a screen of trees so I don't have a good shot. I leave the trail for the first time today, I step down onto the steep bank and I slip and fall on my ass in the 4" of accumulated snow. Snow is still coming down. It's absolutely gorgeous. I can't see anything except this ridge that I can't keep my footing on. I am in a swath of trees that grow in a thick line down from the ridge top. I zigzag and slip down the slope through the trees where I think they are hiding after the flush. My dog moves much easier than me in the snow but she is unsure where to go. Not like a bird dog.

Mountain grouse are legendary for their propensity to perch like statues until you get very close. The grouse believes that camouflaged motionlessness is its best defense. A friend, who grew up in the Big Horns in Wyoming in the 50's, was introduced to the mountain grouse by his father as the "fool's grouse." Because even a fool can harvest a mountain grouse. If the fool has seen where the grouse lands after the flush. The father advised his son not to hunt the fool's grouse, to leave them for the hungry people – and/or foolish people – that need a meal. Unfortunately for me, I did not see where these grouse landed. So I zigzag. I hear them fly off after I pass. The wait-like-a-stone tactic works again.

The wind begins to blow the snow at me. I am discouraged, wet, and cold. I don all of my warm gear wishing that I had brought gators. CamelBak line is frozen, my pack is an unwieldy water bottle. I wish that I had brought better gloves. My hands are red and stiff. I consider heading back down. My wife would be happy if I did. But I would not be. It's only 9am. I'll warm up if I keep moving. So I climb back onto the trail and head higher into the mountains. I clasp my hands together to warm them. Clapsed hands cradle the gun.

I move past a spring frequented by elk and mulies. Their hoof prints punctuate the warm muddy beacon surrounded by colder, snow laden struggling vegetation.

I leave the trail again and move through the trees to where the birds are. There are two of them. They are on the ground. Feeding? Mating? That was spring when the drumming wings of mountain grouse cocks proclaimed virility. Like we used to do on East Main at KO's. Before my wife and I were married. Slowly, I unclasp my hands as they flush. Swing the gun towards them, stock to my shoulder, sight along the barrel (boom!) as they fly behind that tree towards the knob of mountain there. I decide not to zigzag after them, not much of a chance to flush one of them again. Without a bird dog.

Instead I turn and continue higher along the ridge. Finally. Grouse tracks in the snow. I follow the tracks ready for the clattering wings. I only hear the wings. I zigzag until, high in that pine tree, is the grouse. Craning its neck to get a better view of me and my dog. The grouse does not move. Any fool could take that bird with this shotgun. We celebrate, my dog gobbles down the heart and liver, I eat a PBJ. Inspired,

I carefully hunt this magic place high on the mountain. Another explosion of wings! I am warmer. I am faster. Not as fast as Bubba. But fast enough as this covey flushes. A few grayish-blue feathers float back onto the mountain after the shotgun blasts recede. 3000 feet up. 7 miles in. 5 rounds. 3 birds. And back by 2 o'clock to watch the kids. A fine day for a mountain grouse man.