



PHOTO BY RON SIMFELT

# Dakotas Pheasant Preview

Here's an educated prediction about what to expect when going afield this year. ► **BY DENNIS FOSTER**

Despite what even longtime South and North Dakota residents would consider the very protracted and snow-filled winter of 2010/2011 the overall expectation for the numbers of pheasants we can expect this fall looks to remain somewhere between good and downright phenomenal. While it is possible we may see a slight reduction in the overall numbers, we will still be at what can be considered to be very high levels of birds throughout the region and easily more than anywhere else in the U.S. As I write this (early April) it is still too early to predict what kind of a hatch and chick survival rates we will have, but I am optimistic and the prospects look quite good.

We owe this to the fact that, despite what Mother Nature throws at pheasants, they just seem to have an innate ability to survive nearly anything absent a load of well-placed #4 shot. They have once again proven their amazing resiliency and there appear to be very good numbers emerging from heavy cover as the snowdrifts recede for another year. As they come out from the shelterbelts and dense cattail sloughs, they are quite easy to spot as



**This Montana hunter proudly displays her first pheasant in South Dakota. Her killer grin only hints at how deadly she is with a scattergun.**  
■ Photo by Dennis Foster.

any remaining crop and grass cover is largely flattened from heavy winter snows.

I am sure we have had some losses

that are attributable to the harsh winter, but it does not look to have had a major impact. Personally, I feel that other than a near-total devastation, such losses may actually be good for the population as a whole, in a Darwinian sense. As the weakest are weeded out, it only leaves the genetically superior to propagate and pass along these desirable survivability traits furthering their ability to cope with adverse conditions.

This fully explains why released pen-raised adult pheasants have proven to not survive a single winter, no matter how mild. They simply do not have the genes, nor the learned skills with which to deal with what the Dakota's all too frequently dish out. I also believe this is good in that they do not make it to breeding season the following spring and we take the chance of them passing along some of their decidedly weaker traits. I often, not so inaccurately describe these pen-raised birds as "colorful chickens" and they are just about as difficult and fun to "hunt" as said barnyard fowl. This is what you will typically find in the preserves and on

a growing number of the high-dollar commercial hunting operations as they need to supplement the carrying capacity of their land in order to cater to the high numbers of hunters they run, as well as compensating for the increased bag limits at preserves.

Out here in the real world where we have 100 percent wild birds and the laws of mother nature dictate, we find that as long as we have a decent population of hen's in the spring and most of them manage to produce a fair brood, we end up in fine shape come fall. A very interesting note and another factor that contributes heavily to the continued success of the pheasants is that if a hen's nest should be destroyed by floods, farm machinery, etc., or the eggs are taken by predators, they will re-nest until they have chicks that have successfully hatched. If you have ever wondered why there are always a fair amount of very young birds at the beginning of the season, you now know why.

The hen's are truly amazing, but they shouldn't get all the credit as one rooster can quite easily breed a dozen or more of them. It is actually a good conservation practice to harvest as many roosters as possible before the end of season so as to increase the carrying capacity of the land. Over the winter they end up in competition with the hen's for all available cover and food sources. During a harsh winter, protected locations become vital as areas typically thought of as pheasant habitat quickly become buried in snow too deep to be of any use. All the unprotected CRP in the world simply will not carry a single bird through a bad winter. The birds will end up in large groups utilizing very heavy cattail sloughs and mature shelterbelts. What we see in these situations is the roosters pushing the hen's out of the best spots and jeopardizing their rate of survival. Therefore, knowing the libido and capabilities of the roosters, it is best to eliminate as many as possible so as to ensure a high number of breeding hens come spring.

In the areas I have traveled throughout eastern South Dakota and southeastern North Dakota. I am seeing some very encouraging numbers of hen's with what seems to be about the right number of roosters mixed in. So,

## GOOD GEAR TO GET

A good hunt can be made all the better by having the proper gear. Accessorizing isn't just for gals completing their dress ensembles. We, as hunters both male and female, as well as our dogs deserve a good dose of this as well. Over the past few seasons, I have personally run across a couple of unique outlets worth mentioning.

I have had the opportunity to hunt with Jared and Dixie Tanner of [www.uplanders.com](http://www.uplanders.com), along with their entourage of kids. J.T. has taken his passion for hunting birds and carved out an impressive niche business catering to the upland bird hunter. There's lots of good stuff to choose from in your quest to be outfitted properly in the latest gear and this shop is definitely worth checking out as you are planning this fall's hunts.

A long-overdue product is the dog kennel that Doug Sangl, of [www.rufftoughdogkennels.com](http://www.rufftoughdogkennels.com), introduced me to that can withstand any amount of abuse you can subject it to. Now that my dogs and I have managed to destroy every one of the so-called "better brands" available, these guys have come through with just what the serious hunter not only needs, but demands. They are competitively priced, come in a variety of sizes and unique configurations, and offer an outstanding value. —Dennis Foster

based on my on my past experience and extensive knowledge of the birds, having lived my entire life within 15 miles of the very first successful introduction of ringneck pheasants into the wild, I would have to say we are looking at another banner year for 2011. I also run a pheasant-hunting operation ([www.eyetimepromotions.com](http://www.eyetimepromotions.com)) and have a unique perspective from that angle as well.

Being we are on the general subject of conservation and what the birds need to survive, I would like to share some observations on CRP acreage. First of all, we need to face the hard economic

facts that with high commodity prices and an ever-growing need for land to fuel the ethanol industry combined with government payments on CRP that are not as attractive, we are going to see a dramatic reduction in the amount of acres enrolled in the program; of this there is no doubt. Yes, this will have an effect on the birds as we owe, in large part, our resurgence in numbers to CRP. But, I would also counterbalance this somewhat with the fact that the entire region has been experiencing continual wet conditions. What this means is that although some CRP is not being renewed and these acres are now in crop production, there is also an awful lot of land that has reverted back to sloughs and is now impossible to farm. Mother Nature has reclaimed much of the lower-lying ground that is traditionally tilled in drier times. Therefore, we are seeing some habitat being replaced. There is a distinct benefit in the fact that the edges provide valuable nesting areas and the heavy cattails in the bottom of these sloughs supplies excellent winter cover that CRP just can't provide. So, not all is lost and the situation isn't nearly as dire as it would first appear.

Although it may sound a bit strange, we can also thank many of the commercial hunting operations in part, as well. Through the conservation practices they adhere to with nesting areas, food plots and heavy cover, they help contribute to the population in general. In the case of wild birds, they use these areas heavily and they can be found in high concentrations on this land, particularly in winter. But they are by no means stationary and do spread and intersperse throughout adjacent areas. Therefore, no matter what your thoughts on these operations, they do provide some benefits to pheasant hunters as a whole, whether paying or not.

Of further help on the habitat horizon, both North and South Dakota are taking steps to increase the amount of public land available for habit as well as hunting and are to be commended for their efforts. This is a great start but, in my opinion, much more can be done in this regard. A small increase in license fees in the form of an amount charged that would

*Continued on page 52...*

go strictly to land acquisition would be in order. For example, in South Dakota alone with well over 150,000 people hunting pheasants annually, just a \$20 conservation fee would easily generate over \$3,000,000 in additional revenue that could be used to acquire further plots of public land, something to ponder and a very small price to pay when put in perspective. If you own a four-wheel drive vehicle, the same \$20 wouldn't buy enough gas to get you 100 miles down the road.

## WHERE South Dakota

Eastern South Dakota (east of the Missouri River) has been long recognized as a Mecca for pheasants, and for good reason. This has and will always be the case as we just seem to have everything that suits the birds. There are also some newly emerging prospects, with huntable numbers of birds west of the Missouri River in northern South Dakota. A West River grouse hunt can often yield just as many pheasants and is a very viable option.

The south central portion of the state is a traditional hotspot with the Winner/Platte/Chamberlain areas always very good due to a touch milder winters. You can move north on up the line into the Redfield area (where the first pheasants took root) and expect to see huge numbers of birds as well. If you were to want to experience a West River hunt, the Eagle Butte area would be a good bet.

## North Dakota

While having considerably fewer birds as a whole, North Dakota nonetheless has some excellent opportunities; it is just mainly limited to the southeastern portion of the state and is worth looking into. The corridor along U.S. Highway 281 from the South Dakota border and on up has always held a fair number of birds and would be your best place to start.

## WHEN

South Dakota's 2011 season starts on October 15 and runs till January 1, 2012. Shooting hours are noon Central Time till sunset for the first week, then 10:00 a.m. till sunset the remainder of



**Shown is the author's Lab, Gauge, and a pair of proud fathers from Green Bay with their sons and their first limit of roosters — another priceless memory created in South Dakota.**  
■ Photo by Dennis Foster.

the season.

North Dakota's 2011 season begins on October 8 and runs till January 1, 2012, with shooting hours beginning 30 minutes before sunrise.

There is a wealth of additional information, including history, statistics, conservation efforts, and maps of public hunting land that can be found on both SD ([www.gfp.sd.gov/](http://www.gfp.sd.gov/)) and ND ([www.gf.nd.gov/fishing/redbro.html](http://www.gf.nd.gov/fishing/redbro.html)) Game, Fish and Parks Web sites, respectively.

The first couple of weeks after opening offers fine hunting, but please be aware that it is also the busiest time of the season. It may be advisable to plan your hunt for the third weekend or after. Weather is typically cooler and easier on the dogs (and you), row crops harvest has generally been completed (making birds easier to find) and, in general, there are more opportunities for places to not only hunt, but stay, as things have slowed down. Personally, I find later-season hunts to be more enjoyable.

## PRIVATE LAND

While gaining permission to hunt private ground is not as easily achieved as it once was, it can still be done if

you are polite and show proper respect for the privilege. Many farmers have family and friends hunting the first few weeks, so you will generally have better success once the initial rush subsides. It also doesn't hurt to offer something in return and it doesn't have to be in the form of cash. Goodies with your local flavor are always welcomed. Cheeses, various meats, wine, etc. are appreciated and a bottle of darn good whiskey has opened many a gate as well.

## COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS

There are now numerous commercial hunting operations around and most do an excellent job providing a quality hunt and offer good value, depending upon exactly what you want and what you are willing to spend. This can range from simply paying for daily access with no guiding on good ground with plentiful birds, all the way on up to the kind of places that will only serve their dogs Perrier water and which resemble Palm Springs more than the Dakota's. To each his own, I guess.

The vast majority of these operations will fall somewhere in middle, with fully-guided hunts over seasoned dogs and offer other welcome amenities, such as lodging and bird cleaning. Expect to spend anywhere from \$100 per day for basic hunting rights into the \$200-per-day range for fully-guided hunts, on up to "oh my God" prices for some of the more luxurious and extravagant lodges that cater to the well-heeled and corporate crowd. Please be aware that many of these high-dollar affairs are preserves and the birds will mostly be of the aforementioned pen-raised variety and released prior to your arrival. Whatever your needs or desires, something can be found to suit you. □

**MORE DEER!**  
Find dozens of great deer stories, with exclusive state forecasts, hotspots, tactics and more, at  
[GreatPlainsGameandFish.com](http://GreatPlainsGameandFish.com)