

A SOUL-RESTORING BIRD HUNT ON
FAMILIAR GROUND ONCE WALKED BY
GENERATIONS PAST.

THE PRAIRIE HOMESTEAD

BY JEFFREY GILLASPIE



Even in a dry year, the area around the old South Dakota homestead holds an abundance of birds.

JEFFREY GILLASPIE

Between 1860 and 1920, thousands of homesteaders settled the South Dakota prairie, including my great-grandparents. Free ground offered by the Homestead Act brought people from near and far. Some made their life here in western South Dakota, planting roots and making a home for themselves and their descendants. The requirements of building a 12x14-square-foot house and cultivating 160 acres for five years was, most thought, a small price to pay for a new life. Life in the city, big or small, had limitations for success, and the lure of making one's own way was often too strong to resist.

But the West River gumbo clay proved to be a challenge for farming, and it often took homesteaders a combination of ranching, farming, and taking on odd jobs just to make ends meet. The prairie offered a bounty of natural resources, though, and the homesteaders quickly realized that they had everything they needed to survive—provided they could survive Mother Nature.

The top of the cattail split the sun as I bent to adjust my boot, whispering to me that a perfect day was a blessing on the prairie. We had only just stepped out of the truck, the dogs with their electronic collars, me

with my shotgun. The gun was still shiny and free from the scratches and dings that come from spending months in the field, as I am typically guiding so I rarely carry a gun. The dogs' collars were well worn but had more than enough life in them to hunt the family homestead for a few hours. They showed the bumps and bruises that come with daily use for three months straight and had served well over the last several years.

The dogs, at least one of them, showed some age, but nothing that would inhibit a good hunt. Beckham had been on the A-team for five years, and while he took a little longer to recover from a thirty-mile run, he refused to let that infringe on what he figured was the best and only life to live. He had been taught by some of the best bird dogs in the field, and today was one of the days that he was to pass on some of the wisdom he had learned from his years in search of upland game birds.

Other than the steady sound of the wind whistling and weaving through the cattails, nothing disturbed the prairie. Next to the man-made lake, built in years long past, the aquatic plants thrived. Sharing a quarter-section of ground with the South Dakota prairie, this lake and its plants sheltered nature's best children—wildlife beyond belief. Even in a dry year, an abundance of pheasants, deer, coyotes, ducks,

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The grouse taken on the grounds of the old homestead fed generations of the author's family over the years.

and raccoons made their homes near the old 1904 homestead. Signs of life without humans were reflected in every rustle of the reeds.

The dry grass and cottonwood leaves made a crunching noise as I stood up, and a hidden twig snapped as the weight of my boots pushed it beyond its limits. The dogs had had barely time to stretch their legs, and as had often happened on the other times we have visited, the rushes exploded with the sound of fast wingbeats and the cackle of roosters. Half a dozen or more rose from the cattails, sending the featherlike tops of the plants to the wind and calling the dogs to attention. Like me, they were caught completely off guard.

I did not bother to raise my gun, as the moment had taken me by surprise, just as it had the dogs. The younger pup, Zuri, gave chase, but Beck simply stopped and watched the flush. Reining the "kid" back in, I took another step, anticipating more birds would rattle out of the creek bed that fed the lake. They did not disappoint, and as Zuri returned, another bird flushed from the head-high plants. This time, I did not hesitate with the 20-gauge, and as the rooster sailed across the prairie grass, the lead from the shell sent him into a head-over-heels spin, dropping to the dust forty yards away.

I marked the spot, marked Beck, and seeing that he had his stride in line with a retrieval, I turned to check on Zuri, who was coming in hot to see what the commotion was all

about. From the side of my vision, I saw Beck pounce on the flopping bird and I knelt to share the moment with the younger setter reeling into my heels. A few seconds later, Beck joined us with the pheasant in mouth.

Onward. Through a break in the tall marsh, we headed in a northwesterly direction, the dogs thinking I was atop a horse, which is how we usually hunt, and me wishing I were atop a horse. I called quietly to Beck to bring him back within range of my gun, knowing that this time of year no bird was going to sit and wait for me to cover three hundred yards on foot just to take a poke at it. Beck was tending toward the west, and I figured that we should be tending to the north. I won, as Beck is ever willing to please, and he relented to my bidding. We traveled the edge of the waterway, likely pushing birds on foot out in front of us. The dry grass broke loudly under my boots, and I knew the dogs would have some sore pads at the end of the day.

As we reached the rusted barbed wire that marked the edge of the homestead, we turned straight into the west wind, and the dogs were happy. Beck cast far again as Zuri kept close quarters with me. Making a wide turn to the north, then back around to me, Beck nearly stepped on a prairie chicken holding tight in the gnarled grasses. The chicken burst from what only seemed like one blade of grass.

"Sorry, Dad," Beck seemed to say as he slid by with a grin, "wrong side of the wind."

I get it. You cannot always have the breeze on your side. As he turned back to the wind, he slammed into a point so suddenly that the prairie dust emerged from under its cover of grass. His body shook and his nose defied his stature, raised as high as his tail. The wind blew through his tail feathers, wispy and yet unmarred by stickers and weeds. A second chicken emerged from its hidden covert and as I raised the gun, I imagined the benefit for the young dog, who had by instinct locked up the second Beckham had.

Now we would have that familiar smell of grouse we so wanted to embed in her nose. Two shots rang out, and as the bird found the wind, the only scent in the air was that of gunpowder and my own chagrin. I had swung the gun like I was shooting at a pheasant and in so doing, had managed to shoot an easy three feet in front of the grouse. *That's all right*, I told myself as I cursed out loud. It was good to see prairie chickens on this homestead. There have been too many years of crops in this dust, and this year was the first in a long time that there was actual grass to hold them. The sharptailed grouse are happy with a stubble field and a strip of grass, but the prairie chicken, for some reason, needs the wide-open expanse of the prairie to make a home.

We reached the corner of the homestead, established more than a century ago with blood and sweat, and turned once again, this time, our backs to the wind. The clouds were moving, easily outdistancing the wind that was ruffling my vest. The day was warmer than it should have been for a late December hunt, and the breeze helped cool my back as we moved through the thick cover.

Across the expanse of the short grass, I saw a covey of sharptailed grouse rise and clear the cottonwood trees that

stood watch over the north edge of the lake. The trees were old and silent, having seen it all, and the flush of a dozen grouse was not a new occurrence to them. Year after year they watched the birds and other wildlife, marking a haven for them all.

Once again, I cursed out loud. Always follow the hunter with the longest nose. If I had heeded Beck's casts when we had first broken through the tall cattails, he would have settled into that proud point with his nose held high and his tail to match.

As we approached the edge of the prairie grasses, I noted that Zuri had started to cast far and turn back into the wind, telling me that she was becoming more confident as the brace continued. Every step I took showed another view of bird roosts on the ground, and I smiled, happy to see so much indication of a healthy population. It was enough to drive the young dog crazy, and she spent plenty of time with her nose on the ground inspecting what was once a hotspot for her prey.

The pheasants flushed wild ahead and behind us, intent on reaching the millet field to the west. It was dinner time, and the shadows were growing longer. We made a cut through the cattails where the deer had stomped the tall tubers down and climbed the shoreline up to where the homestead had once stood.

Fence corners wrapped in woven wire were sentinels next to the yard, marking where the simple garden once grew. Horseradish plants that had survived 116 years of frozen winters and dusty, parched summers still thrived and marked one corner of the garden as their own. The skeletons of old wagon wheels just topped the tall grass, rusted and silent, witness to the rain and snow and wind that was a constant companion on the prairie. I could smell the cottonwood leaves that had fallen to the ground, and a familiar, yet fleeting feeling of the fall season rushed through my mind.

The structure was small, although not the smallest that had been built out in the middle of nowhere. The roof was the only visible part, as it had

collapsed years before and now served as a home to a variety of small creatures. Hops grew randomly around and onto the roof, having served its purpose years before when this place was a family home. I found a spot free of wire and glass next to the bricks of the old chimney and sat for a moment, watching the sun slowly sink toward the long horizon. A few raindrops fell to the dust, their origin a surprise, as the clouds were not the type that would typically stick around.

In the days of the settlers, this house had been bustling with activity, the stove had a constant fire burning, and lines were staked at the edge of the lake in hopes of fresh fish for dinner. Plenty of grouse had fallen from the sky on this ground and had fed many mouths over the years. I scratched the pups' ears as they wandered in for some attention. They were tired. There was a small interest in hunting, but not enough for them to pass up the oppor-

tunity for a lazy rest next to me in the soft grass.

No word or photograph could possibly do justice to the peace you feel when you are outdoors and away from everyday life. The nearest dwelling was too far from us to even be spotted, and the sense of being one with nature settled in like a young pup drifting off to sleep with a contented sigh.

As we drove back toward civilization, I spun the day's adventure through my head. The way the dogs worked, the way I worked, how the birds behaved, and where they were hiding. Finally, the realization hit of how much weight had been lifted off my shoulders as I wandered over that ancient ground. I do not know where it went, but I was glad to have this day in my memory and I knew it would give me balance once again. I can only imagine that there were moments that my ancestors, who had come to settle on this land, felt the same way.



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