



Upland bird hunters find success despite bad weather.

Hunting through the omens

JOE DUGGAN / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Sunday, January 25, 2009 12:00 am

On the drive to St. Paul Friday morning, a radio announcer cheerfully says we've probably reached our high for the day.

It's 23 degrees.

That's bad bird hunting omen No. 1.

Also on the drive to St. Paul, a north wind gusts with enough power to push the car across the dividing line.

That's bad bird hunting omen No. 2.

To make matters worse, the temp hit 59 degrees in St. Paul the day before.

But Pete Berthelsen and Steve Riley and I all had stuff we couldn't get out of on the good day.

So, as the saying goes, the best time to hunt is when you have time to hunt.

Besides, the confidence gained by hunting with two wildlife biologists offsets a few bad omens. Berthelsen is the senior field coordinator for Pheasants and Quail Forever in Nebraska. Riley is an assistant wildlife division administrator at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

They love to hunt, they understand bird behavior and they've got good dogs. What else do you need?

For starters, how about temps in the 40s and a light breeze?

Oh well.

We sucked it up, threw on an extra layer and got out there. We hit the first field at about 9:30 a.m.

The private land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program in Howard County featured a sea of mature big bluestem. Beautiful to look at and perfect winter cover, so at least we were in the right spot at the right time.

Late season pheasant hunting represents a true challenge. The roosters that have survived this long have earned that "wiley" title. In other words, they know how the game is played.

So we tried to limit conversation in the field and shake up our approaches to the best cover. But after the first two pushes, we had sprung only one hen.

"I hope they're not all gobbed up," Bethelsen said.

When pheasants flock together, their collective eyes and ears can more easily detect danger. And once one or two birds take wing, the rest pretty much follow suit.

We found the gob on the third push.

On one hand, it's frustrating to watch so many ringnecks flush out of range. On the other hand, it's really impressive to see so many birds in the air.

Now that the main cluster of birds was spread out, we hoped we would be able to get a few singles to hold tight for the dogs.

It worked.

As we approached the top of a hill on the northern edge of the property, a rooster flushed. It was a long shot and even against the

wind, the bird got up to speed incredibly fast.

This is all by way of explaining that we missed.

Another bad omen.

We turned to the west and walked out the field.

The dogs looked birdy.

“Hen!”

“Hen!”

“Rooster!”

Another miss.

“That’s two we should have put in the bag,” Berthelsen lamented. “With late-season hunting, you can’t do that.”

He also noted that scenting conditions appeared to be poor. Still, as we continued our walk, the dogs flushed several hens that held tight in the thick grass.

About 15 minutes later, shortly after working a couple of wild plum thickets, Berthelsen noted that his 2-year-old Lab, Lucy, was trailing a pheasant. She was headed toward an edge of grass above a wash out.

“Get ready,” he said. “On the edge.”

No sooner had he said it than a rooster fulfilled his prediction. I rushed the first shot and missed, but connected with the second barrel.

The rooster had a pair of long, sharp spurs.

“That’s a trophy,” Riley said.

After plates of scalloped potatoes and ham at a diner in St. Paul, we returned to the cold. By now, a half-inch or so of snow had fallen.

This time we hunted property owned by Berthelsen. As we drove in, he talked about all of the habitat improvements brought about by hard work and federal conservation programs. The list included removing cedar trees, prescribed burns, intensive grazing and planting dozens of prairie grasses, wildflowers and plants.

Quail need three things, Berthelsen said. Areas of open ground, areas with overhead cover and areas of grass with a high forb content to attract insects.

Insects are critical for quail in their first weeks of life, Riley explained.

Also, all three of those requirements need to be within about a 75-yard circle. So one of Berthelsen’s goals is to not allow his CRP ground to get too mature and thick. Once that happens, it stops being productive for nesting and brood rearing.

The thick, mature stands of grass we hunted in the morning provided some decent winter cover for pheasants, but it wouldn’t fit the bill for quail.

When he started managing the property four years ago, it had two coveys. During a whistle count last fall, he and two friends identified 15 coveys on the place.

That’s the power of habitat, Berthelsen said.

A few minutes later, we started walking through a few rows of standing milo planted as a food plot. Lucy the Lab flushed a nice covey and Berthelsen fired a single shot.

Two bobwhites fell. A minute later, both were in his game bag.

Finally, a really good omen.

Reach Joe Duggan at 473-7239 or jduggan@journalstar.com.