

Turning the November blues into late-season bronze.



Here at Shepherd, we have kept records of our pheasant harvest success consistently over a decade. Season begins around the second weekend in October and runs through December. October and December are normally the most productive months. Why is November less productive?

The answer to this question is not about hours in the field. It is about the pheasant's ability to pattern us in response to hunting pressure, and is linked with cold weather. Once you understand this linkage, your ability to succeed on a hunt, during any month, improves.

Typically, cold weather sets in here in early December. When it happens, especially in combination with snow, thermal mass trumps hunting pressure: the birds gravitate to dense cover with a blanket of snow. This is frequently a cattail marsh, or a lodged over sorghum Sudan field, or dense yellow blossom sweet clover, or draws thick with a mix of brushy vegetation. More open fields, especially those with high-energy food, and Russian olive trees with their high-calorie, sugar-filled, fruit that lingers on and on, will see pheasant feeding activity. But not much, if any, roosting. Note though, that heavy coyote or red fox pressure can change this, and motivate birds to actually roost off the ground, typically in a gnarly, or thorny tree. Again, Russian olive fits this bill admirably!

Here's the point. If you know this, and you know the property you are hunting, you can pattern the

birds. They certainly pattern us! Turn the tables, and pattern them. Knowing the property is not just about the property's layout. It's also about predator status. We aren't the only pheasant predators on the block. I suspect that the average fox harvests more pheasant than the average human gunner.

Patterning birds may look like getting up before dawn and positioning ourselves between a stand of cattails (roosting cover), and a draw thick with Russian olive, that day's feeding ground. We've done this repeatedly in late season and at times have had shooting akin to traditional European driven pheasant shoots, with dozens of incoming birds, sometimes with a tail wind, providing classic shooting opportunity. Note that when it gets cold, high-energy food like Russian olive, is in high pheasant demand!

Novembers, of late, have been way mild. A key to success under mild weather conditions can relate to moisture. Without rain, a landscape can be totally obfuscated with pheasant sign. But if the old sign is dampened, it makes way for the fresh. That's good news for a good dog's ability to suss out pheasants.

Without a rinse off, the birds have everything going for them, except one factor. The later it is in the year, the less standing cover is available. For example, you may be able to walk a creek bottom in November that was almost impenetrable just a month earlier. And certainly on the open flats, wind will lay entire fields down. This works for pheasants, sometimes bringing food within reach, but also represents a more open viewscape, which means that when hunters show up, the birds will evacuate to the nearest security cover. Under such conditions it can be tough to get within shotgun range, but it can be done, especially when the security cover is ringed with gunners before the birds can thread the needle and clear out. This takes fairly precise coordination by the hunters, and works on occasion.

November is a good time to mix up dog strategy too, if possible. Try hunting with a different breed, with a different strategy. A Brittany, instead of labs, perhaps. Or the other way around. On one occasion we hunted a pointer right after a snow dump, and the birds held super tight. Terrific hunt. But stepping out of your normal pattern is called for in November, especially if you suspect the birds have you patterned.