

# Hunting Buddies

*A Photo Essay Celebrating Pheasant Hunting in Alberta, Canada.*

By Barb Loree

Hunters/Editors: Terry Thornton & Kathy Miner

It is the Saturday before opening day; my husband reaches into the closet, dusts off the gun cabinet and unlocks the shotguns. He is carefully cleaning the stocks and barrels and checking the actions when a very eager and excited Golden races into the room alerted by the familiar “click click” sound of the actions. Even the 10-month-old pup is

wiggling harder than normal and darts around like she knows what all this means. It won't be today; only two more “sleeps.”

Wild pheasant hunting (not banded or released birds) is a steadfast yearly get together for our family and friends.<sup>2</sup> The phone starts ringing early in the fall to let us know if they can make opening day, which has

fallen on a Monday this year. It looks like we will have six family members shooting, two dog handlers, three Golden

Retrievers (two 10-month-old pups and one 5-year-old male that has a birthday today), plus our son's 3-year-old black Lab.<sup>2</sup> We will dearly miss our old Golden girl this season; the memories are overwhelming since we both started this sport together, and it is tough for me to hold back the tears.<sup>3</sup>

Okay, it's time to regroup thoughts and start making the list of stuff we need for the hunt and all the outdoor feasts during and afterwards. Tomorrow we will drive to the local sporting good store for the annual shopping

spree. Hunting licenses, shotgun shells, a new whistle lanyard, sporting clays to shoot when it gets slow, maybe some new hunting attire—it's all on the checklist and after that trip is complete, then it is off to the grocery store to stock up with enough grub to feed eight hungry hunters and our four-legged hunting buddies. Checking the weather, it looks surprisingly warm and sunny for the season so we are planning outdoor lunch barbecues and crock pot dinners. The menu will include the recently harvested pheasant and partridge for supper on the second evening.<sup>4</sup> Having these delicious meals

together is just as important as the hunt itself, since it is why we harvest the birds in the first place.

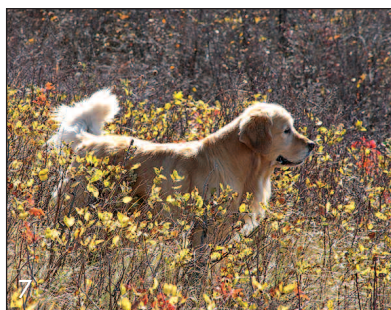
The night before opening day is busy packing for the three-hour road trip to the south of the province deep in pheasant country, where we will find only wild roosters, partridge, antelope and many other wild critters not on our dinner menu! Trying to remember everything and get a decent night's sleep doesn't usually go hand in hand

Finally, it is really and truly opening day; the alarm bells ring very early in the morning and the dogs somehow just know it is their big day.<sup>5</sup> Barely able to wolf down their breakfasts, they are bursting with excitement, so I try to settle them with a quiet walk and then load them into the truck. Off we go, just three more hours and the birds will be flying.

After a breathtaking drive on a brisk frosty morning with brilliant autumn colors and scenery that whisked our minds away from the daily race that we run, we arrive at a quaint, quiet, southern Alberta town and meet our family and friends for breakfast at a local haunt. The meal chatter is about years past, the dog stories, the *big* ones that got away,<sup>6</sup> and the spectacular sunrise this morning that gave a pink and purple hue to recently snow topped mountains. There should be a fair number of birds this year. Maybe even a second hatch since the spring was good to the baby pheasants by not freezing late or being too wet, and the cover is not sparse due to a drought. We all pile into three vehicles and, with the land owner's permission, are off to drive in a few grain fields that have been harvested for the season. The fields are shimmering, sparkling shades of gold backed with wild rose bushes and thickets of cover in multiple autumn colors.<sup>7</sup> Pheasants will be in these grain fields this morning







having their breakfast, too.

Our convoy drives a few miles only seeing some coyotes and mule deer at first; some of what's known as pheasant

weed is blowing in the fields and playing mind games with us, since it can really resemble a bird bobbing for grain. Then just around the next corner at the edge of the field, we spot three or four roosters with brilliant full feathering. At the same time a covey of hens flush right beside the truck and the roosters start running. We're only out for the roosters; we want the girls to produce more of them next year.

After all the preparation, it is time for the hunt. Immediately on opening the car doors, two roosters flush early and land fairly close in a large thicket; the other two larger roosters also flush, but set their wings and sights on the next draw over half a mile away. These wild roosters grew up in the tough terrain of the river draws with many predators, so they are spooky, smart and extremely fast (able to run at least 20 miles per hour on the ground, and fly many miles to safety). We rarely have a chance to get close to the larger 3- or 4-year-old birds.



I lift the tailgate to see two vibrating retrievers just bursting with anticipation. They launch out of the truck and, on verbal command, are off to hunt the thick cover where the first

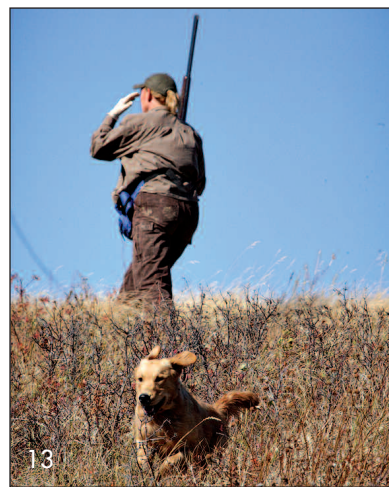
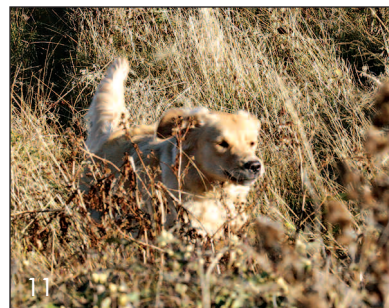
two roosters landed. One shooter goes to the top of the draw to block the birds and the hunt is now on in earnest.<sup>8</sup> The dogs move out with intense purpose, noses to the ground, eyes and heads turning in every direction, oblivious to everything but the job they love. Bird scent is everywhere. The dogs easily burst through the thickets and the tails start wagging really hard, indicating they are very close. Immediately, one rooster cackles and then flushes, exploding



through the cover driven by the dogs behind him. Then within seconds the other rooster flushes and both birds are brought down by the skilled shooters. The Lab easily retrieves the first bird shot and my male Golden is hard after the second one down the draw, that is wounded and running.<sup>9</sup> Within a few minutes he struts back to the top of the field with his prize in his mouth. The color of the male pheasant glistening against the Golden's coat is simply breathtaking.

By the morning's end, we harvested four more roosters and six partridge that we spotted in the fields. Now our sights have turned to the river draws, which can be miles long and hundreds of yards wide, thick with cover, thorns, burrs and hopefully, pheasant. Initially we look for smaller draws to bring the young pups out for their first hunt of the day. Calling them back and forth they quickly start to quarter naturally into the wind, and within minutes those tails start wagging instinctively indicating they are on bird scent.<sup>10</sup> How do they know? Who whispers to them that the birds are in there, ready to be flushed and retrieved?<sup>11</sup> You can train for eons with dogs and birds, but you can't ever re-create the excitement and difficulty of the actual hunt. But somehow they always know. They've been exposed to pheasants at pheasant farms and know birds live in cover, so they hit the cover hard to roost out their prize.

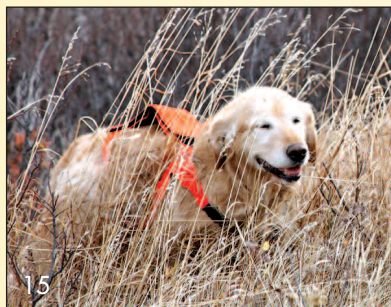
This is tough cover – cover that you need dogs to push through – a human would simply never make it. They both flush quite a few hens and look puzzled at the lack of shooting for their work compared to their pheasant farm encounters.<sup>12</sup> About halfway up the draw one pup starts to bark from the middle of very thick cover and he won't come back to the calls or whistles. We all know from experience when a hunting dog barks they usually have encountered a critter, so dressed in protective chaps I quickly head into the cover to locate the pup. Through the thick bush all I can see is a black and white tail about three feet in front of him which is not a good sign, since it means badger or skunk. We need to get the pup out of there fast. With big time encouragement the pup turns to chase me and comes safely out of the cover to my calls.<sup>13</sup> We sensibly leave that area quickly and start working the top of the draw when two roosters flush way ahead of the pups, but right in front of the blockers. Shots are fired so the pups instinctively run to the gunners and easily spot one rooster that has been hit. The race is on for the bird but being very polite, the boy lets the girl eagerly retrieve the fluttering bunch of feathers,<sup>14</sup> then she in return shares a feather or two with her hunting





## Hunting Buddies, *continued*

partner. They are so playful, it is hard not to laugh at their antics. They instinctively quarter, flush and retrieve, so they absolutely have earned every right to be our hunting buddies today.



The next draw we approach looks familiar. The sight and sounds take me back to last season and last year's story about the "big one" that almost got away. It was summer weather just like today and my old girl was battling cancer, yet her hunting passion kept her going.<sup>15</sup> The shooters had harvested six roosters and

two partridge from the draw so we were all on our way back to the trucks when pheasants started flushing everywhere out of one thicket. My girl was tired so we stayed in some shade and rested while proudly watching our Golden boy track down a running rooster. As he approached me with the bird I noticed a face full of porcupine quills and substantial blood on the front of his thigh. Frantically I ran to his location while digging the needle nose pliers out of my pocket. It is almost unbelievable he stayed with his bird after being quilled and it definitely had been a runner since it was still kicking. After handing me the bird, he settled easily and never even flinched while the quills were being pulled out. The blood on the leg was from a huge thorn and once removed the wound clotted well and the dog started to relax.



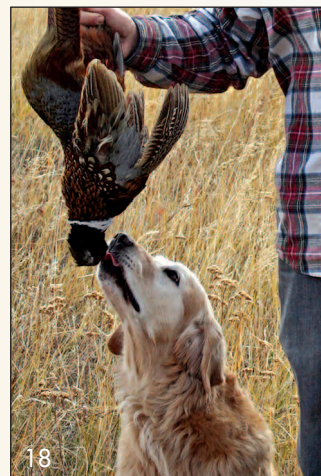
We had fallen way behind the rest of the hunters when shots echoed through the draw. I looked up to see my husband watching a huge rooster set its wings, coast and fall into some heavy cover below him. Our Lab had marked the fall, so I relaxed with the Golden, then cooled them down with some water before we slowly ventured up the hill.<sup>16</sup> When

we got close to the top, there was no bird and the Lab had been badly spurred in the face (the roosters have large spurs on their heels which they do not hesitate to use), so this big pheasant was still very much alive and running. Time was of the essence but the dogs were all pretty tired. I hunted our Golden male in the area of the fall trying to pick up the trail. The old girl was hot and heading downhill towards the river bottom to have a cool down swim, or so I thought. We worked and worked for close to one hour and to everyone's



disappointment we had to give up, exhausted by the heat and cover and hating the idea of leaving a wounded bird. As I turned to call the dogs in, here came the old girl Golden,<sup>17</sup> climbing up the river draw, holding her head high and proudly packing a very large rooster that was still alive

(she had been working the trail all this time). I ran back down the hill to give her water and bag the bird which had 50 bars on the tail feather and spurs that looked like talons. It was no wonder the young Lab decided against the retrieve; it took a dog with experience to flip a fighting cock pheasant and grab hold by the back to finally bring him in. When we got back to the trucks, I gave her the bird to hold for a picture and she proudly wiggled around everyone happily, woo-wooing with her prize.<sup>18</sup> She had a sparkle in her eye and so did my husband, and in my mind, that sparkle will be in this place forever. Today we will walk the mile to the bottom with all four retrievers and challenge this draw again, hoping for a safe hunt and the promise of some prize roosters, with her memory in our back pockets.

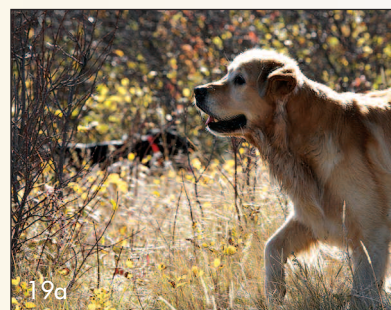
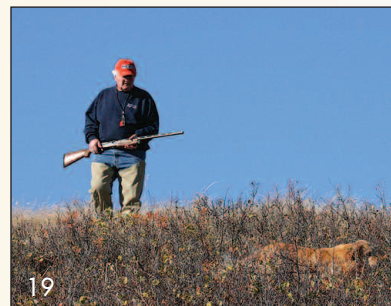


A strong wind has picked up and all the dogs start quartering too far ahead of the guns with the scent of running birds being blown towards them. Our gunners try to keep up, but I know we are traveling way too fast and might very well miss a lot of birds. The dogs are intense

with the bird scent when one huge pheasant flushes and the shots from three gunners doesn't even flick a feather since he was too far away. That big rooster is this year's "one that got away" story. His harem of hens continues to flush as we work the draw.<sup>19</sup>

Our Golden male finally checks back and seems to be on another runner. He points to a bush, and the bush itself seems to cackle, then explodes with a flushing rooster.<sup>19a</sup> My husband releases the safety, takes a breath and pulls the trigger slowly with the bird in sight flying uphill and away. It was a tough shot and his patience pays off. Our Golden in hot pursuit tries to fly over a ditch and ends up slamming hard into the other side. I flinch with worry but he quickly recovers and runs up the hill uninjured. The pups are also in hot pursuit, but they don't try to steal the bird; with respect they watch and learn from the older male as he scampers down the hill with a spectacular rooster against a crisp blue sky.<sup>20</sup>

By the time we get to the top of the draw, the dogs have slowed their pace allowing us to harvest another four roosters and both pups end up flushing and retrieving







Time to fire up the barbeque, relax and have a feast, maybe even a nap.

Feeling rejuvenated we make a plan for the afternoon hunt, deciding it is too hot to hunt the draws for pheasant, we will sneak some mallard ducks instead. The lead truck identifies a flock of mallards a few hundred yards down the canal, so we all pull over and quietly open the doors, careful to not make any loud sounds that will spook the ducks early. We sneak into the grain field below the canal road and quietly walk with the pups on leash just behind the guns, toward



where the mallards were last spotted. The gunners try to anticipate where the ducks will be and start sneaking back up the hill a little further than they need to be. Once they crest the top of the road the ducks spook, take flight and a few shots are fired from one gunner who is in range bringing down two big mallards that land in the canal. We send the pups on their very first real duck hunting retrieve and they both hit the water hard in search of two wounded, but live ducks. The boy pup easily retrieves one that is flapping at him,<sup>22</sup> while the girl is chasing a flapper that is headed down stream. She is within inches of the duck, opens her mouth for the retrieve when the duck disappears diving under the water. She stops briefly then continues swimming ahead when the duck pops up right in front of her nose then dives under again.<sup>23</sup> This time I see the ears go up—aha! So that's how they do that!—and under the water she goes after her bird coming up for air with a wing in her mouth. The duck gets re gripped very carefully when they reach the shore and she continues to hold on pretty tight while proudly delivering her prize. The next time I let her out for a retrieve, she thought it would be more fun to watch her hunting partner almost get the duck back to shore then sneak attack and pounce on him to try and take it away. Again the pups made us laugh and throughout the afternoon we continued to hunt for mallards giving all the dogs lots of retrieves. It was important one of our dogs

one of their own apiece. Stomachs are starting to rumble and the dogs are too hot to work another draw, so it is time for lunch.

We drive to a secret spot on the river, surrounded by fall colors and out crop rock formations, park right beside a small gurgling waterfall and take the dogs downstream for a big swim.<sup>21</sup>

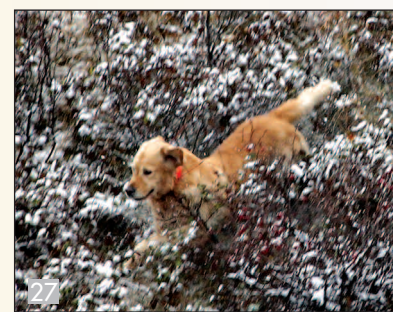
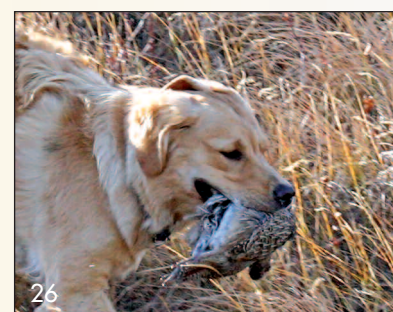
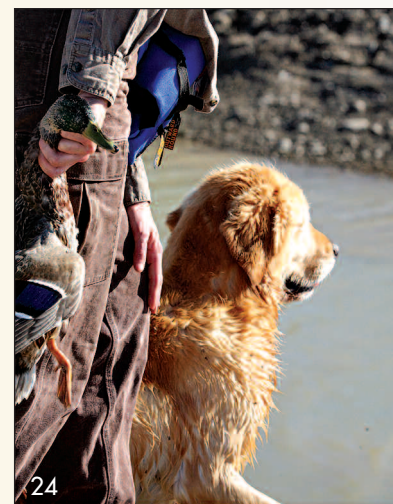
Now that our hunting buddies are cooled off and feeling frisky it is time to return to the fields for another pheasant hunt.

In the late afternoon the sky lights up and colors dance off the mountains making the grain fields shimmer again. The wind has died down to a whisper which holds promise that the pheasants will be making their way further into the fields for their grain. At the very first turn we flush a covey of partridge and follow them deep into the field. The pups are out to see if they can quarter a grain field and pick up the scent. Their instinct pays off; the covey is flushed and they each get a double retrieve since five partridge went down in all different directions.<sup>26</sup> The last bird must be running, so our older Golden is sent into the field to find the bird. He ends up trailing for close to 15 minutes, but we didn't loose one partridge. With the sun slowly setting, we pass by a river bank that sends me down memory lane again. It was two years ago that a rooster I shot set its wings after being hit and went hundreds of yards flying over this high bank into the river far below. My young male Golden burst out of the cover in frantic pursuit.

knew how to handle because we ended up with three blind retrieves and one was a swimmer.<sup>24</sup> The last blind was a really tough one, but our Golden handled the angle well, took straight casts across a road, canal, ditch, fence, another larger ditch where he had to hold his line out of sight and then 150 yards straight out into a cut grain field. What a pleasure it was to work with all of these great retrievers and they ended up with 12 big mallards.<sup>26</sup> (This is a perfect number for our annual neighborhood spaghetti duck dinner)

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Fumbling, I got the whistles in my mouth, but he never even glanced back at me.<sup>27</sup> As a younger pup he always thought he could fly, so my heart was in my stomach not knowing how he would manage that steep bank. After what seemed like an eternity a hand came down on my shoulder and my friend said, "He navigated the bank with the ease of a mountain







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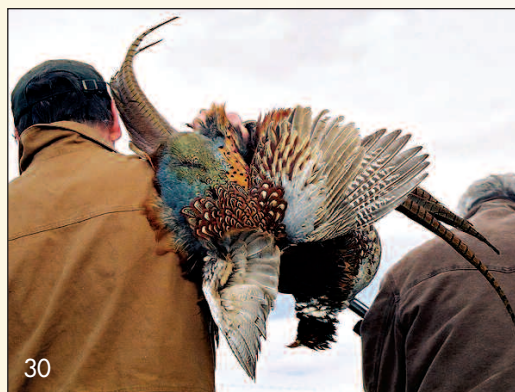
goat, has his bird and is now playing in the river." Finally my lungs filled with air again, but now we just needed to find a spot to bring him back up that bank. We walked a half mile with the Golden cavorting below us in the river before we found a spot low enough for him to navigate back up,<sup>28</sup> and he never once dropped his bird the entire way.

The truck quickly stops bringing my mind right back to today's hunt for some roosters that were just spotted. The gunners easily hit the flushing pheasants and the puppies both get another marked retrieve, this time in the grain field where I can take pictures of them play-

fully running with their roosters.<sup>29</sup> We end the day with two more marked retrieves in the grain fields for the older dogs and that makes a total of 14 roosters. We have reached our licensed limit for pheasants on opening day. We drive back to the hotel where we will have a picnic and tailgate supper, but first we take care of our hunting buddies. The dogs are fed, brushed, de-burred and checked over thoroughly for scratches or seeds in the paws; then we make sure to flush the eyes with a gentle saline solution to get rid of any seeds or dust. With full bellies they are tucked away on comfortable warm dry bedding for the night to dream of chasing pheasants tomorrow.

Then it is our turn to fill our bellies with savory crock pot chili, hamburgers and three different types of salad. Once cleaned up we all sit down to relax, pour glasses of red wine or warming cups of cocoa, talk about the ones that got away, tell dog stories and discuss some of their spectacular retrieves. And dream about tomorrow!<sup>30</sup>

*Photo credits: Barb Loree and Kathy Miner*



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Goldens pictured in the hunting photos include:

"Jessie" – Can CH. Bojszasgold Jessie WCX; Can CD JH WCI VCI (waiting at the bridge)

Owner: Barb Loree, (Am-Can CH. Cherren's On The Road Again CD; Can CDX WCI OS ex Bojszasgold Goldpaw Dia Gypsy)

"Chase" – Rio's Take The Money N Run SH TDX WCX; Can MH\*\* TDX WCX VCI

Owner: Barb Loree & Terry Thornton (CH. Amigold On A Wing N A Prayer CD MH\*\*\* WCX OS DDHF VCX ex Goldenloch Ouachita Maiden)

"Lira" – Amigold Sky Hi It's Only Money SH WCX Can MH WCX  
Owner: Terry Thornton (CH. Amigold On A Wing N A Prayer CD MH\*\*\* WCX OS DDHF VCX ex Goldenloch Ouachita Maiden)

"Likah" – Rio's Likah Bird On A Wire WC  
Owner: Barb Loree & Cathie Hay (CH. Amigold On A Wing N A Prayer CD MH\*\*\* WCX OS DDHF VCX ex Amigold Dukes Takem JH WC)

"Edge" – Goldcker 1DrDog's Next Pushover WC  
Owner: Kathy Miner, Lori & Brian Lancaster (Can Dual CH.- AFTCH Firemark's Push Comes To Shove\*\*\* ex Can CH. Goldcker's What's Next Can CD AGN AGIJ CGN VC)

In memory of our first Golden hunting buddy (not pictured)

"Janeiro" – Jenner's Hi'River Queen  
Owner: Dwight Loree (Can CH. Gold-Rush Meryl-T-Valentine CD OS SDHF ex Can CH. Redpepper Free Spirit)