

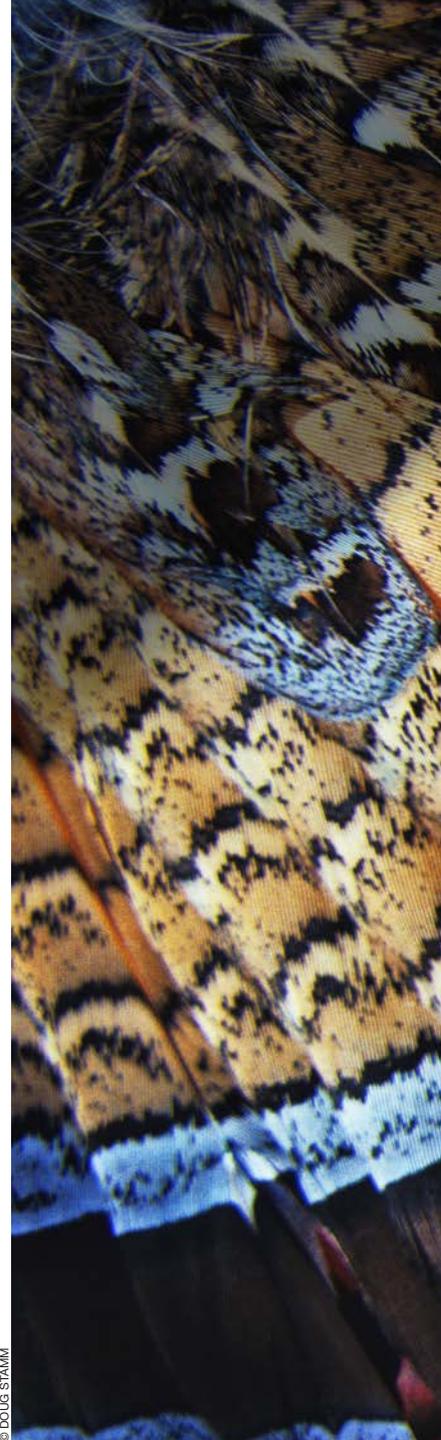
On the **HUNT** for GROUSE

The bond
between dog
and hunter
strengthens
with every step

by Mark
Beauchesne



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I can't tell you exactly when it all starts, that feeling when the first frosty fall morning hits. Excitement and anticipation overcome me. It's time to head for the woods to hunt grouse.

All I have to do is stay focused and not get distracted by the dazzling colors of October. Too much to ask! I am startled by a flushing grouse. I raise the gun, but never get a bead on the bird.

My grouse hunting fever was sparked by the good fortune of having a family hunting



camp deep in the northern woods. In the late 1980s and early '90s, the nearby forests were regenerating, and this new growth was perfect for producing high numbers of grouse. So my younger years were spent wandering the logging roads and brambles in hopes of “walking” up a grouse.

I would spend my entire vacation roaming the regenerating clearcuts. I shot a bird or two each day, certainly enough to supplement my camp provisions. Grouse Parmesan would be the highlight of the week.

No need to rush into the woods before daylight. That's my style of hunting. This is my time off to enjoy the autumn landscape.



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Part of the appeal is that grouse hunting can be as simple as a walk in the woods. The gear is not complicated; there's only one rule: wear rubber boots. The casual pace is refreshing. No need to rush into the woods before daylight. Finish your coffee, get dressed, and then head afield. That's my style of hunting. This is my time off to enjoy the autumn landscape.

Turning Point

Over the years, I have encountered many grouse hunters with dogs. I was interested in hunting with a dog, just not ready to take on the responsibility.

Then I met Ella, the pride and joy of my friend Sean. Ella was small for an English setter, tri-colored with brown and black markings called "ticking" on a soft white background. She was all business, ignoring my attempts to rub her head.

I don't remember the covert we hunted that first trip, or if we even shot any birds that day. Etched in my mind is that pretty little dog searching intently for the source of some alluring scent. Back and forth, side to side, she searched. Then the bell around her neck went silent. Sean and I hurried to the place where we last heard the bell.

Sean gestured. I spotted Ella, right there on point. Head low, tail high, no movement whatsoever. That was the turning point for me. The dog seemed to have that same

excited, happy feeling I had.

After that, the three of us went on many grouse hunting trips. We made for the bush almost every weekend from October to December. What the partnership of a dog added to the hunting experience was amazing. I no longer had to focus on being ready for the flush of the bird. Sean and I would be lost in conversation until the bell



© MARK BEAUCHESNE

*Avery is excited...
The cool air has tripped
a signal inside him.
He is ready to hunt.*

stopped. Ella on point was all we needed to regain our focus.

Avery's Debut

Ten years ago, a puppy joined us on a hunt. This puppy would become my world. Although I had no dog training experience, I set out to train my own bird dog. Basic obedience was no problem. But what about the finer points of hunting? I consulted with two trainers and read books. The same basic theme rang loud: You and your dog need to learn how to communicate with each other.

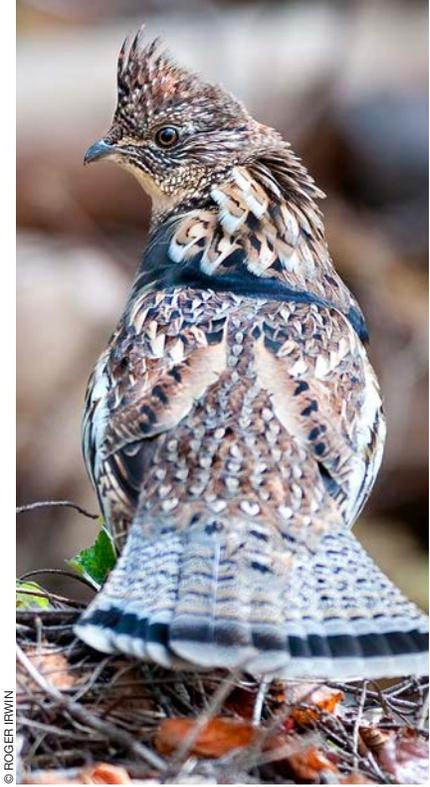
On the way home from the breeder, I named this puppy Avery. He's the namesake of an island in Louisiana where Tobasco® sauce is made. Also a small spit of rugged land in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom called Avery's Gore.

Avery and I came to an agreement about my expectations. He was to find birds, point the birds, and find the dead birds. That was all I was going to ask of him as a gun dog.

There are "finished" gun dogs. They are steady to the wing and shot, meaning they will hold the point. They will also retrieve dead birds. Amazingly, they will even honor another dog's point. This takes training and dedication.

For my first go, however, I had enough to learn and felt I should keep my expectation of training to an achievable level.

Avery's early training went without



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too many incidents. This dog would point anything. Butterflies were a favorite. I kept reminding myself that he was just a puppy. By the time mid-September rolled around, he was hunting well, pointing, and following my instructions. Of course, there was no way of truly knowing if he was going to be a good hunter.

Go Time

The first cool, crisp day hits in late September. Avery is excited, head high. His tail is just a blur. The cool air has tripped a signal inside him. He is ready to hunt.

On the morning of our first hunt, I try to keep a level head, play it cool. I get into my brush pants and flannel shirt. Avery calmly watches me. Then the rubber boots come out and all hell breaks loose inside that dog! The newly named “fun boots” are in the mix, so he knows the hunt is on!

I open the front door, and Avery flies over the porch steps. He scrambles around the garage a half dozen times.

“Truck!” I shout. Avery is instantly at the door of the vehicle. I release him with a simple “okay.” He dashes into the crate, and we are on our way.

Once we are parked, Avery’s breathing quickens. Something important is about to happen, and he just can’t wait. I open the crate door and give him a stern “whoa,” then place the collar and bell around his neck.

Oh, it’s “go time” now! This young dog knows what the collar means: time to go to work. I say “work,” because setters have been bred for a purpose. Avery knows his job. He had some great points while training back in September. This time, it’s for real.

Gun in hand, dog by my side, I look down at Avery and give him the okay. He is off, and the bell sounds his way.

Remember he is just a puppy, I tell myself. A good half-hour of running around and puddle splashing ensues.

Once the nervous excitement is out of his system, I direct him to a stand of alders that straddles a small creek. His pace slows, his nose leading the way. Now his tail has a huge side-to-side wag. I remember seeing the same wag during training when he found birds. It was his way of telling me, “Hey, there has been a bird here.”

The silence is intense. My eyes are filled with the sight of my puppy with his tail held high. Not a twitch of muscle; he is as tight on point as it comes. Gently, I reassure him with a soft, “Whoa, whoa.”

Avery breathes in the air, tasting it; the bird is very close. I’m just watching in awe. It has all come together, his instinct and our training. The bond I feel, the surge of pride, is interrupted by a grouse taking flight. A single shot. Then the exultant words of, “Dead bird, dead bird.” That’s Avery’s signal to locate the downed grouse. We share a

moment full of instinctive feeling.

There are reasons I can articulate as to why I love grouse hunting. And then there are the deep-in-the soul reasons, the ones you just need to be there to understand. Most of all it’s the companionship, the bonds between dog and hunting friends that strengthen with every step.



Fish and Game Advertising and Promotions Coordinator

Mark Beauchesne has been grouse hunting since he was a teenager. It got even better when English setters came into his life. Over the past 10 years, Mark and his dog have spent many days in the woods of New Hampshire hunting the wily “thunder chicken.”

