HUNTING THE “WILD” PHEASANT:

30,000 ring-necks raised and released for sport

BY JEFF GAILUS

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THE TABER PHEASANT Festival runs for a week or so every late October in an agricultural wonderland. According to various chambers of commerce and economic development bureaus, southern Alberta is an “unlimited landscape of opportunity” where low corporate taxes and an undefinable but apparently ubiquitous “entrepreneurial spirit” has turned the once-boundless prairie into Canada’s premier food corridor, wresting more than a billion dollars worth of grains, potatoes, sugar beets, chickpeas and soybeans from what was once Canada’s premier pheasant habitat.

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Taber, where the eye-watering tang of manure slaps you in the face as soon as you open your car door, sits at the literal centre of all this boundlessness. It is a Footloosian town of about 8,500 residents with a healthy reliance on the agribusiness industry and an extraordinary variety of Christian churches: Catholic, Lutheran, evangelical, reformed, LDS, Jehovah’s Witness, Baptist and Mennonite, to name a few. Plowed fields as level as the Uyuni salt flats spread in every direction, and a drive along the township and range roads reveals the poultry processors (14.5 million broilers per year), confined feeding operations (500,000 head of cattle), French fry factories (two billion pounds of potatoes), and sugar beet plants (105,000 tonnes of refined sugar) that turn the fruits of the land into food products and ROI.

Apart from these observations, and the fact that some 40 per cent of the population prefers speaking a Germanic language at home rather than English or French, the only other remarkable thing about Taber is the existence of the harmless-sounding but ultimately troubling Community Standards Bylaw, which prohibits, among many other things, swearing or spitting or loitering, or even gathering in groups of three or more in any public place “where a Peace Officer has reasonable grounds to believe the assembly will disturb the peace of the neighborhood….”

As an habitual spitter and occasional curser, and a journalist inclined to discuss, in places both private and public, the vagaries of the world with a wide range of strangers, often in groups larger than two, I was a little concerned that these (likely unconstitutional) prohibitions would interfere with my documenting the goings-on in and around Taber during the 2019 edition of the much heralded pheasant festival. I would just have to be on my best behaviour.

Be apprised, though, that the Taber Pheasant Festival is not your average bird festival. Unlike dozens of other avian extravaganzas held every year in almost every part of North America, the Taber version is not really about celebrating or learning about or even watching pheasants; it’s about killing them. It’s the single biggest hunting festival in this country, with almost 1,000 hunters and their obedient retrievers congregating for a week of hounding the world’s most popular game bird.

The Taber Pheasant Festival is put on by the Alberta Conservation Association, a sportsman-run, hook-and-bullet non-profit and “delegated administrative organization” that gets a percentage of provincial hunting and fishing licence revenues to do what governments usually do in other jurisdictions: conduct research, promote hunting, fishing and trapping, and conserve fish and wildlife populations and the habitats on which they depend, especially through partnerships with private landowners.

One of ACA’s primary focal species is the pheasant, specifically *Phasianus colchicus,* known as the ring-necked, or common, pheasant. On a ride out to ACA’s Enchant Demo Project, where ACA has helped improve upland game bird habitat on a 1,460-acre farm, Ken Kranrod, ACA’s vice-president, told me that a big part of what they do is help repair the damage done by modern agriculture. At Enchant, their habitat improvements—a new wetland, habitat strips of leafy cover along crop edges—have increased grey partridge densities to some of the highest in North America. It is now a model for how other landowners can make cost-effective changes that don’t affect their bottom lines.

A parallel effort is the Provincial Pheasant Release Program, which ACA took over in 2014 after the Alberta government decided to mothball it. Despite Brobdingnagian productivity, and the fact that ring-necks usually do well in agricultural areas, southern Alberta is hard-pressed to grow wild pheasants, and the government was tired of throwing good money after bad in an increasingly futile attempt to create a self-sustaining population. “They don’t really overwinter that well because they’re not from this climate,” Kranrod told me as Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* played in the background. Undeterred by these inconvenient facts, the ACA took over the complicated task of raising and releasing what’s now 30,000 pheasants each year at a variety of sites in Alberta, because, well, hunters really like killing pheasants.

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Just 1 per cent of the pheasants released in Alberta survive the winter. Essentially they all die whether or not they evade the hunter’s gun.

ACCORDING TO PHEASANTS FOREVER (120,000 members), the first ring-necked pheasants arrived in North America in 1881, transported from their native range in China by one Owen Nickerson Denny, the American consul-general in Shanghai at the time. Most died along the way, but Judge Denny released 29 more the next year on his brother’s farm in the Willamette Valley near Portland, Oregon. Many more birds were released over the years, some imported from China, some from English gamebird farms, and they began to flourish in Oregon and up into Washington. During Oregon’s first pheasant season, in 1892, hunters reportedly killed 50,000 roosters on opening day.

Hunters everywhere clamoured for more. This was long before anyone worried about the deleterious effects of invasive species. Fish and game agencies dutifully answered the call, releasing thousands upon thousands of mostly farm-raised pheasants everywhere the habitat would support them. Now there are as many as 30 million pheasants living in 40 US states and six Canadian provinces, more than half of them in South Dakota. Hundreds of thousands of hunters kill millions of them every year. But tinkering with nature on such a grand scale often invokes the law of unintended consequences. Despite the existence of tens of millions of birds, numbers have been declining in most areas since a peak in the early 1960s, mostly because entrepreneurial spirit and the cult of economic efficiency have turned pheasant-friendly family farms into corporate megafarms with little to no wildlife habitat, pheasant or otherwise.

Nowhere has been hit harder than Alberta. When I went into Marksman Guns & Sports in Lethbridge to buy some pheasant loads for the festival, Ted Feller, the owner, reminisced about the glory days. “We have 10 per cent of the pheasants we had 40 years ago,” he said, with a thinly veiled tone of disgust. “I’m 62 years old. When I was a teenager, there were pheasants all over the place. Now they’re almost gone.”

The Taber Pheasant Festival is, in part, an antidote to this trend, promising its hunter participants the perfect combination of camaraderie and opportunity. Participants sign up to hunt on four dozen or so farms, private land that is otherwise off limits even to local hunters for the remainder of the season. Each hunter can hunt as many as three half-days during the week, at three assigned release sites that are duly populated with 20 ring-necked pheasants each and every afternoon. In the evenings, social gatherings—the Game to Gourmet Culinary Tasting on Monday, Scotch Tasting and Wing Wednesday, and a banquet and silent auction on Thursday—allow hunters to share stories over drinks and experience the bliss of well-prepared *Phasianus colchicus* recipes: pheasant empanadas, pheasant wings, roast pheasant with dressing and gravy, Asian noodles with pheasant meatballs, smoked pheasant mac ’n’ cheese and, my favourite, butter pheasant.

Taber
Pheasant
Festival
CANADA'S
BIGGEST
HUNTING
FESTIVAL

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When Curtis downed the last of his two pheasants, the crowd applauded politely, as if Tiger Woods had just dropped another birdie putt.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the whole event is the Novice Shoot, which is offered the first weekend, in a field by Fincastle Lake, to educate people about the critical role of hunting in conservation and introduce neophyte hunters to the intricacies of finding and killing upland game birds. "You have a young kid and he comes out and you get the wash of colour and the cackle and whatnot," said Kranrod. "Pheasants make it so easy and controlled and exciting. They're a great species to introduce kids to the world of hunting and how that integrates into the world of conservation, which includes habitat conservation and enhancement, working with landowners, the circle of life, all that. That's why we wanted to get involved."

At 53, I was no young kid, but I had come to hunting late in life, long after I had left Alberta for other climes. I hadn't grown up in a hunting family, and like many denizens of suburbia, I had a rather low opinion of the practice. But when I relocated to Missoula, Montana, in the mid-2000s, most men (and some women) I knew hunted, not for sport or trophies, but for food. They eventually convinced me that, done right, hunting is the least-bad way to put wild, organic meat in one's freezer. While I had opportunistically killed the odd grouse with my bow while hunting elk and deer, I had never hunted upland game birds in the traditional way, which is to say wandering hither and yon in open country with a shotgun crooked over my shoulder. This was my chance to learn.

When I drove out to Fincastle on Sunday morning, the makeshift parking lot was already full of trucks and SUVs. It was a beautiful blue-sky prairie day, and the big white tent and tangerine festival banners billowed in the inexorable breeze. I was a tad late, having had to backtrack for my forgotten camera and then taken a wrong turn off the highway on my return, but the staff at the registration table happily wrote out my nametag, returned my $20 registration fee and assigned me to group A4.

Although it is not required, I had brought my own shotgun, an ancient pump-action Stevens Model 520 made in the late 1920s. A dear friend and mentor had rescued it from his brother-in-law's basement and gifted it to me, and I'd had a gunsmith refurbish the rusty old weapon into hunting shape. It was more of a goose than a pheasant gun, but I couldn't wait to try it. When I pulled it out of my Suburban, somewhat self-consciously, the gun handler that would carry it over to the shooting range gave a low whistle, as if I'd handed him an artifact I'd just dug out of the prairie sod.

"Wow, that's a, a beautiful gun," he said, as he turned it over in his hands. He made sure it was unloaded, gave it a few shakes, and pumped the action open and closed a couple of times. "I dunno. It's a little loose in places. I'm guessing you can use it, but it'll be up to the shooting instructors."

At the range, shotguns were already blazing. Group 2 was up, and tiny children as young as 10 were blasting clay "birds" flung from three automated trap machines at astonishing speeds. I searched the crowd for my fellow A4s and found the three of them talking together as they waited their turn at the firing line. They were all bird-hunting newbies from Calgary. One, Curtis, hunted deer, and we swapped stories about coming to hunting late in life. He turned and introduced me to Chris, his father, who lived in Coventry Hills, one of the ever-multiplying subdivisions that had sprawled north from what was the edge of town when I'd grown up there. Then, it was still farmer's fields and coulees, decent pheasant habitat I'd wager, which we explored on our BMX bikes, looking for snakes and ducklings to catch and smoking the odd illicit menthol cigarette, all while keeping a watchful eye out for older boys inclined to spit in our faces or shoot at us with pellet guns.

Chris, who looked fit and spry for the 60 years he said he was, had gone out with Curtis after deer, and had learned to crave the outdoor exercise and thrill of the chase. The only firearm he owned was a short-barrelled tactical shotgun for home defence, and he was keen to try the fancy autoloaders provided at the Taber Pheasant Festival, some of which were intricately engraved works of art that cost more than $3,000.

I watched father and son take turns thumping clay targets. Curtis creamed them with lethal precision, but Chris had some trouble hitting the mark. I watched as his gray-haired instructor showed him how to better position the gun and swing it from right to left after the clays. When I walked up to the firing line, my instructor, Phil, asked me if I'd ever fired a shotgun. I told him I hunted big game, and was reasonably competent with high-powered rifles, but that I'd never shot a scattergun at moving targets. Phil patiently walked me through the differences: Your feet should be squarer than when shooting a hunting rifle, he said, your weight forward slightly and your knees bent, like the stance assumed when playing defence in a basketball game.

"You gotta be smooth," he said. "Unlike a rifle, where you have a lot of time to aim, and you pull the trigger softly, you want to follow the clay with the barrel and kinda slap at the trigger without stopping your follow. But you gotta be smooth."

The key, I learned, is to get the butt of the gun high up on your shoulder and press your cheek lightly to the stock. Instead of a reticle in a scope, a tiny bead at the far end of the barrel is your guide. I whittled it down to a three-step process: raise the gun, follow the bird, slap the trigger.

"Pull!" I said when I was ready. The clay flew from the trap to my right and arced serenely across the sky in front of me. Raise. Follow. Slap. The gun boomed and the orange clay shattered to the ground. After four in a row, Phil slapped me on the back. "Good job. I can see you're getting the muscle memory. Once you shoot enough, you'll be able to throw up your gun exactly the same way every time."

I SPENT AN HOUR HONING MY SKILLS and then walked over to the tent to get a bite to eat and ready myself for the next phase of my education. Instead of inert, metaphorical birds, the targets were now live pheasants.

What I'd witnessed the day before, when my friend Katie Morrison had done her novice day, can only be described as a shitshow. On a separate shooting range right in front of the billowy tent, three handlers grabbed a rooster each out of a crate, which they shook vigorously before stuffing them into piles of hay. Two shooters were oriented so each had a chance at the birds when they flushed without endangering the handlers or the crowd of eager shooters and proud parents, who watched their child hunters with bated breath.

Most of the dizzy pheasants had to be prodded—even tossed—out of their hay shelters, while the two shooters unleashed a barrage of pellets in their general direction from a distance of 10 or 20 yards. At least half the birds were saved by the inexperienced inaccuracy of the shooters and flew off to hide in the tall grass 100 yards away. Some dropped from the sky with a thump; others were "winged" and tried to hobble off, only to be brought back flapping by eager retrievers. A half-dozen or so ran off into the parking lot to hide beneath the fleet of pickup trucks.

Now it was my turn, and I was having serious second thoughts. I am a reluctant hunter at the best of times, and it always breaks my heart when I walk up to a deer or an elk I've killed in the wild. The core ethic of hunting is supposed to be "fair chase," which (in theory) says animals should have a reasonable opportunity of escaping their fate. What I was being asked to do was as far from this ideal as one could get.

My handler passed me my old shotgun, an innocent I knew had never notched a kill. I could see a frightened pheasant looking around furtively over the top of its modest redoubt, its human tormentor just a couple of feet behind it. Pheasants evolved

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to conceal themselves in grass and shrubs (what hunters call "cover"), and when they feel threatened, they prefer to run for it if they can. This poor thing doesn't know what to do, I think. It can't hide, it can't run, and it sure as hell doesn't want to fly, and there's Curtis, off to my right, champing at the bit to get on with it. Behind us, 50 or so onlookers are waiting to see if these two grown men can actually hit more than the broad side of a barn.

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Just as I began thinking about missing on purpose, the handler pokes at the pheasant. It hesitates—another poke—and then leaps into the air on my side of the makeshift range, its wings beating furiously to pull it out of danger. Muscle memory takes over and the gun goes up, high on my shoulder. Follow. Slap. Boom. The pheasant plummets to the ground, its neck bare of any semblance of flesh or feathers. At least it died quickly, I think, but I can't bear to do it again. I raise the gun on the last two birds, but there was little follow and no trigger slap. When Curtis downs the last of his two birds, the crowd applauds politely, as if Tiger Woods has just dropped yet another birdie putt at the Masters.

After memorializing Curtis and his birds on my memory card, we wandered over to the field-dressing station, where a bevy of chefs taught us how to turn these beautiful birds into lean, earthy meat similar to chicken. As we pulled and cut and bagged, I asked how they were enjoying the festival. "It's great," Curtis said, as he picked feathery down from a pheasant breast. "It's like a guided hunt but you're not paying anything." His father was even more enthusiastic. "I'm hooked!" he said. "I'm going to have to sell my gun and buy one I can hunt with."

I looked up to see thousands of snow geese swirl their way onto the surface of Fincastle as a cacophony of shotgun blasts permeated the air. Off to the side, a couple of older men sniggered about the fact it's a miracle that no animal lovers had ever shown up to protest.

IN THE AFTERNOON, KATIE AND I DECIDED to take my gun for a walk to see if we couldn't scare up some pheasants on the south end of CPR Reservoir, an agricultural impoundment just west of Taber. It was thick with cattails and shrubs, perfect pheasant habitat, but a half-dozen orange-clad hunters were already coursing through them with their dogs. The only birds we saw were two dead roosters that had been shot but not picked up.

On our way back to the Suburban, a dual-axle pickup pulling a horse trailer drove up the road toward us. It stopped and a middle-aged man hopped out.

"Are you hunting pheasants?" he asked.

"We are," Katie said, "but we're not having much luck."

"Would you like to see some pheasants?" he asked.

We looked at each other, a little confused, and walked over to the truck. Two young boys climbed out of the cab and joined their dad, who introduced himself as Henk. They were farmers in the area. The younger of the boys, Lennard, who was 9, had raised some pheasants they wanted to release, part of an ACA program that pays 4-H members to turn one-day-old chicks into mature pheasants.

"But he's a little worried about it," Henk said in a slight Dutch accent. "He doesn't really want them to be killed by hunters. So we might go somewhere else."

I wondered for a moment what Lennard would have thought about the novice hunt, and then asked if we could watch them release the birds. Lennard lowered his head and worried his hands a bit, and then smiled shyly and nodded his agreement. Henk opened the trailer door to a dozen or so roosters standing on the floor, and Lennard jumped in and walked to the back. He spread his arms like a conductor and then took two steps forward: the birds flushed into the air and rushed out the door, a blizzard of whirring wings and brilliant colours that disappeared into the leafless brush so quickly it was almost as if they had never existed at all.

I share Lennard's concern about the welfare of his hand-reared pheasants. Although I was enjoying myself at the festival—the food was excellent, the people were friendly and the opportunity to shoot as much skeet as you wanted (for free!) was a real treat—the truth is that whether or not Lennard's roosters were shot by hunters, the chance any of them will live to enjoy next summer is pretty close to zero. And it's not just because Alberta's winters are cold. It's frigid where pheasants evolved in China. But the habitat there is better and they're truly wild birds, not what an acquaintance of mine calls "lost chickens that can fly," for which reason he refuses to hunt Alberta's pheasants.

This perception among some hunters, that released birds are somehow a diminished and domesticated form of the real thing, is backed up by a significant amount of research. Although pheasant farms claim to respect the birds they sell, they are basically bred and raised like the broilers over at Sunrise Farms, north of Taber. And this, it turns out, makes them a whole lot less capable of surviving in the wild.

Brothers Lennard (left) and Julian. Lennard raises pheasants as part of a 4-H program. "He doesn't really want them to be killed by hunters," his dad says.

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Dr. Joah Madden, a zoologist and leading pheasant expert at the University of Exeter, near London, has spent much of his career trying to tease out the reasons raised-pheasant survival rates in the UK, where 40 million are released every year, are so deplorably low. "About 25 per cent of them are dead before the first trigger is pulled," he said.

What he has found is not particularly surprising. The stressful conditions in which the birds spend their early weeks make them more susceptible to disease; their inability to adequately forage for wild foods, especially during harsh winters, makes them more likely to die of starvation; and their naïveté and inexperience with perching makes them easy targets for predators. It's even worse in Alberta: Just 1 per cent of the farm-raised pheasants released in Alberta, whether by 9-year-old kids or the professionals from MacFarlane Pheasants Inc., survive the winter, and the few that do are hard pressed to reproduce. Essentially, they all die whether or not they evade the hunter's gun.

These facts raise uncomfortable questions that are all but unavoidable at Canada's biggest hunting festival. For instance: Is it alright to sacrifice semi-domesticated sentient animals for our recreational and culinary enjoyment? Is it OK to introduce children to "the world of hunting" and "the cycle of life" with an experience that is not really hunting at all? Am I simply being churlish to even bring it up?

Before I had left the Novice Shoot, I stopped Tedd Walcott, the instructor who had taught Chris how to shoot, to ask him to carry my shotgun back to my Suburban. Walcott is a chiropractor from Lethbridge, and a senior shooting instructor and part-time deer-hunting guide who specializes in one-day hunts for novice hunters. I thanked him and his colleagues for their tutelage and invited him to Montana to hunt antelope with me. When I expressed my reservations about shooting caged birds, he sighed. "I know," he said. "It's totally artificial. But we train people to hunt, and it gives them some confidence to get out. And if we only hunted wild birds, we wouldn't hunt."

Maybe that's the lesson, then. If hunters think hunting is a tradition special and important enough to maintain, then maybe we need to make sure our elected representatives protect enough habitat to support wild populations of the native game we seek, including economic incentives for private landowners to do the same. And if we don't or can't, maybe we explain to our children the hows and whys of our failures, and the consequences of a system run amok, rather than invent something that actually subverts the very values (i.e., respect for nature) we claim to be trying to teach them.

I ROSE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING and drove east in the dark to Release Site #31, a half section of land between Highway 837 and 40 Mile Coulee, where a sign four feet square greeted me with the knowledge that Jay and Ryan Doolittle owned the land and Black River Outfitters had sponsored the site, for which I was exceedingly grateful. I was also excited, as I always am in the early morning dark on a hunting day, even though I hate getting out of bed before the sun rises. But I'll be honest: The serious second thoughts had returned with a vengeance.

During my research, I'd heard actual hunters tell all kinds of awful stories about hunting released pheasants. On the online Alberta Outdoorsmen Forum, there were more than a few disparaging critiques of hunters and their dogs waiting for the release truck to leave, and then descending on the farm-raised birds that had been, and I quote, "released for the slaughter." I'd also watched a couple of YouTube videos of people standing over frightened birds and then nudging them into the air with a gentle foot, only to blast them at 10 feet as they made a half-hearted attempt to flush. After the Novice Shoot fiasco and my experience with Lennard, my discomfort had grown to such an extent that last night I'd had to drink an entire bottle of red wine (Erath Pinot Noir 2017, "with a hint of wintergreen melding with savory meatiness") just to get to sleep.

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But here I was, in the dark, 336 miles from home, parked at the northeast corner of SE Sec 26 Twp 9 Rge 13 W4M. As the first grey light slipped over the horizon, I began to make out the nature of the enigma before me. Every hunt is just a puzzle to be solved, a unique concatenation of wind direction and topography and vegetation and food and water that, if you're paying attention, tells you where your quarry is likely to hide and how you can get close enough to kill it.

Release Site #31 looked promising. The breeze was light and from the northwest. A broad, shallow coulee sloped down to the southeast. Much of the place was bare, probably from overgrazing of livestock of one kind or another, but the patches of cattails and wild rose and snowberry preferred by pheasants were well dispersed throughout the property. The map I'd been given showed ponds at the west end, near where the outlines of gnarled trees were just now emerging in the pinkish light. Unlike every other hunt I'd ever been on, I also knew that the ring-necks had been dropped off the afternoon before, and they didn't know the place any better than I did. The drop-off would require a truck, and the truck would require at least a modest two-track onto the property. A quick scour of the map indicated it came in from the northeast corner and headed for the ponds and trees.

Still, there was no hurry. I was only taking my gun for a walk, as most hunters happily describe a day on the hunt, and I was sure there would be much to see along the way. I didn't have a dog, so I was going to have to cover as much ground as my two old legs would let me. I tromped through wild rose thickets at a half run, hoping to surprise a pheasant that had never encountered a predator before.

Ninety minutes later, not far from where the two-track entered the property, I heard a series of hoarse and foreshortened croaks, repeated every 10 seconds or so. I didn't know what sound a pheasant cock makes, and perhaps they were really cackles, but I figured this might just be it, so I politely shooed away some mule deer I had been watching and followed the croak–cackles toward the trees. I was certain it was just below the rise, and so I hoisted the butt of my shotgun high on my shoulder in anticipation of the raise-follow-slap routine. But no birds rose from the grass, and the attenuated croaks continued in the distance. I crept forward like a marine in a Vietnamese rice paddy, and soon enough I saw the rooster perched on a dead branch high up in one of the trees, not far at all from the little road. I was 20 yards away, and happy that it had learned to perch so quickly.

Here was another conundrum. Wild pheasants, I'd been told, are wily critters that don't easily give themselves up. They'll run through the grass and shrubs for half a mile or more to avoid having to fly, but when they do, they burst out of cover at more than 40 miles an hour. This is what makes the pursuit of pheasants "sporting"—and why shooting them on the ground is frowned upon. What about in a tree? I stared down the barrel of my shotgun and waited so long for this loquacious rooster to fly that my shoulder muscles ached and my arms shook. I lowered the gun to my side and stamped my feet—and still the bird croaked. I waited impatiently for what seemed like forever, and then raised my gun again. This time I shouted, and it finally leapt from the branch. There was hardly a follow and nary a slap. Boom. I dropped it dead with a single shot, but I felt no sense of pride for having done so.

It was now 10 a.m. I had half my limit and three hours before the next group arrived, but I was losing whatever motivation I had ginned up earlier in the dark. I wandered through the old trees and beat through the bushes. A quick lap around the biggest pond revealed few cattails and zero pheasants. I'd had enough. Time to head back to the truck.

As I pop over the next rise, four clueless, splendiferous pheasants drink from a pond like a herd of sheep. ■

Originally from Calgary, Gailus now lives in Montana. He is the author of The Grizzly Manifesto *(RMB, 2010).*