

Pheasant Hunting in Texas

As I negotiated my way through a maze of tall tumble weed and pigweed encircling a quarter acre irrigation pit, a cackling ringneck pheasant erupted from the tangled mess right behind me. Somehow the bird allowed me to walk right past him. As the long-tailed bird cleared the tall vegetation and just before the strong, cold north wind could assist him in escaping, Shawn Harris and I fired simultaneously, and the bird folded, dropping to the sparsely vegetated shore line. Upon retrieving the brilliantly-colored bird, we spent appreciable time admiring the magnificently feathered specimen and really never questioned who actually hit it. But that's pheasant hunting, most often conducted with a fairly large group of family and friends enjoying a lot of shooting, an abundance of walking, and outstanding camaraderie.

The ringneck pheasant is not native to the U.S.--they are immigrants from China. Historically, Richard Bache, Benjamin Franklin's son-in-law, released pheasants from China on a New Jersey plantation back in 1791. Then in 1881, Judge Denny, U.S. Consul to China, successfully released birds in Oregon and Pennsylvania.

Ringnecks released around 1910 in western Oklahoma began showing up in the northern Panhandle in 1939-40. In 1941, two Hereford residents established a release program in Deaf Smith County, and the rest is history as individuals from other counties began to establish pheasant populations.

A regal bird displaying a radiant fluorescent copper-gold-colored chest and an array of pastel green and blue-colored rump feathers, topped by a lacquer-blue-colored head and neck accented by a brilliantly white ring all complemented by extremely long

tan-colored tail feathers striated with dark bars, the ringneck is unquestionably one of Nature's true marvels.

I grew up hunting ringnecks back in Pennsylvania during the late 60s when I was a teenager, but this was my first pheasant hunting experience in the Lone Star State. Ever since I arrived in Texas back in 1975, I fully intended to hunt these birds, but as a certified wildlife biologist specializing in whitetail deer, pheasant hunting during December had to be put on hold.

My time schedule changed, however, in 2004 when I became a college instructor at Southwest Texas Junior College where I developed a wildlife management program, affording students an associate of applied science degree. It's a first of its kind in Texas, and now in its seventh year, a total of 140 students are enrolled in the program. More importantly, it's attracting students from other states and throughout Texas. Two of my best students, Hereford residents long-time friends Blake Martin and Andrew Caperton, invited me to hunt pheasant with them in 2009, but a management job in Mexico took priority, so our hunt was postponed until 2010.

Arriving by air in Amarillo on December 3, I was met by Ed Toler, a retired sergeant in the Hereford police department, who dedicates much of his time now training bird dogs, particularly golden retrievers. The drive southwest to Hereford was a short one as Ed dropped me off at the home of Lance and Karen Martin, parents of Blake. I unpacked my gear in the solitude of a house void of people, but that changed in the evening when a number of family and friends arrived to plan the traditional pheasant season opener. Lance, an insurance agent, is widely known in these parts, thus lined out the farms we could hunt and instructed us as to how we could hunt them efficiently.

With little sleep and lots of visiting, 6 a.m. arrived swiftly. Following a hearty breakfast, we drove several miles on a dry, dusty county road to a vacant dairy farm with pens inundated by invasive plants like tumble weed and pigweed. Several small irrigation pits occurred there as well, providing pheasants ample water and cover. The outlying area, composed of recently harvested milo and corn, provided birds all they needed to survive. Our job was simply to walk the birds up, which is much easier said than done.

Ringnecks, like blue quail, prefer running to flight, thus we had to line up and walk through the thick vegetation and drive birds to several individuals situated on the opposing side of the area we hunted. Without these individuals, called blockers, in place, birds would simply keep running, and if they flushed, they would do so beyond the effective range of our scatterguns.

With two high brass Federal loads of four shot in my over and under, I worked my way alongside of Blake and Andrew through the jungle of vegetation, oftentimes hearing the cackling birds go up, but unable to see them because the vegetation was over my head.

After we traversed several heavily vegetated dry pits and around several ponds, a total of six roosters were bagged by our party of seven. It was a little discouraging to these local ardent pheasant hunters, but I saw more pheasants in one day than I would in a month of hunting back home in Pennsylvania.

After lunch we returned to the dairy, but only one rooster was bagged. “It was a slow day” commented Lance as Blake, Andrew, and I filmed the last bird of day, employing what little color the cloudy horizon afforded us for a silhouette of the rooster.

On the second morning hunt, we started out with 15 hunters at an old beet refinery plant that had gone under several years ago. An abundance of thickly vegetated pits occurred on this property, and following a short gathering, walkers and blockers were designated, and we were off, but not before two roosters exploded skyward right as we exited our vehicles at the entrance to the first pit. This was a portent for things to come as a substantial number of roosters inhabited these pits.

Just before entering the first pit, a cock bird erupted, going left, and with one shot from my 12-gauge, the bird hit the turf with Ed's golden retriever Rusty expertly locating and retrieving the beautiful bird. Minutes later the blockers opened up as birds avoiding us flew up at the end of the pit. Before I knew it, birds were exploding upward throughout the pit.

The same held true on our second drive as I dropped my second bird of the day. What made this bird so special was that Blake shot at it first, but missed. That granted this old man bragging rights, at least until I approached the edge of the pit where a rooster got entangled in the vegetative quagmire not three feet from me. I could have hit the cackling, struggling bird with my barrel, but once airborne, I blew what appeared to be a chip shot. Like dove hunting, the misses in pheasant hunting are as enjoyable as the hits, as respectful comments like 'nice shot' reverberate across the line when a bird goes down or complete silence when a bird flies to safety.

By morning's end, 10 to 15 roosters were collected and most of the folks parted for home.

Lance had two more farms to hunt that evening, and by 3:30 we were negotiating another dry, dusty county road slightly north of town towards a large set of unused cattle

pens maybe a football field long and half as wide. Void of cattle, the pens were inundated with chest-high pigweed, and the plan was for Blake, Andrew, and I to walk the pens east to west while Ed and Lance blocked on the west side. I climbed over into the northern side as Blake and Andrew proceeded further south. But before they entered the pens, they spotted three roosters running and took off after them. One of the birds took off and Blake fired, missing the bird. Suddenly, birds erupted from every portion of the corrals, but none close enough to me for a shot. Lance and Ed were covered up, and in little less than 10 minutes, some 50 roosters had exited the thick cover, and Lance and Ed were limited out. It was a sight to behold, with only one regret, and that was the fact that I didn't block.

The following day I flew back home with an abundance of fond memories and the acquisition of several new friends. Although this was my first Texas pheasant hunting experience, it won't be my last, and the friends I've made simply enhanced the experience.

Now in the brush country I can focus on quail. With ample spring rainfall enhancing reproductive success, quail have rebounded and will provide some good shooting through February.

Pursuing pheasant in Texas verifies the rich wildlife diversity of the Lone Star State. Nowhere on the planet can one catch a speckled trout in the Gulf, a giant rainbow trout in the Guadalupe, shoot a trophy buck in the brush country, and bag a few dove, quail, and pheasant, all in one season. Tweaking a lyric of Tanya Tucker—"When I die, I may not go to heaven; if I don't, just let me go to Texas, 'cause Texas is as close as a sportsman can get."

