

Bert's Birds

*Story and photos
by Ben O. Williams*

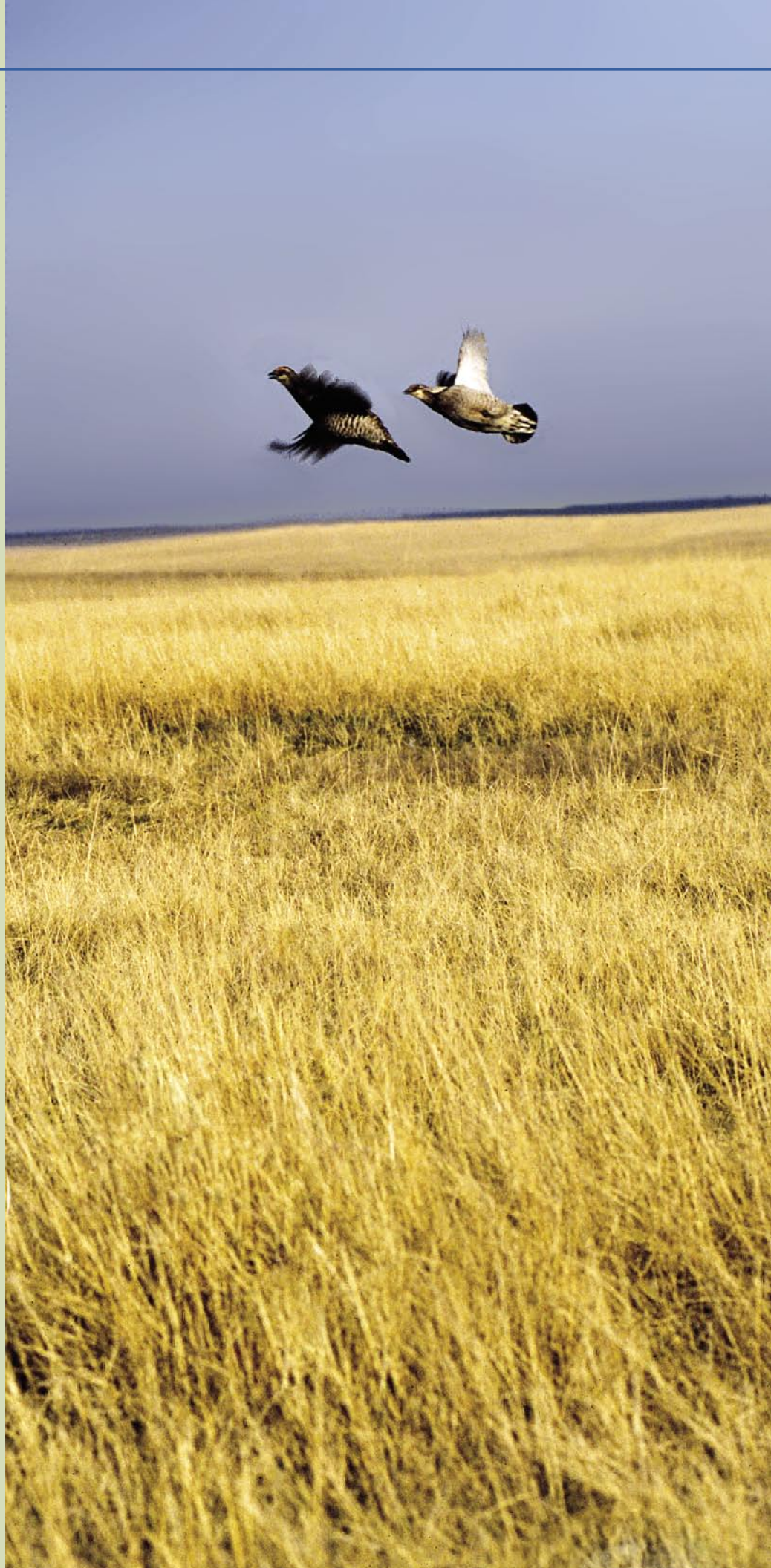
The decal of a cowboy on a bucking bull with a bold-lettered "Bull Durham" at eye level blocked my view through the glass door of the general store.

"Do you have any rivets?" I asked the young girl in back of the counter when I stepped inside.

"What are they for?" she replied.

"I need to replace a couple of rivets in the door of one of the dog compartments on my hunting rig. The rattle reminds me to get it fixed every time I drive down a rough road in this farm country. I have a little time until the weather clears this morning before I go hunting, so I thought this would be a good time to get the door fixed."

Two prairie chickens flush from a CRP grassland.



“Have a cup of coffee,” she said with a smile. “I’ll go look, but I don’t remember seeing any rivets like that.”

“Nope,” she answered, walking back. “I suggest you go to Bert’s Welding Shop.”

“Well, it’s not much of a job,” I said. “I don’t want to bother or be a nuisance with such a simple task that I can do myself.”

“Oh Bert won’t mind,” she said. “And further more, he loves hunting dogs. Bert would rather talk dogs and hunting than work. I’ll bet when he sees your hunting rig, he’ll fix the door just to see the dogs.”

“Thanks for the coffee and the help,” I said, backing out the door.

“Have a good hunt,” she said, and then waved.

Fixing the door was easy, thanks to Bert’s pop rivet gun. I showed him the five Brittanies riding in my rig.

“It’s no fun hunting chickens without pointing dogs,” Bert said. “I had a German shorthair but she died when I was gone. After I got back from Vietnam, I started this business and moved to town. Training another pointing dog just didn’t fit into my schedule. I sure wish I had one! One of these days I will!”

“Bert, this is my last day here. Would you like to go along and see the dogs work?” I asked. “I’m going to a “walk-in area” west of here that’s been very good chicken hunting.”

“I’ll take a rain check,” he said with a laugh. “Got too much going on today.”

That’s how I met Bert.

Bert lived in a small, friendly town in South Dakota. After returning home from the U.S. Army, Bert started a welding shop in town and no longer lived on his grandfather’s homestead with his parents. When his old pointing dog died, he stopped hunting prairie chickens. After his father passed away, Bert leased the two family farms and his mother moved to town. He hadn’t done much hunting since, other than going after pheasants with a buddy who had a Labrador retriever.

It wasn’t until the following year that I got to know him on a personal basis. We talked on the phone several times about gun dogs and game birds, and he invited me out to hunt chickens.

“Ben, if you want to shoot some chick-



Tense with anticipation, a hunter steps forward for the flush.

ens,” he told me on the phone, “we can hunt my two farms. There are usually four or five flocks on the home place that feed in the alfalfa field in the morning and spend the rest of the day in the hills. The other farm has more woody draws and holds a lot of sharp-tails, but I’ve seen chickens there, too, in the low hills.”

“Good,” I answered. “I’m looking for prairie chickens. I have plenty of sharp-tails here at home.”

“We’ll meet opening day of grouse season at the old home place,” Bert said. “I’m having the old, two story farm house fixed up and painted so we’ll have a nice place to stay. Follow the directions I’ve described and you can’t miss the newly painted white house and big red barn. See you soon!”

When the time for the hunt arrived, I found myself driving through the rolling farm fields not far from Bert’s place. All the family farmhouses I passed looked the same. Most were built after the turn of the last century. The architectural plans were right out of an old Sears & Roebuck catalog.

The general store must have had a surplus of red and white paint, I mused. All the houses were newly painted white and the barns red. I noticed the old red tractors were of the same vintage. Must have had a good Farmall dealer in the region.

A newly painted, two-rail white fence surrounded the lawn of the two-story farmhouse. I was sure this was Bert’s place, but why didn’t he mention the white fence? It was the only thing differ-

ent from all of other farms I’d passed. A note on the back door confirmed it was Bert’s place.

“Ben, I have to work late, so I can hunt with you for the next couple of days,” the note read. “Marge, the tenant’s wife, put supper in the fridge for you. Make yourself at home. See you at breakfast. Bert.”

He was there bright and early the next morning. As we dug into a breakfast of bacon, eggs, and hash-browns, Bert reminisced about long ago hunts and described his hunting routine.

“Ben, ever since I was kid, I’ve always hunted for chickens the same way,” he said. “Skip, my German shorthair, and I would walk the edges of the hayfield first and see if any birds were still feeding. I always had my doubts, but invariably a young bird or two would linger in the hayfield after the other birds left. Why, I don’t know. Then I would..” Bert stopped, took a sip of coffee, and looked at me. He must have thought his guest might find his enthusiasm overbearing.

“Ben, however you want to hunt is fine with me,” he said. “You know your dogs and have hunted chickens in a lot of different locations.”

“Bert, that doesn’t mean I know how to hunt your place,” I replied. “We’ll use your plan. You know the lay of the land and where the birds were in the past. Bird patterns don’t change much from year to year unless the habitat has changed. Have the farming practices changed since you had a tenant on the homestead?”

“No! In fact, I think the bird habitat is better,” he said. “I know that’s true for pheasants. We have a lot more cover today than when I lived here.”

The sun was breaking over the highest ridges, warming up the side hills where hopefully the birds would be taking their sunlight baths soon. I drove down the lane and stopped. Bert wrestled the barbed-wire gate open and I drove into the hayfield. I pulled up next to a haystack and parked the pickup.

Bert shrugged his shoulders, not looking at me, then said, “The meadow is cut short, I don’t think a chicken in its right mind would use this field.”

I looked out the window at the haystack, not answering. I got out of the pickup and walked to the haystack, looking for chicken sign. Bert followed. Bird droppings and feathers were everywhere.

“They’re here,” I said, scraping the ground with my boot.

Bert, cleared his throat. “I’ll be darned,” he said, “Do you think they’re using the hay field too?”

“Yeah, they sure are,” I said, looking across the barren field. “But I’ll tell you this. You’ll never get close to them.”

“What’s the best way to get to those distant hills, where the sun is just breaking over?” I asked.

“Straight ahead, follow the edge of the field,” Bert advised. “But go slow Ben. This hayfield is rough.”

We bounced down the cut field, following the fence. Three half-grown rooster pheasants ran ahead of us, their drab plumage looking more like that of hens than of roosters.

They cut into the heavy cover along the dilapidated wooden posts and woven wire fence. I hoped the hills weren’t full of young pheasants, because we’d spend all the day chasing the dogs as they futilely pointed running pheasants.

“You know, Bert,” I said. “Pheasants can ruin a good pointing dog.”



The prairie chicken is a symbol of the prairie's pioneer era.

Beyond the hayfield the land rose into the hills. The bunchgrass and scattered silver sage caught my eyes first. The prairie waved its golden hair and glistened in the sun.

“Nice cover, Bert,” I said. “It’s the best I’ve seen for prairie chickens around here.”

“Ben, these are the hills where I used to hunt, but I usually drove on a sandy two-track road that goes up that long hill to the right and follows the ridge for a mile until it dips back down the other side” Bert replied. “We’ll go back that way, it’s a lot less bumpy.”

I let three Brittanies out of the dog compartments and put beepers on them as Bert slid the shotguns out of the leather cases. When it comes to prairie grouse hunting, I prefer a light 28 gauge side-by-side. Bert carried a light, Browning Superposed over/under 12 gauge.

We had walked one hundred yards below the long ridge, when dogs disap-

peared out of sight over the top. Moments later, the dog beepers sounded the hawk scream, telling me they were on point. I scurried toward the horizon just as two birds, dark against the sky, sailed overhead and down the slope, disappearing into the golden background. Once on top, I waited for Bert, watching the three dogs.

“Bert, the Britts are right below us,” I said. “Catch your breath, they won’t move.”

“What a nice sight seeing all three dogs strung out in a line. Who’s the lead dog, Ben?” Bert asked.

“It’s Pat, he’s only nine months old. Let’s go, he’ll hold them!”

We hurried down the slope and then walked slowly past Mac first, Terra second, and stopped behind Pat.

“Go ahead, Bert, but slowly,” I said, and waved him on.

Bert looked over at me, I shook my head and motioned him on.

Bert passed in front of Pat, and the other two dogs broke.

Seven chickens feathered the light breeze and turned downwind. Two shots rang out. Feathers drifted slowly down as Mac and Terra retrieved the brace of barred birds.

“Nice shooting Bert,” I said, shaking his hand. I marked the others down.

“Why didn’t you walk in and shoot Ben?” asked Bert.

“Sometimes, Bert,” I answered, “It’s just fun to see the overall picture of man, dogs, and birds all go into motion. And I know where the other birds went. Let’s go!”

—Outdoor writer Ben O. Williams lives in Livingston, Montana.