

Successful Pheasant Hunting Strategies

by Mike Gnatkowski



Ever look at a pheasant's ears? Not the feathery ears on the top of their heads, but the ears they hear with. They're big, relative to the overall size of a pheasant's head. That's the reason they hear so well. And they put that attribute to good use. A slamming truck door quickly gets their attention. A gun receiver clanging shut puts them on high alert. The sound of a dog beeper collar means, "I'm out of here!" Don't underestimate a pheasant's ability to hear. Instead, use the wind to your advantage whenever possible, don't talk while you're hunting, use hand signals and soft whistles and keep noise to a minimum.

NOT A BIRDBRAIN

A pheasant's keen eyesight might be even more astute. They can spot the shadow of a hawk circling hundreds of yards above or the glint of a gun barrel from a 1/4-mile away. The sight of a distant orange-clad parade tramping across a field puts them into panic mode.

Why is it then that pheasant hunters think they can drive up to their favorite field, slam the doors, talk loudly about last night's Broncos comeback, rack a few shells into the old pump gun and expect the pheasants to remain unaware of their presence while basically saying, "Go ahead, kill me!" That might work on opening day when you still have young-of-the-year birds that haven't experienced the onslaught before, but those that survive to the second day make it a point to not make that mistake again, but most hunters don't seem to learn.

Wild pheasants are like Pavlov's dog. It's not enough that Mother Nature ensures the survival of the fittest, but hunters, too, train them to be elusive or die. They quickly learn that trouble generally comes from the same direction and they formulate an escape plan that is tried and true.

In a big chunk of public ground there might be a couple designated parking spots where hunters typically enter a field. Pheasants know that. As soon as the truck stops the

pheasants are implementing their escape plan. They're either booking like a roadrunner for safe cover or they lift up just a couple feet off the ground so as not to be seen and quietly glide into a safe refuge or sanctuary. Most hunters never see them. They line up and go down and back and down and back in the field, never flushing a bird and assume that there aren't any pheasants in that particular field. Truth is, there were.

Public access sites, road ends, private property land boundaries, ditches, rivers and creeks, and other physical barriers represent natural starting points for hunters. Avoid them, or if you have to use them, head off in the opposite direction you think most hunters might head. Or park a 1/4-mile down the road and sneak into the cover, being as quiet as possible. If there's an obvious piece of heavier cover in the center of the field or a ditch bank that looks particularly birdy, don't head right for it. That's what the majority of hunters are going to do. Instead, slink down the property line, even if you have to hunt some inferior cover first, to put yourself in position to hunt the better-looking cover from a different direction or walk in single-file with the dogs at heel and block the anticipated escape route of the birds.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Knowing the topography of the land and its nuances can help predict pheasant escape routes. You can also use the topography to plan hunting strategies and drives. Use barren ground or inferior cover as edges to help funnel pheasants in a certain direction — sometimes. Hills, ravines and draws can act as barriers to hide your advance to better cover and surprise birds before it's too late. Get a good map of the property and study it carefully before you enter the field. I like to make notes on the map of how many birds we flushed in the field the last time we hunted it, which direction we went, what time of day it was and then use that information to plan a successful sneak.

On a hunt a few years ago we were huddled up whispering our plans for an assault on a field I'd hunted a dozen times before. The best cover was obviously in the center of the field, but rather than head directly for the cover I planned on hunting in the opposite direction, first to the edge of the property and then working the thick cover towards the center.

The Labs worked feverishly through the cover, and several hens busted out, but no roosters. As quietly as possible, we continued to work the field towards the honeyhole in the center. We came up to a big drainage ditch that I'm sure the others never knew about. It was wide enough that pheasants would have to fly and expose themselves to get across it and normally they didn't. We used the ditch as a physical blocker on our left and pushed along the ditch. Right where the cover got really thick the ditch made a hard turn to the right. I waved to everyone to converge towards the corner. The Labs dove into the thick cattails. A nice 8-point white-tailed buck came blasting out of the cover first, cattails streaming from his antlers.

Birds used to hearing approaching hunters from the other direction never knew what happened until it was too late. Guns erupted, birds splashed in the ditch, birds escaping back over us got toasted and tumbled into the field. Thirty seconds of chaos produced

eight roosters in the game bags all because of a well-planned assault that took the topography into account.

I can't begin to tell you how many times I've been sitting in a duck boat and listened to roosters cackling all morning. Pheasants are not above getting their feet wet. Thick cattails make for perfect loafing and escape cover, especially later in the season when the marsh is frozen.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I learned a lesson many years ago. I was trudging down a dike with a bag of decoys over my shoulder when the biggest rooster I've ever seen exploded out of the weeds on the side of the dike and sacred the heck out of me. I watched the cock as he headed towards the open marsh, wondering, "Where in the heck is he going?" The gaudy rooster knew exactly what he was doing and went into a long, graceful glide and landed on a solitary muskrat house in the middle of the marsh. No two- or four-legged predator without wings was going to bother him there.

There isn't much in the way of food in a marsh, but pheasants only have to spend a short time in an adjacent crop field to fill their crops before retreating to the safety of a marsh. It doesn't take much; just a little high ground or a small island can be a pheasant haven. Once the marsh freezes, the whole thing becomes a pheasant oasis.

I had been listening to roosters crowing every morning for the first three weekends of the duck season and had a pretty good plan of attack formulated for opening day. I knew the pheasants had to be roosting in a grassy field that adjoined the marsh so I made plans to be there bright and early.

It was just getting light when my Lab, Keifer, and I started skirting the edge of the marsh towards the grass. We hadn't moved a bird the first few hundred yards, but I could hear roosters cackling ahead of us. Sneaking along I finally got a fix on the pheasants. Three roosters were sitting in big cottonwood crowing their heads off. Pheasants don't roost in trees right? An old fence was between us and them that I had to cross. I was in mid-straddle when the birds perched in the trees saw me and flew off, in the opposite direction, of course. Once on the other side of the fence another rooster flushed out of the grass, headed for the marsh. The second barrel sent the cock angling into the cattails. Two roosters then exploded at my feet as I stood there with my jaw and double-barrel wide open.

And so it went. I'd take a poke at a bird at the edge of good shooting and a dozen would get up next to me in the marsh. The plan was obviously good — the execution was lacking! But I find myself pheasant hunting more and more with my knee-high mudders or even waders on, especially later in the season when pheasants get wise. It's a tactic that few other hunters employ. Hunters might be afraid of getting their feet wet, but pheasants aren't.

Successful pheasant hunting might not be as much about how you hunt, but when you hunt. Pheasants use certain types of cover for roosting, others for loafing and still others for feeding. Pheasants typically feed early and late, so hunting food plots at midday usually doesn't make much sense. You want to hit those kinds of locations right at first light and then again in late afternoon. Thick cattails, plumb thickets or abandoned farms are great midday loafing spots. Pheasants like the security of expansive fields of thick grass for roosting. Plan your hunting to hit these spots during prime time when the competition is still having breakfast or has given up for the day.

Hoodwinking a sly ringed-necked pheasant into making a fatal mistake takes scheming and execution. Give him a few weeks of on-the-job training and the task becomes increasingly difficult, but you can still bag your fair share of roosters if you learn to think like a pheasant and not like everyone else.

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