

# GUN DOG<sup>®</sup>

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## South Dakota Sporting Field

By Clair Kofoed

The vast grasslands  
and grain fields offer  
pheasant hunting like  
the good old days.

The author's tri-color with a prairie grouse;  
sharptails and prairie chickens are bonus birds.

# If anyone should mention the name South Dakota to a pheasant hunter, the response is predictable and immediate. Predictable in its scope and immediate in its reaction, like Old Faithful in Yellowstone gushing about 150 feet high.

As an avid pheasant hunter, my response was immediate when friend Jeff Bird invited me to participate in a South Dakota rooster expedition on his SportingField wild pheasant hunting operation last fall at Torilil Farm in Presho, SD.

It didn't hurt that biologists predicted the best bird population in 35 years. It didn't hurt that Jeff manages some 7,800 acres of the finest wild-bird hunting in the heart of the South Dakota Rooster belt. It didn't hurt that we would be the first to hunt the heart of his CRP pheasant Mecca that season. And it didn't hurt so much that sleep for me the night before the hunt was as hard to find as an autoloading gun at a black powder shoot.

Both Jeff and I are setter affectionados, and we wanted to try our luck at using our pointing dogs on the beautiful South Dakota CRP cover. The vast grasslands had flourished under perfect conditions. We hoped by hunting early season, we could get some points on the younger pheasants after scattering the flocks into the CRP with driving techniques.

Jeff, our companions Bill and Ed and I started the trip from Rapid City. We then drove east from the airport and picked up licenses at the venerable tourist trap of all time: Wall Drug. I think Jeff has bought his license there since his first season in South Dakota (traditions in hunting die hard). We proceeded down I-90 to the town of Presho where we met Mark, the manager of the area.

Mark was my kind of guy. He loves to hunt and knows the hunting area and habits of the birds intimately. After a ten minute truck ride, we mustered

out at the bottom of a huge wheatgrass CRP field. There were patches of tall sorghum planted around the CRP in strategic locations for the sole purpose of attracting and holding birds. Mark divided us up and had one group push the sorghum while he placed the other exactly to intercept roosters that rocketed out and down into the vast CRP.

The plan worked like a charm. The drivers had birds hold for points in the grass cover while others broke out ahead. Birds rose in waves from the sorghum and the action was intense for both shooters and blockers. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. Normally, if I spot a cockbird that escapes off to the side of a drive I'll mark him carefully for future reference. Here, the birds were so abundant that marking singles was ridiculous! Long before you could "look him up" the dogs would find 20 other birds and the original plan was moot.

It was all over in less than 90 minutes. The four of us had our three bird limit and a bonus brace of Prairie Chicken and Sharptail Grouse. Even the rusty shooting we exhibited (it was really our first hunt of the season) didn't prevent us from prevailing. If anything, it prolonged the fun.

SportingField Ltd. offers excellent wild pheasant hunts. They own and lease 7,800 acres of CRP and farmland near the town of Presho on I-90 in south-central South Dakota. SportingField LTD also offers early

hunts for Sharptail Grouse and Prairie Chicken beginning the third weekend in September. Starting the third weekend in October, they offer hunts for pheasants. The terrain is rolling CRP grassland and farm fields of milo, sunflower and corn. Jeff has hunted the area since his teens and in an effort to enhance his traditional hunting ground, created SportingField to provide quality wild-pheasant-only hunting to a limited number of hunters. He is a dyed-in-the-wool upland hunter and fancier of fine side-by-side shotguns and Llewellyn setters.

Jeff's colleague in South Dakota is Mark who guides the hunting parties and provides a wonderful farm lunch. He also knows every bit of the ground



South Dakota, no better place for man and dog.

and how best to waylay the wildest rooster. As the person who farms SportingField, Mark plants crops and manages the farmland for the single benefit of the pheasant population. Other uses are secondary.

The Ring Necked Pheasant is literally and figuratively the South Dakota State bird. Never have I seen anything like the attention and adoration heaped upon "Rudy" in South Dakota. Pheasants are big business and a cash crop for farmers and city folks alike. Farm ground is managed for the most part to benefit the pheasants. Crop residue and food plots

are left standing for the birds. CRP lands provide a double income by way of government payments and lease receipts from pheasant hunters. Farmers want and encourage anything that will benefit the birds. Many farmers raise game farm pheasants to keep up with the demand for lease hunting on their lands. Therefore, two things become rapidly obvious. One: Free pheasant hunting in the heart of the "Rooster Belt" is nearly extinct. And two: The type of paid hunting experience can vary tremendously.

SportingField offers the finest type of hunting experience—the pursuit of 100 percent wild pheasants in quality habitat, and plenty of it. The experience is quality for other reasons as well. Hunters can participate in the traditional "big drive" type hunt or go off to work the grass over a dog, one-on-one, so to speak. The South Dakota CRP is some of the finest hunting cover for pointing dogs I've seen. It is very dense at ground level to encourage the birds to hold, yet it only grows about waist high. This is great cover for shooting and isn't difficult to walk through. Some states have CRP with switch grass six feet tall. Even though I like both types of cover, the lower cover is definitely great for working pointing dogs.

After our triumph with the pheasants, we spent the remainder of the day walking the grass for Prairie Grouse. At this time of year they tend to flush wild. We tried to

ambush some birds by walking over the crest of the hill where a covey had landed. This tactic will usually give someone in a group a shot, but it's not like the early season Grouse hunting where dogs can pin birds, and the shooting range is measured in yards instead of miles.

After picking up another brace of Grouse, we brought in the dogs and

called it a day. The 40 minute drive north to the motel in Pierre featured nothing but grass and sky as the setting sun created colors too rich to believe.

The following morning we got up at a leisurely hour and headed back to Presho for another go of it. In our area, pheasant hunting didn't begin until noon the first week of the season and then it switched to a 10 a.m. start for the rest of the year. As the South Dakota hunting regulations state: "Our hunting is so good you only need part of a day to get a limit."

We started hunting an overgrown sunflower field that was more weeds than crop. It looked good and proved even better. The part of our group pushing the head end flushed 50 birds as soon as we entered the field. Because the weedy understory was so thick they couldn't run easily, so they began jumping all around us. Dogs pointed, then continued to hold as birds just kept coming up. Bill, who hadn't hunted in about 15 years, had his three roosters in 15 minutes. The



The ring-necked rooster is king of SportingField country.

rest fared almost as well.

I was taking pictures and trying not to think about the birds boiling up all over the place. Finally, I put down my camera and knocked down a rooster cutting hard to my left. By the time the

action ended most of the group had two birds. Bill was finished.

At the next hunt site, a long CRP field, we formed a classic line and pushed toward the end. Because the early season birds hadn't really wised up, many of them were holding close for some classic points. Again, I elected to hunt with the camera. The rest of the group finished out with limits and began to walk back to the vehicles. I couldn't resist the temptation to flank on out ahead, and block at the end of the field. My exertion was rewarded. A huge long tailed adult erupted in front of the walkers and headed straight at me, gaining altitude all the way. I tried to keep cool and didn't move a muscle as he bore toward me, 45 yards away. By shear reflex I pulled the rear trigger on my Bernadelli side-by-side as the bird reached the zenith overhead. The tightly choked 5s did their job; a perfect station-8 high house on a driven bird! Luckily I hadn't had enough time to really think about the shot and blow it the way I usually do. I'll remember the sight of that high rocket against the blue prairie sky as long as I live.

After the hunt, we headed back to Marks' farmhouse for a hearty lunch. Swiss steak and gravy on homemade bread, followed by cake and pie washed down with cold milk. So much for the idea of losing a few pounds on this hunting trip! Everyone relaxed and admired the birds, after which Mark took the pheasants into Presho for processing.

That afternoon we headed out into the short grass prairie to walk up a few Sharptails, and walk we did. But I must say the Sharptail Grouse won that afternoon as the closest bird I saw flushed at 300 yards. Bill lucked out, as a single pushed by Jeff flew right over his head. At the report, another covey of about 40 birds flushed wild. We did manage to bag three Grouse between us that afternoon, no thanks to my effort. It only made me want to come back in September for a go at all the birds we had seen.

Another fiery prairie sunset, another perfect day; I've never seen better pheasant hunting. Given that the winter wasn't too bad in 2001, and with good spring production, it should be another banner year. I join a growing number of hunters who say, "Give me the SportingField!" ★

## IF YOU WANT TO GO:

**R**ates at SPORTINGFIELD Ltd. South Dakota Wild Pheasant Hunts for 2002 are \$250 a day guided and \$200 a day unguided.

The guided fees include your guide, dogs and lunch. You can bring your own dog or they will provide one at no additional cost.

Contacts: Phone: 503-625-9301, FAX 503-925-8234, see website for more info: [www.sportingfield.com](http://www.sportingfield.com)