ESSAY

A FINE FINISH

Ending Montana's pheasant season with a rooster volcano

BY RICK BASS

SHUTTERSTOCK

November is the month, it is hoped, of pheasant-hunting proficiency; in theory, you've gotten better with practice and are in better shape, as are the dogs. And this is good, because the snow is down now, so that you're hunting with cold fingers. A cup of coffee in the morning is as useful as a hand warmer as it is for awakening, and given the alkaline taste of prairie coffee to a northwestern Montana hunter spoiled on clean, sweet water, maybe this is the highest and best use of this brew.

The prairie is abandoned now by almost all but the serious bird hunters—the rest are stalking elk and chasing deer, perusing magazines and cookbooks for Thanksgiving recipes, and beginning to think of other coming holidays, too—beginning to think, already, about starting to wind things down.

You push on. The birds are exquisitely wild and untrappable in November, and they can be found hiding in the gnarliest places: cottonwood thickets alder-snapping your cold face, frozen cattails mush-muck swampsucking at your boots. The dog points and the rooster gets up and blows out, spraying a plume of cattail fluff so thick in his exodus that it looks like you've already shot and he's trailing feathers.

And after you do shoot, and the real poof! of feathers tears loose, the cattail fluff is still drifting into your face, getting caught in your three days' beard, your hair, your eyebrows, and even your mouth, so that you can taste the swamp; and now you can smell it as the dog muscles ahead into the cattails and then comes thrashing back, rooster in his mouth, shaking a new vapor trail of cattail fluff coming at you this time, instead of going away; and you can smell the marsh, the incredibly rich scent of it, from where the dog's feet are splashing in the semi-frozen mud. Cattail fuzz coating your face like a wolfman's, you crouch down and pet, and brag on your dog.

By December, anything that's left on the prairie is one hard-assed resident, human or otherwise. The migrants are long gone—it's only four months now till the first of them begin drifting back. And now that Montana's season's been extended all the way to New Year's Day, my oldest daughter, Mary Katherine, and I decide to close out the second-to-last day of the season on the last day of the year.

We leave the afternoon before; the plan is for us to arrive late that night, check into the hotel, get up and hunt a half-day in the morning, then drive on back home in leisurely fashion, arriving in time for our New Year's Eve party. The prairie—indeed, all of eastern Montana—should be ours, an expanse that should be all the more unpopulated by the storm warnings that are brewing: big snow and big cold, scheduled to arrive about the time we are returning. It's our plan to slip back over the pass just ahead of it.

We get a late start and stop off in town to rent a batch of videos for Mary Katherine to watch on the long journey through the night and back. She got one of those little portable DVD players for Christmas, and it's a particular feeling of insularity to leave town, striking out on the dark road, with Mary Katherine wrapped up in her big blanket, seat-belted in, with the little blue flicker of movie screen washing over us and the tiny cinema sound of actors' and actresses' dialogue, as if we are somehow still at home, ensconced on the couch.

And yet there is also very much the feel of an adventure, a journey. There are no other travelers; the night and the state are ours.

One reason for our solitude is that the storm has blown through a few hours ahead of schedule, with a speed and intensity even greater than predicted, howling and scouring, raking the Rockies with wind and ice and snow—lots of snow, which whirls in all directions and is shoved up in drifts and mounds completely unbroken by the passage of any other vehicle, much less a snowplow. I try to drive straight through the first drift, assuming the snow to be loose and powdery, but the wind has packed it down to the consistency of a ski hill, and we bump over it, blasting through it, as if excavating a mogul; and the road is filled with these snow dunes, as if there is no more road and we have traveled back into the past, into a time before roads existed, and yet are stubbornly and perhaps foolishly continuing to try to impress our ways of being upon the landscape, insisting that there be roads where perhaps there no longer are, or never were, any.

The snow howls past sideways, the streams and currents of it so steady and so hypnotizing that it begins to seem we, not the snow, are traveling sideways. We plow through one low hill after another, all but creeping, and eventually the little town appears, where our room is unlocked—there are no other travelers—and I carry Mary Katherine, who is asleep, inside. She wakes briefly to the stinging, howling slant of snow. I bring the dogs inside—the room is warm—and fall deep asleep into a rest that is almost more satisfying than the hunt itself—as if, here at the end of December, it might almost be enough to turn around and go right back home.

We awaken to the bright light of day three hours later, the entire prairie blanketed with white and that north wind still howling. The car itself is a giant dune, shrouded in a crystalline ice shell, and we put on every article of clothing we have brought, chip our way into the car like mountaineers, clearing window views all around, and then drive out to our hunting spot.

It is ridiculously, unbearably cold. No one is out, nor is there sign of any life whatsoever. The farmers and ranchers have brought their stock inside—perhaps into their living rooms, beside the fireplace, it is so cold. I sip coffee while Mary Katherine sips hot chocolate, and we share a frozen chocolate donut.

This will not be a long hunt.

I drive out into the stubblefield and park angled to the wind, leave the engine running and the heater on, with the windows well cracked for ventilation. I collar up Point, and like the Abominable Snowman or the Pillsbury Doughboy, I set out downwind toward a levee, on the leeward side of which I think there might be some roosters taking refuge from the storm. Point looks around almost in alarm for a second—am I serious?—but when he sees that I am, he lopes ahead, trying his best. Surely any scent molecules will be long ago atom-smashed, sliced and diced, and scrubbed scentless by this wind; but he pushes on anyway, playing it out.

We get lucky; we find them within 16 minutes, just as I am about to head back, unable to trudge any farther, big boots breaking with each and every step through the scoured, crystal-thin sheet of ice that covers a foot of frozen powder below.

Point has run out a little too far ahead of me, turning back into the wind, and is utterly unable to hear my whistle. One tree stands at the base of that levee. Ought to be a pheasant there, I think. Instead there are between two hundred and three hundred, and they seem to be all roosters.

They erupt, and continue erupting, like some surreal and supernatural blossoming fireworks spectacle, with little Point standing there in their midst, looking straight up into the snow and the swirling pheasants as if he has stepped into a dream. He looks like a porcelain dog, like some little figurine caught in one of those shake-up snowflake bubble-globes, and the pheasants just keep unfolding into the sky, cackling and sailing away, like the world's greatest and longest chain of dominoes—ten birds' departure triggering the flight of another twenty, which triggers the departure of another thirty, which then sends up another forty. I am just a tad too far away to shoot but am running hard, trying to get there before the party is over.

Pheasants are sailing past me now at about a hundred miles an hour—terror-stricken, I think, by their own velocity. I can see some of their eyes, briefly, through that screen of snow—roosters whirling through the sky like a hundred yard-bags of autumn leaves dumped into the howling wind—and I swing the gun on one and fire twice, but I am a century behind him. The snow and wind absorb the shot pellets as if I've fired into the void, and I peel my gloves off, fumble for new shells, and attempt to reload, while the clatter of pheasants, the ceaseless volcano of them, continues to blow, all issuing from beneath that one lone tree.

I fire twice more and miss—my cannonade has authorized still more birds to leap up, every pheasant in the county hunkered beneath that one lone tree—and somehow I manage to load again. Now Point has broken from his surreal trance and is dancing, leaping, snapping at the last of the trail-away pheasants, his mind suddenly unhinged by the bounty, the excess, of that which he has discovered—and I fire twice more at what turns out to be the last pheasant leaving, and the bird tumbles—more, I think, from a heart attack, or from the great cold, than my shooting—and Point plows out into the field of cattails frozen as stiff as stalks of ice, cracking and snapping them, seizes the big rooster, and then comes racing back up the levee as if nothing strange has happened, as if it's just another pheasant hunt.

I break the gun open and grab the heavy bird with my free hand. I'm too cold to even try to shove it into my game bag. The car is only a few hundred yards away, and we break into a clumsy run across the frozen prairie.

The heater is roaring, Mary Katherine is still watching her movie. I kennel Point and climb in myself, and we drive home, where we will arrive just in time for our New Year's Eve party. Fourteen hours' driving, twenty minutes of hunting, one bird. And all the way home, we visit about life and the dogs and the holidays, and why we live where we live.

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Writer Rick Bass wrote this essay while living in the Yaak Valley, his home for many years. He now lives in Pray. A longer version first appeared in The Wide Open: Prose, Poetry, and Photographs of the Prairie (*University of Nebraska Press).*

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