

The dog days of autumn By Tom Dickson

Is it just my imagination, or are there more hunting dogs in Montana these days? Just last week I saw a springer, a Brittany, two Labs, a pudelpointer, a small Munsterlander, and about a half-dozen wire-haired pointing griffons, which seem to be the breed of choice in Helena these days.

It makes sense. Bird dogs enhance waterfowl and upland bird hunting enjoyment and success, and they (usually) make great pets. Good with kids. Trainable. Loyal.

Hunting dogs weren't nearly so popular here a half-century ago. When my friend and previous *Montana Outdoors* editor Dave Books moved to Montana in the early 1970s, relatively few duck hunters owned trained retrievers, and getting a pointing dog for sharptails, gray (Hungarian) partridge, and pheasants was practically unheard of.

The exceptions, according to Dave, were duck dogs belonging to a group of retriever advocates who lived in and around Missoula. These hunters and field trialers were inspired by Billy Wunderlich, a Minnesotan whose retrievers had won several national championships in the 1950s and who eventually moved to St. Ignatius.

Hunting dogs, also known as "sporting breeds," fall into two main categories. "Retrievers" tend to be large, with thick, oily coats that withstand cold water. They are bred and trained to bring back shot ducks,

geese, and upland birds. The most popular are Labrador (Labs), golden, and Chesapeake Bay retrievers.

"Pointers" are faster, slimmer dogs with lighter coats. They range out a quarter-mile or more in search of scent then stop dead still and aim their muzzle at the hidden prey. Pointers are taught not to move until the hunter walks up and flushes the bird for a shot. The most common purely pointing breeds are English setters, Brittanies, and English pointers.

The fellow who brought pointers to prominence in Montana was Ben Williams, who lives outside of Livingston. Williams raised Brittanies and focused on hunting gray partridge, a tight-holding import from Europe. "Ben, who moved to Montana from Washington state in 1963, believes he was among the first to run Brittany spaniels here," Dave wrote in a 1988 *Montana Outdoors* article.

If I'm any indication, the desire for a pointing dog often comes from growing too old to chase after a retriever that's busting birds out 100 yards away. Hunting over a pointer is a leisurely affair. You stroll more and stumble less.

Other popular pointers—German wire-hairs and German shorthairs—fall into the "versatile hunting breeds" category of dogs bred to point *and* retrieve with equal relish.

These increasingly popular dogs also include Gordon and Irish setters, Vizslas, Weimaraners, and the aforemen-

tioned pudelpointers, small and large Munsterlanders, and wire-haired pointing griffons (which is what my nine-year-old Mesa is).

The great appeal of upland dogs is that they find birds. That's increasingly important these days, as pheasant, gray partridge, and sharp-tailed grouse numbers continue to decline. Blame that on the loss of more than 2 million acres of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) grasslands over the past decade and the seemingly endless drought that has reduced so much upland bird cover to a dusty moonscape.

The rooster harvest graph on page 20 of this issue shows that pheasant numbers rose in the 1960s during the Soil Bank era, declined when that federal farm program ended, then climbed again with the advent of the federal Conservation Reserve Program. But as CRP grasslands were converted back to crops over the past decade due to rising commodity prices, pheasant numbers have plummeted.

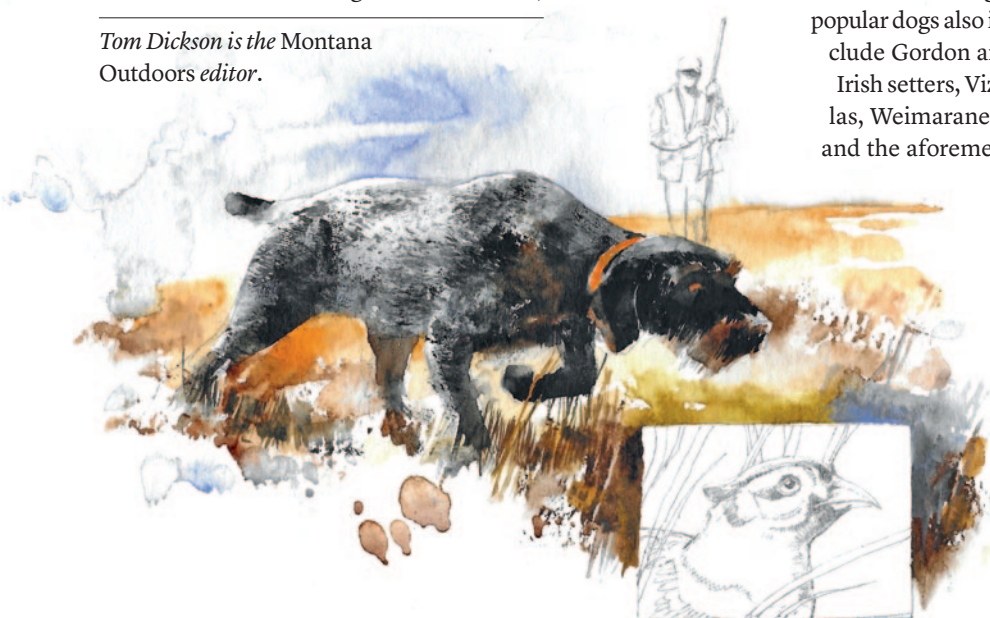
FWP is doing all it can to compensate with upland bird habitat leasing and conservation easement contracts. But making up for all those lost acres is hard when weather and a multibillion-dollar federal farm program conspire against you.

So we upland hunters do everything we can to find those few remaining birds—scout more, drive farther, hunt harder. And buy and train four-legged pheasant-finders.

I'm looking again at that 1953 rooster harvest. Wow: 390,000 birds, back when about half as many people lived in Montana as there are today. Those really were the days. A hunter didn't even need a dog; you just walked around in tall weeds and had your limit by noon.

Then again, maybe that wasn't so great. I'd much prefer even a birdless day of hunting with a dog to a limit of roosters without one. Mesa and I sometimes walk for hours and don't see a single rooster, sharptail, or partridge. We still have a wonderful time. A full game bag is always satisfying, but even when bird numbers are low, nothing beats a day roaming the prairie with an eager dog out ahead, the two of you searching together for whatever there is to find. 🐾

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GERMAN WIREHAired POINTER ILLUSTRATION BY STAN FELLOWS