



Honoring season opener of pheasant season

BY JOE DUGGAN / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Saturday, October 31, 2009 11:15 pm

ST. PAUL - Way, way too many crops still out.

Standing beans, an ocean of corn.

Don't want to knock on doors today; the farmers are grumpy.

As grumpy as the roads are muddy.

And the Huskers kick off at 11:30 a.m.

But Saturday's the pheasant and quail opener in Nebraska.

And the sun is shining ... at last.

So what to do?

Are you kidding?

Opening day is the resolution of nine months without bird hunting. It's about revisiting traditions, reconnecting with friends and releasing the dogs. It's been nine months, man!

Blow off an opener just because conditions are less than ideal?

C'mon.

Pete Berthelsen has a pretty cool opening day tradition. The senior field coordinator for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever in Nebraska owns some land in central Nebraska. He's turned it into a sort of field research station for bringing back quail. Or, as he likes to say, "Just add habitat and, poof, you've got quail."

So on opening day, he posts a few friends on his 160 while it's still dark and they listen for whistles as the sun comes up. Then each guy marks where he hears a covey on an aerial map of the property.

On Saturday morning, the whistle crew counted 13 coveys. When Berthelsen started the count in 2005, they counted just two.

Poof.

But Berthelsen has to talk on an outdoor radio show for an hour, so his covey counters head to the field. Lucy the chocolate Lab can hardly contain herself when they let her out at a brushy creek near Farwell.

"Huntumup" says Ryan Lodge, and she's off, crashing through grass, soaked to the skin in seconds, coveting nothing more than just a whiff of a game bird. How can you keep this creature home on opening day?

After tracing the long winding creek for many yards, the dog's tail whips like a dervish. Scent at last. Then a flush.

"HEN."

Then another hen, and another, and another, until a dozen hens boil out of a clump of grass where they had been invisible seconds before. Not one rooster. Lodge and James Webb of Grand Island hold their fire.

"A bachelorette party or something," says Lodge of St. Paul, who works as a farm bill biologist for PF and QF.

At the next stop, they pick up Pat Larson and his 12-year-old son, Ethan. Last week, the father and son hunted the youth season, but this will be Ethan's first time to carry a shotgun on an official opening day.

They head out on a piece of Howard County prairie that's been beautifully restored by the Larson family through the federal Wetlands Reserve Program.

The walk is hard as they push through stands of goldenrod, sunflowers and a long, snake-like plant called common mullien. It's great habitat, but where are the birds?

Probably in the corn field at the end.

Finally, a rooster flushes and goes down

Then a second.

And a third.

Each bird to a different hunter.

They get to the end of the field and crack on the outdoor reporter who missed two shots. Then Berthelsen teaches Ethan how to field age a pheasant - hold it by the lower beak and give it a bounce. If the beak breaks, the bird was hatched this year.

Later, Larsen says it's just the kind of opening day he wanted for his son. It took some work, but they got a few birds and everyone had fun.

"The sport of it is one thing, but it's the camaraderie, the social aspect, that's the real reason you hunt," he says.

And it's why you always honor the opener.

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