



HUMBLLED BY HUNS

These fast-flying prairie imports can confound even the most skilled wingshooters. **BY DAVE BOOKS**

I eased around the corner of the abandoned ranch house and squinted into the warm October sun. My gaze swept quickly over the rusting farm machinery and the dilapidated stable. Except for a light breeze rustling the golden leaves of a cottonwood, things were quiet—too quiet. I felt like I was about to become part of the shootout at the O.K. Corral.

Then I saw what I was looking for—my Brittany, Chief, frozen on point in the brown weeds next to an old hay rake. I didn't know whether to expect a covey of Hungarian partridge, a rattlesnake, or Wyatt Earp. Tightening my grip on the worn checkering of the

Browning over/under, I slid my thumb against the safety. As I walked past the dog's rigid form, out of the corner of my eye I could see his pink nostrils monitoring the scent emanating from the grass. "Okay, Mr. Pink Nose, what have you got this time?" I wondered.

No matter how ready you are for the whirl of those stubby wings, you're never really ready. Just as I began to suspect the birds had moved, they exploded from the grass, chirping like a dozen rusty gates in a prairie windstorm. I regained my composure in time to sort one bird out of the blur and stick with it until the sight picture looked right. The bird folded just as the covey veered out of sight around the corner of the stable.

Chief fetched the handsome gray-brown Hun, and I slipped it in my game vest. I hadn't been able to see where the covey had gone, but I guessed the birds would head for the old corral about 300

yards away. Coveys in past years had flown to this collection of rusty barbed wire, boards, tall grass, and weeds. I'd try to find them one more time, then, win or lose, I'd leave them for another day.

After you get to know a covey well enough, you begin to take a personal interest in it. As a hunter, you want to shoot your share of birds, but you also want to leave the covey strong enough to withstand the depredations of foxes, hawks, and winter storms. You know that one evening next spring you'll drive out to the old homestead to watch and listen, worrying a little until you hear the raspy love song of a mating pair. But now it's hunting season, and you're

THE CALL OF THE GREY PARTRIDGE. WATERCOLOR BY ARCHIBALD THORBURN, 1902

sure this covey is more than capable of coping with old Pink Nose and his jangle-nerved sidekick.

As much as Hungarian partridge seem to belong on the prairies of western North America, they're not native to the region. Their natural home is Europe, the British Isles, the Scandinavian countries, and parts of Asia, where they are better known as gray partridge. We call them Hungarians because that is where most of our imported birds came from. Huns were released in various locations in the eastern United States throughout the 1800s, but the climate and terrain weren't suitable and those early introductions didn't take. It wasn't until the early 1900s, when Huns were stocked in the wheat belt region of eastern Washington and Oregon, southern Alberta, Montana, and North Dakota, that things began to pop. Maybe "explode" is a better word, since the Hun quickly demonstrated the reproductive capacity that has made it a mainstay of European upland shooting for hundreds of years.

The most spectacular of the western plantings took place in southern Alberta in 1908 and 1909. With the support of a wealthy Michigan bird hunter named William Mershon, a group of Calgary sportsmen released 800 partridge near Calgary. Within five years those birds had multiplied and spread across southern Alberta and into Saskatchewan and Montana. Aldo Leopold later calculated their rate of spread at 28 miles per year.

So successful was the expansion of Huns from the Calgary planting that by the mid-1930s outdoor author Ray Holland could report flushing more than 100 separate coveys in a day's outing on the Saskatchewan prairie. Not bad, considering the province of Saskatchewan had not stocked a single bird! Those spectacular populations of the 1930s eventually crashed, but not before the Hun had established itself as a game bird throughout the Prairie Provinces and wheat country of the Northwest.



THE ARTIST'S DOG. WATERCOLOR BY ARCHIBALD THORBURN, 1901

Today, southern Alberta and Saskatchewan remain the heart of the Hun range, but Montana, North Dakota, Idaho, and eastern Washington and Oregon also support good numbers. Other states with limited but huntable populations include Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Like other upland game birds, Huns are subject to cycles of abundance and scarcity. Although Huns get along better with modern agriculture than most game birds do, they too are hurt by horizon-to-horizon plowing. Even in today's best Hun country, Ray Holland's 100-covey days are a thing of the past.

Hun coveys, which consist of a mating pair, their offspring, and other adults unsuccessful at mating, contain 10 to 20 birds. Hun populations have a 75 percent turnover each year, so a three- or four-year-old bird is an old-timer. Coveys occupy the same favored sites year after year; in good years there may be several coveys in a given locale, while in lean years the population may shrink to a single covey.

Although Huns do best in wheat country where waste grain is available in fall and winter, they don't need it to survive. One fall while hunting an uncultivated area along the Snake River in Idaho, two friends and I ran across an incredibly high density of Huns. We had been chukar hunting, climbing the rocky slopes above the river for most of the day without much luck. Toward late afternoon we dropped down to the grassy benches just above the river and stumbled into the best Hun shooting any of us had seen.

In agricultural areas, hunters will do best by checking the edges of stubble fields in morning and late afternoon when the birds are feeding. During the middle of the day, abandoned homesteads, brushy draws between grain fields, and weed patches are likely to produce birds. Huns favor light cover over thick undergrowth, and I've even flushed them from plowed fields where they were as invisible squatting in the dark soil as if they had been hunkered down in knee-high bunchgrass.

One time my friend Mike Gurnett and I watched a covey sail into a small patch of weeds and grass surrounded by alternating strips of wheat stubble and fallow field. Licking our chops, we quickly covered the 200 yards to the little island of cover. We combed every inch of it—twice. As we stood there scratching our heads, Mike asked, "Where the heck did they go?" Just then the birds flushed from the bare field in front of us, leaving us so rattled we didn't fire a shot.

For a long time the Hun in America didn't get the credit it deserves for being a first-rate game bird. For one thing, it has always lived in the shadow of its showier fellow-immigrant, the ring-necked pheasant. Then, too, there is the nature of the places where most Huns live: big, open country, thinly populated with humans. Local folks may sing the Hun's praises, but perhaps there aren't enough voices out there to be heard

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above the yipping of lonely coyotes.

Good quail or ruffed grouse shots who visit the prairie often wonder how they can miss Huns, where there are few trees to obstruct their view. But Huns often flush farther out than the birds they're accustomed to, and snap-shooting techniques don't work well. With Huns the first shot is often about 25 yards, and the second may be 35 or 40. Once newcomers adjust to the longer distances and stronger follow-through required, they score better. This is not to say that Huns are tougher targets than quail or vice versa—just different. Wingshooters become programmed for the birds they hunt most often, and it takes time to adjust to something new.

The best Hun shooters are the smooth ones who don't rush things and who swing through their birds strongly but deliberately. Hurrying to put pellets in the air is a common mistake, and when I hear someone rattle off a string of shots I don't expect many casualties. With Huns there is rarely time for more than two careful

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shots, and a shot at a 14-ounce bird at 35 yards has to be right on target. I hear sport shop talk about triples on Huns, but honest triples are about as common as neck shots on running antelope. One thing that complicates Hun shooting is the everlasting prairie wind. When it kicks up, strange things happen to the flight patterns of birds. Duck hunters will understand. I once flushed a Hun into the

teeth of a strong wind, and as I watched it over my gun barrel it began to look bigger instead of smaller. Suddenly it tired of bucking the wind, turned, and came directly toward me, buzzing over my head like a feathered bullet. I didn't get that one. Huns can be humbling. I remember a blustery day when my partners, hunting some distance away, flushed a covey in my direction. I enjoy pass shooting and relished the chance to show off in front of an audience. But these Huns were different—they came at me like shrapnel out of a gunmetal sky, scattered, flying high, and riding the galloping wind. I missed with both barrels, and went on to miss several easier shots after that. So much for overconfidence.

Despite their small size, Huns are tough birds. Many times I've watched one fly 100 yards or more before succumbing to a pellet or



GRAY PARTRIDGES IN FLIGHT. WATERCOLOR BY ARCHIBALD THORBURN, 1898

two in the body cavity. For that reason, I try to watch the covey as long as I can see it, even if I think I've missed. A bird that drops straight down out of such a covey often will be dead, while a bird that appears to be flying normally but lands short of the others may be wounded. It goes without saying that dogs are a great help in hunting Huns. There is a lot of country to swallow up the birds, and a wide-ranging pointing dog will find more Huns than a close-working flusher. But any good dog is helpful, especially when it comes to finding and retrieving downed birds.

In recent years more hunters have discovered the pleasures of hunting Huns on the northern plains with pointing dogs. Conditions are best in early fall, but I've had memorable hunts later in the year, too. One crisp November day my Brittany, Ollie, made a wide cast into the wheat stubble adjacent to the Conservation Reserve Program field we had been hunting. When he topped a rise and disappeared, I didn't follow; it was late afternoon and I was bone tired. Besides, I figured he'd be back in a minute or two. After five minutes, I trudged to the top of the hill to investigate.

When I topped the hill I beheld a sight guaranteed to warm the heart of any wingshooter and give exhausted legs a sudden shot of adrenaline: 100 yards below, Ollie stood motionless, head high, pointing toward an island of stunted brown weeds in the ocean of wheat stubble. I hurried ahead, expecting a nervous covey to take flight any second. As I closed the distance, my mood ricocheted from doubt to hopefulness to guarded optimism: 50 yards, 20 yards...10 yards...5 yards...suddenly a covey of Huns lifted skyward in a flurry of wings. I dropped a bird with the improved-cylinder barrel of my over/under, then swung well ahead of the last bird in the covey and downed it with the modified choke. Ollie retrieved both birds to hand, transforming a long, luckless afternoon into an instant success.

As we headed for the truck, the sinking sun peeked from beneath a gray cloud bank, casting an orange glow across the landscape. In the distance, the reedy calls of the scattered Huns drifted to us on the breeze—the familiar sound of a covey gathering for the night. 🐾