

Hunting Late-Season Pheasants – Bruce Kania

Think dry-fly fishing for 16-inch brookies on a busy stretch of river in Upstate New York, where the fish have felt hooks before. Think pursuing five-pound bass on lakes in the middle of town in Wisconsin. Think mouth-calling coyote in Montana, and getting them within bow range. These are analogous to the challenge of hunting late-season roosters.

Pheasants can run, hide and fly. Any seasoned hunter knows this. But what many of us forget is that the birds can do all of these strategies in a single episode. This means that their potential escape strategies are essentially infinite. A hunter might come to believe, in objective humility, that we just get the birds that make mistakes.



But there's a secret to late season pheasant hunting. There are things we hunters can do to help pheasants make mistakes. We can turn the tables on roosters.

Once just a couple seasons back I was hunting with a professional wildlife photographer: a seasoned hunter, for sure. But just a bit cocky, at least in terms of his shooting ability and accordingly, gun and load choice. It was December, and winter conditions meant roosters had another layer of down between them and a lethal shotgun pellet. Yet he was shooting a light gun, and light loads. And a much higher ratio of late season shots involve going away angles. Accordingly, there can be more feather, down, meat and bone between pellets and lethal territory than with early season birds. Again, this works against the hunter, certainly more so than early season where close broadsides and quartering shots are far more frequent.

But here we were, walking a spring creek. The snow was maybe ten inches deep, and it blanketed lodged-over cattails and bulrush. There hadn't been a pheasant track for the last two hundred yards.

"There's no birds here" he says. I could understand his sentiment. It certainly seemed that way to me too. So both of us just about jumped out of our boots when a rooster blows out of a copse of cattail that my yellow lab had been working. This bird had been fully prepared to sit tight, and except for the dog's nose, it would have gotten away with it.

What was the bird's world like, underneath the blanket of snow, squeezed tight against the stalks of cattails? How do they endure wet feet in such a setting? And how many others had we already walked by, in our belief, based on a lack of sign on top of the snow, that birds were absent?

This bird just blasted out, as the pressure of the dog's presence crescendoed. It went my partner's way. He was surprised, and slow, at least compared to this veteran rooster. Reality is that I might have missed as well. This bird beat both of us. In any case, it was the archetypical late season rooster.

So how would we remake that particular hunt, that late season push along a spring creek? Well, we have endless options around how we strategically hunt. Just like roosters and their escape options, we too can sow confusion. In the process we can get close to hiding roosters, and add plenty of pressure so that they ultimately do take to wing. Bear in mind, that flying is a roosters most expensive option. Much cheaper, in terms of calories, is to hide, or to sneak and run, then hide again until the pressure's off. And all of us tend to gravitate to the path of least resistance... the easiest path.

It's not particularly likely a rooster will run through thick cover and deep snow, with occasional bare patches where the bird could be visible, so a seasoned hunter might reason that blocking along this creek is less valuable than the added pressure of a hunter walking on either side, with a dog working the middle. But if there were three guns, then placing one blocker, in or against a stretch of the creek where the bird could not pass by unnoticed, would be smart.

In this case the two of us could have hunted, very slowly, at less than half a normal walking speed, and of course been super focused on the dog's messaging system - body language - to help with being ready. Whoever is controlling the dog would know to keep it working well within range. And both hunters would know to trust each other's intuition - and actually stop at those particularly birdy looking spots, where the cover shouts out "be ready!" Stopping builds pressure on birds. Stop and just wait....a minute or two is frequently enough. Especially at the end of a push, as runners do stack up. This is a good strategy throughout the season, and especially so for late season runners.

The birds will mix up their escape strategies, so mix up yours too. Pay serious attention to likely escape routes along the flanks of the push, and post blockers to cover them. Once the push reaches these blockers, they can join the push and add even more pressure. But mixing up a conventional push has many nuances. For example, once late last season as we were staging for an early morning push, one of the blockers had noted six roosters piling into the draw about to be driven. At the end of the push, only four roosters had piled out. At least two others had dodged us, and let us walk by. So a couple hours later we re-pushed the draw and yes, one more rooster was pressured out. How many of us normally will consider hunting the same cover twice in the same day?

What if you know a property has been hunted primarily by hunters with flushers. A really high potential late season strategy then is to introduce pointers, especially with fresh snow cover. This can result in excellent shot opportunities on the birds that we have been walking by. And the snow tends to add to bird's tendency to sit, and to hunter's and dog's ability to get close.

Late season birds are particularly practiced at threading the needle, and bisecting the difference between blockers. On the other hand, a good, experienced dog, especially one that is willing to diligently work serious cover, and especially when combined with a dog owner that's willing to inspire the dog by joining it in the thick cover, can be very effective. So just one pusher with a good dog, and more blockers covering the flanks, minimizing a bird's ability to pile out without presenting a fair shot can work here. A tweak on this is to have the blockers stand out of sight of the cover within a draw...maybe twenty or so yards back from the lip of the draw. And to have gotten in position quietly. This combination can be deadly for late season birds. But note, you need a fresh dog and truly willing pusher to pull this off.

We all have heard about hunting super slow, and it's a great way to mix things up. But the reverse

can work too. Two hunters, ideally a righty and a lefty for safety, or a single hunter, can move through a push way faster than normal, and sometimes be there to intersect with early birds, that are adapted to running, then flying well in advance of any gun. My partner, in this case my wife Anne, and I tried this once while wearing heart rate monitors that extrapolated our calorie count. Over the course of an hour and fifteen minutes we both burned a greater rate of calories, by 25%, than any previous workout regime we'd employed over the past five years, over the same time. The message is that bushwhacking at speed is extremely costly in terms of our calorie burn, not to mention fraught with safety hazard. In our case, we wanted the calorie burn as the hunt was also serving as a workout, and we took extra safety measures, as in hunting with open guns. And incidentally, the workout component of the hunt can get seriously interrupted when a bird goes down. Bird recovery can take time, and provide a breather. Incidentally, our dogs tend to be surprised by this approach, and my sense is that they love it.



There's another strategy that can truly mess with a pheasant's head. At our place I normally direct the hunts. It's my farm, and I think I know it best. But reality is that late season birds have patterned me, just like I pattern them. So passing the reins to another hunter, who may look at pushes or strategies very differently, can throw a curve-ball at the birds.

There's one more late season strategy I've tried, with mixed success. Very simple...just follow your dog. Instead of directing the dog, let it be the leader. And move at its pace. An

aerial view of such a strategy would not likely involve many straight lines! But I suggest this can work reasonably well in big settings.

The arrogant hunter might suggest that pheasant's small brains can be easily overcome by human intellect, supported by human invention... the gun, or bow, for that matter. Others among the avid pheasant hunter community may argue that the collective intelligence of a pheasant population easily dwarfs individual humans. My sense is that we harvest pheasants that make mistakes. And they are really good at what they do. For me they are the ultimate game bird, and beyond contributing to passion and pleasure, they also serve in another wonderful capacity. Last year I collected 62 birds, all but three off our home property. My wife set a new personal record with 39. Health by diet, and health by the physical nature of hunting this demanding quarry, is really a tremendous gift. My sincere thanks to the pheasant!