

Grasshoppers, Glaciers, and Grouse

by Jeff Gillaspie

Approximately 20,000 years ago, a final, vast sheet of glacial ice was slowly and inexorably spreading across the plains of South Dakota. As it built mass it moved, and as it moved it carved, scoured, and scraped the land, engulfing rocks varying in size from a basketball to boulders. It carried them on its path to serve as carelessly strewn markers of its passing.

When Earth's temperature finally began to rise, this once dominant ice sheet started to melt and grudgingly relinquished its grip on the land. Those rocks suspended in its midst were ultimately left behind to share the landscape with the waving, mixed-grass prairie and any wildlife that could survive, even thrive, in this harsh terrain.



The wind picked up to a perfect speed, and sitting in the saddle was a nice break for everyone. Watching the dogs, once again at full range working the wind, we settled into a pleasant glide through the grass.

The fully masked setter, white with orange ticking and a solid spot on his tail, loped along in front of us with a determination that rivaled any other. The white-with-light-orange-spots pointer did the same. Twenty-five miles ago, these dogs wouldn't have been recognizable by their spots. They would have been at a distant four hundred yards, flashing across the prairie grass like the many tumbleweeds we had seen this day. It was seventy degrees now but starting to cool, although the sun was still in full display. The late afternoon brought a light wind we were happy to enjoy.

Having set out from the trailer nearly two hours ago, we had covered some of the best prairie grasslands available anywhere in the world. Still green from the late August rains, this thick cover could easily hide a sharp-tailed grouse or prairie chicken, and it did. The unseasonably hot temperatures early in the year had dried up many pastures, but the much-needed blessing of late summer moisture from above hadn't passed up the ranch we were hunting. The dogs had done an incredible job working the birds, using a timid breeze that came straight from the north with a cooling hint of what winter would bring.

The birds were cooperating as best they could – they were here. Both Bandit and Jan had some amazing finds, backs, holds, and flushes. There were still plenty of grasshoppers in the thick cover of the glacial stone-scattered grasses, and the prairie birds took full advantage of an easy meal while it remained. The grasses were rustling instead of crackling under the hooves of the Tennessee walkers – Tex, Smurf, and Elvis – carrying us over the endless, rolling sea of prairie grass. All three had long since settled into a steady but smooth pace across the fields tinted with a hint of tan above the green carpet, and they didn't hesitate to bend their heads for a quick bite at every opportunity.

Thus far in the day, the opportunities had been there, but the connection hadn't quite been made. The classic style of the English setter Bandit and hard-driving skills of Jan the pointer made for an exceptional afternoon; and while Bandit doesn't typically care to honor a dog he hasn't run with before, he was a perfect gentleman when Jan stuck her nose high in the air at a covey of five sharptails.

On the flush, the first bird came up and over the guns, cackling a victory, somehow knowing it was safe from the 20-gauges. The bird didn't notice me until it was ten yards from the horses. A quick change of course sent it wobbling toward a nearby row of Russian olive and cedar trees that had been planted there some forty years ago. Shots rang out as the bird whisked over the tree line, mocking us once again. With both guns empty, the rest of the covey decided it was the perfect time to make their escape. Bandit broke his point/back as he knew there were no longer birds in this area of the prairie that had demanded his attention. Jan held until she was

released, as she had been trained to do for the field trials. She carried the discipline to match her hunting drive.

I directed the guns to head toward the tree line, and as we discussed the chances of more birds holding after all that racket of gunfire, Jan, with the wind at her back, ran through another sharptail just forty yards away sitting near the trees along the fence. Sometimes I can make the call correctly; sometimes the birds make me look like the happy fool I am.



Due east, as the hunters were walking the edge of the trees, the north wind brought the scent of the entire pasture to the dogs. It was indeed a challenge keeping them close to the now dismounted hunters, but the birds today had made it more than evident that they had little patience for a slow dismount and leisurely approach. A dog on point at fifty yards had routinely meant that there would likely be a flush of feathers when the hunters neared the thirty-five yard mark.

The wind was just light enough to keep the scent aloft, gently brushing the noses of the dogs. Like the smell of a freshly baked apple pie cooling on a windowsill, the smell of first-year prairie chickens swayed Bandit into a turn, then another as he narrowed his range of scent. Easing into a point, he slowly brought his nose high. As if it were matching the second hand



of a clock, his tail ticked up to the twelve o'clock position. It was simply stated and perfectly presented.

Gentlemen, your prairie chickens! The guns were ready, close enough that the shooters would have to hesitate a split second after the explosion of wings, lest there be nothing left of the bird when it was retrieved. Both birds erupted from the ground at the same time, presenting themselves in ideal positions for the guns on each side of the dogs. Two shots rang out, but two more did not, and the birds continued unscathed over the high spine of the pasture, likely in search of a different county in which to spend the afternoon.

This species of bird had spent thousands of years evading predators that were much more efficient than we were, and there is a reason this hunt is such a task and, therefore, challenging experience. The glacial rocks that have littered the pasture for 20,000 or more years had seen uncounted numbers of prairie chickens and sharptails rest on their surface to collect the day's water, bask in the sunshine, or even find a bit of shade on a hot summer day. To watch the dogs casting across the vast expanse of nothing but short-grass prairie, listen to the wind softly whistling, and see and hear the grass sweeping as the measured gait of horse hooves pass through it – that is an opportunity, even a blessing, like none other.

Speaking from experience, it's easy to talk yourself into missing birds, especially after the first-round peppers the trees instead of the birds. As a guide, I try to keep chins up and friends motivated. There's nothing worse than getting in your own head when the birds start flushing. Fortune smiled on me this hunt, though, as my crew of gunners had the experience to analyze their shots; instead of getting frustrated, they corrected and moved along. Now we prayed for more finds.

Down through the draw that drained the spring snows into the stock dam and across the other side we rode. Short cattails sparsely covered the bottom of the drainage and typically provided some solid cover for not only the pheasants that frequented the property but also the many coyotes, fox, skunk, and racoons that called the ancient ground their home. The wind picked up to a perfect speed, and sitting in the saddle was a nice break for everyone. Watching the dogs, once again at full range working the wind, we settled into a pleasant glide through the grass.

The steady *swish, swish* of the grass across the hooves of the horses was hypnotic, and with the sun just right, and the motion of the horses rocking back and forth, it could have been quite easy to drift off to sleep. The occasional sound of Bandit checking in kept me alert, though, as a hot day like this carried with it the chance of an overheated dog. We stopped often for water, and when we reached the edge of

Sample the Village Press Sporting Group family of magazines!

The Pointing Dog Journal

The premier source of exploring and enriching the pointing dog and upland bird hunting experience.

The Retriever Journal

Hitting the uplands and wetlands with a driven hunting retriever.

Just Labs

Celebrating the incredible life of the family Labrador retriever.

American Fly Fishing

Bringing the world of fly fishing to life through exploring well-known fisheries and off-the-radar waters.



Visit www.vpdcs.com/sportinggroup to request your no-obligation issue of one or all of our titles, or call **1-844-251-2652**.

www.pointingdogjournal.com
www.retrieverjournal.com
www.justlabsmagazine.com
www.americanflyfishing.com

the crest of the hilltop running to the northwest, we made a full stop, calling the dogs in.

Both Bandit and Jan came in and settled in the shade of the horses, gulping what they could for water and rolling in the cool grass. We were lucky. The temperature had started to drop, and the wind cooled the dogs nearly as much as it cooled us. Typically, those rolling hilltops held birds near the top, and it wasn't unusual for a hunter to spend the entire stretch of ground walking, as the grouse tended to scatter out and flush at random distances. We hadn't seen a single bird moving to the north, but, while I'm used to being outsmarted by the survival instincts of the prairie chicken, I am sound at taking note of their coverts and frequenting them.

The goal for the day was not to stack the feathered bounty high. It never is. Today we were looking for a prairie chicken to claim as a prize, and thus far we had managed only sharp-tails. Nonetheless, it was a good day, and everyone was feeling the calm that only comes with sailing across the prairie watching the dogs do what they love best. We had one shorter ridge to cover on our way back to the horse trailer, and the wind would be completely at our backs; but we are ever the optimists in the field, and Bandit and Jan were up for the task.

Bird breath... There's nothing better after a day in the field.

Maximize your dog's potential with the best field-tested, dog-approved hunting gear.
Order online 24/7 or by phone weekdays 9-4 EST.



uglydoghunting.com 877-982-7054





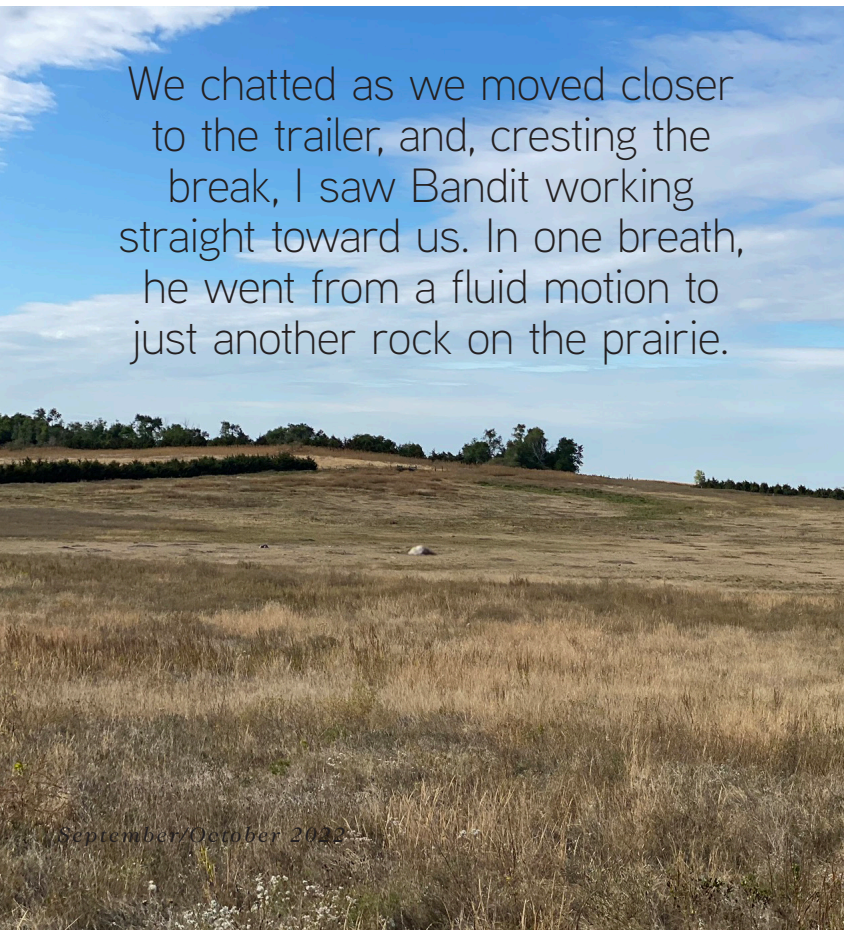








We chatted as we moved closer to the trailer, and, cresting the break, I saw Bandit working straight toward us. In one breath, he went from a fluid motion to just another rock on the prairie.



Maybe "ridge" isn't the best description. When I say ridge, I mean an elevation rise of 100-200 feet from the bottom of the draw. You'll feel that elevation rise if you hoof it from bottom to top, though, as it may stretch a quarter of a mile from the drainage to the crest. It is all rolling hills on this ranch, scattered with massive glacial rocks and boulders, some easily topping the one-ton mark. Filled with badger and coyote dugouts, the walk can be treacherous. One careless step and you may be dealing with a painful, even temporarily debilitating injury. For the most part, the sure-footed horses are naturals at avoiding these hazards, but as a walking hunter, it's easy to forget to watch your step.

Once the dogs had rested and indicated they were no longer willing to lie in the shade of the horses, we mounted up and turned to the east. The sun was low enough that it flashed a reflection from the horse trailer like the beacon from a lighthouse. The wind swirled through the draw and made the grasses dance, sending the dogs in all directions trying to pinpoint the source of the scent. As we crested the last section of the field and turned toward the trailer, the prairie dogs in the adjacent pasture sounded off with their vocal disapproval of our presence. I wasn't impressed by their presence either but was at least polite enough not to reply in kind.

Bandit cast about 500 yards out ahead, taking the low road. I thought to myself that he had decided to call the brace and head back to the trailer, but when he reached the end of the draw, he climbed the rise and turned to us, quartering the wind, and covering it edge to edge as he worked his way back to the horses, who had spotted the trailer and livened their pace a bit.

Jan had cast off to the east of the ridge and was torn between the prairie dogs and the smell of potential birds in the taller grass. As she worked the lower edge of the ridge, I kept watch with pride on Bandit. He had worked hard today, and he had done more than his job description required, finding enough birds for all of us to fill our bags. The heat and miles had taken their toll today, and his pace had slowed considerably as we neared the end of the brace.

Bandit dropped out of sight in a break across the top just as Jan was hailed from her travels toward the prairie dogs. We chatted as we moved closer to the trailer, and, cresting the break, I saw Bandit working straight toward us. In one breath, he went from a fluid motion to just another rock on the prairie. His body twisted a bit, his nose wasn't held high, his tail wasn't straight at twelve o'clock, and he wasn't shaking with anticipation. But his eyes looked straight to me, then down, back to me, then down again. Now, I'm a bit slow to thought sometimes, especially toward the end of a day that began at four in the morning, but it didn't take a sharp mind to realize that this was the opportunity for one last chance at a bird.

"Get down, guys! This is your chance if you can get up there in time!" I whispered/yelled to my hunters. "Leave the reins on the horses, they won't go anywhere."

At about fifty yards, based on what we had seen today, the birds weren't going to stick around long enough for us to dilly-dally. The well-oiled saddle leather creaked once again as the hunters slid to the ground. They pulled their guns from the leather scabbards, and as soon as they were clear of the horses, I sidled up and collected the reins of Smurf and Tex.

In the seconds that followed, I offered words of encouragement such as "go, go, go" and "faster." The moment was surreal, and I felt my adrenaline rising, my blood pumping, and the hair standing up on the back of my neck. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jan top the hill straight beside Bandit, and

with her manners in check, she froze in an honor that would make any field trial competitor proud.

Twenty-five yards from Bandit and Jan, the guns had made it into shooting range, and not a moment too soon. Time stopped, the wind stopped, noise stopped. The sound of beating wings flooded my ears, and as I focused only on Bandit, I saw his head tip backward as a prairie chicken exploded from directly under his nose. In a split second, two more birds erupted from that spot, one on each side of the dog. A shot rang out to my right, but I couldn't take my eyes off Bandit. He was still locked tight, telling me that the birds weren't done. Two shots sounded from the left, and I figured there had to be at least one bird on the ground.

I shouted for a reload to everyone, knowing that if the birds had all flushed, Bandit wouldn't be holding steady on point but would instead be trying to run down fallen birds. The last of the birds finally had enough and burst from the covert just a few yards from Bandit, shouting their disapproval of the disruption even though no shots had been fired their direction. Bandit broke his point and chased down the first bird to fall, grabbing it and holding until his gunner could catch up. Jan was released from her honoring point, and she rounded up a second bird for her hunter.

Two prairie chickens had fallen, and our goal had been achieved in such a fashion that if there would have been video of the event, it would have gone viral. Bandit is always one to impress in the field, and this wasn't the first time he somehow put himself square into the middle of a covey without bumping them. But it was the first time he has done so with the birds parked directly under him.

As if he knew exactly what I was thinking, he came to me and plopped down in the shade under Elvis, his smile only matched by my level of awe at his skills. I sat down next to him, and he laid his head in my lap, panting hard, and happy to call it a day. I could feel the pride well up in me, knowing that having dogs that are so willing to work this hard for you is a blessing that can't be explained, only felt.

The drive back is always my time for reflection, and today was no different. I relived the way the dogs had worked, the way I worked, how the birds had behaved as well as where they had chosen to hide on that particular day. Most importantly, however, was the realization of how much weight can be lifted from your shoulders when you sit on a horse and follow a big-running dog. Like so many other days, I was glad to have this one in my memories.

