



## *Experience leaves nothing to grouse about*

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*Mike Ranum of St. Paul, Minn., holds a ruffed grouse as Aspen, a 2-year-old English pointer, looks on during a hunt near Park Falls.*



Park Falls - October arrived with a cold blush across the North Woods.

Icy tendrils made an overnight advance on the swamps and ditches outside Park Falls.

At dawn, the temporary crystal reflected the sunrise and surrounding palette of red maple and green spruce.

It was calm but not still.

The popples were shivering, perhaps trying to shake their frosty coating, perhaps just dancing one last time as they brighten and complete their journey to earth.

Aspen was shimmying, too.

"You ready to go, girl?" asked Ann Jandernoa of her 2-year-old English pointer.

If there are any more complete expressions of excitement than those of a just-unboxed hunting dog, I haven't seen them.

Aspen's ears and eyes and posture all gave the affirmative.

The rest of the group - St. Paul residents Mike Ranum and Don Thomas and me - was ready, too.

The three of us have joined Jandernoa and her English pointers Aspen and Northern Bean for a day of ruffed grouse hunting on public land outside Park Falls.

If location and timing are keys to success, all we'd need is some red wine and a warm oven at the end of the day.

(Disclaimer: Since grouse are notoriously difficult targets, the oven may also be used to prepare frozen dinners).

Park Falls has proudly proclaimed itself "Ruffed Grouse Capital of the World" for many years. The forests and wetlands in nearby Ashland, Price, Oneida and other counties provide some of the nation's best grouse habitat.

And with much of the land here in public hands, primarily in county, state or national forests, hunters have some of the better access available in Wisconsin.

We donned our orange vests and hats at mid-morning and set out on foot along a forest lane north of Park Falls. The lane angles through tall hardwoods and toward a young popple stand.

Aspen worked ahead, zigging left and zagging right, bells on her collar clanging with each stride.

After just 400 yards, she locked on point at the edge of the lane, white tail arched like a saber to the sky.

"Birds," said Jandernoa, motioning for Thomas to move left and Ranum to move right while she and I came up the middle.

Aspen held tight and, as we approached from behind, a pair of grouse rocketed out of cover 10 yards from her nose.

The birds did their own weaving through a dense maze of foliage, leaving us with only a split-second glance of brown tail feathers.

No shots were fired. Welcome to grouse season, where, like musky anglers who count each follow, we relish every flush.

"That's two," said Jandernoa. "Not bad, because we haven't even got to the good spots."

Jandernoa grew up hunting and trapping in Michigan and later earned a forestry degree from Michigan Tech.

She now lives in Park Falls and works full-time as a hunting guide, hunting educator and dog sled musher with her partner Skip Souther.

"I find grouse hunting to be the most challenging and rewarding," says Jandernoa. "The complexity of the bird and their habitat is truly amazing."

When not guiding, Jandernoa and Souther hold grouse hunting workshops around the country. As is true in so many outdoor endeavors, the key to grouse hunting is habitat.

Grouse thrive in early successional forests, areas that have either been disturbed naturally by fire or managed through timber harvest. The young forest provides the shelter and food essential for grouse and many more species, including song birds like the gold-winged warbler.

A reduction in logging has meant a long-term drop in grouse numbers - and many other species - over the last few decades.

According to data from the U.S. Forest Service, aspen/birch stands in Wisconsin have declined 36% since 1935; they continue to fall 1% annually.

The Ruffed Grouse Society and most wildlife managers advocate responsible, active forestry that includes clear cuts and benefits a broad range of plants and wildlife.

Wisconsin has fared better than most states and, buoyed by the rising tide of its population cycle, can still make good on Park Falls' civic claim.

According to the Department of Natural Resources, the ruffed grouse population in Wisconsin is up over last year as it approaches the peak of its 10-year population cycle.

Northern Wisconsin's grouse drumming counts were up 6% over 2008; statewide the counts increased 3% from last year, according to DNR reports.

And the average number of broods seen per hour increased 31% from 2008 levels, the second consecutive annual increase. The average brood size was 4.4 young per brood in 2009, same as 2008.

Ruffed grouse populations rise and fall on a 10-year cycle, with lows near the middle of each decade and highs near the end. Wisconsin's grouse population bottomed out in 2005 and has risen each year since.

The birds are drawing hunters to Wisconsin from across the nation.

Jandernoa and Souther help them by keeping close tabs on forestry activity in the region. They produce grouse hunting maps of areas that have been recently logged, keying on aspen stands that are from 9 to 17 years old.

At the moment, we're working through tightly spaced vertical trunks in an 11-year-old stand of aspen.

"It's about the age of the stand but also what's on the forest floor," said Jandernoa as she stopped to finger the leaf of a bunchberry. A wild strawberry grew nearby; both are prized food for grouse.

To our west lay a tag alder swamp. The birds spend the night there, said Jandernoa, then move "out and up" to feed in the morning.

The faint jangling stopped; Aspen was on point again. Jandernoa gave out directions like a field general.

When we were in position, she said "O.K. Aspen" and a visage of white sprinted ahead. A grouse flushed, crossing from Thomas to Ranum, who downed the bird.

Seconds later Aspen stood over the handsome grouse, sporting a distinctive black ruff on its neck and black band on its tail. The bird proved to be a young-of-the-year male.

We hunted on, with Jandernoa keeping voice contact with the group and constantly calling out sign.

"I've got chalk," she said, noting woodcock droppings. And "There's another drumming site" as we passed a mossy stump littered with grouse leavings.

The leaf litter was disturbed in spots where woodcock had probed with long bills for earthworms. With the coming cold and prospect of frozen ground, the woodcock migration is on.

We continued to limbo and side-step through the young popple stand, listening and looking for Aspen's points.

The next flush produced a woodcock for the bag; later we connected on another grouse.

There are no easy shots in grouse hunting; only shots we think we should make and those that are expressions of hope.

We shared the friendly banter of hunters who accept the misses - but not without comment.

"Don't start with me," said Thomas, flashing a smile and reloading after a near-grouse encounter.

Some grouse hunters wait until later in the year, when more leaves are down and visibility is better. There's an argument for that.

By lunch, we put up 31 grouse and 5 woodcock. Most of the flushes were audible only, but sufficient to produce a fluttering in our chests.

Aspen, showing skills of a much older and supremely skilled dog, worked close and gave us ample opportunities.

We fired about 15 shots and had three birds for the bag.

"This isn't about getting a limit," said Jandernoa. "Grouse hunters by-and-large are after the experience."

Indeed, there's never a bad time to hike for hours in grouse country. The morning warmed into the 50s and the sun highlighted a painterly suite of fall color across the landscape.

We followed the contours of the cut, working higher and higher, always with Aspen in the lead.

By the time we reached the top, our cheeks matched the maple leaves.

Our game pouches had mild dimples in them. But we had added several limits of experience and laughter.

Looking down from a hardwood park toward the swamp, it was clear October couldn't have gotten off to a finer start.

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