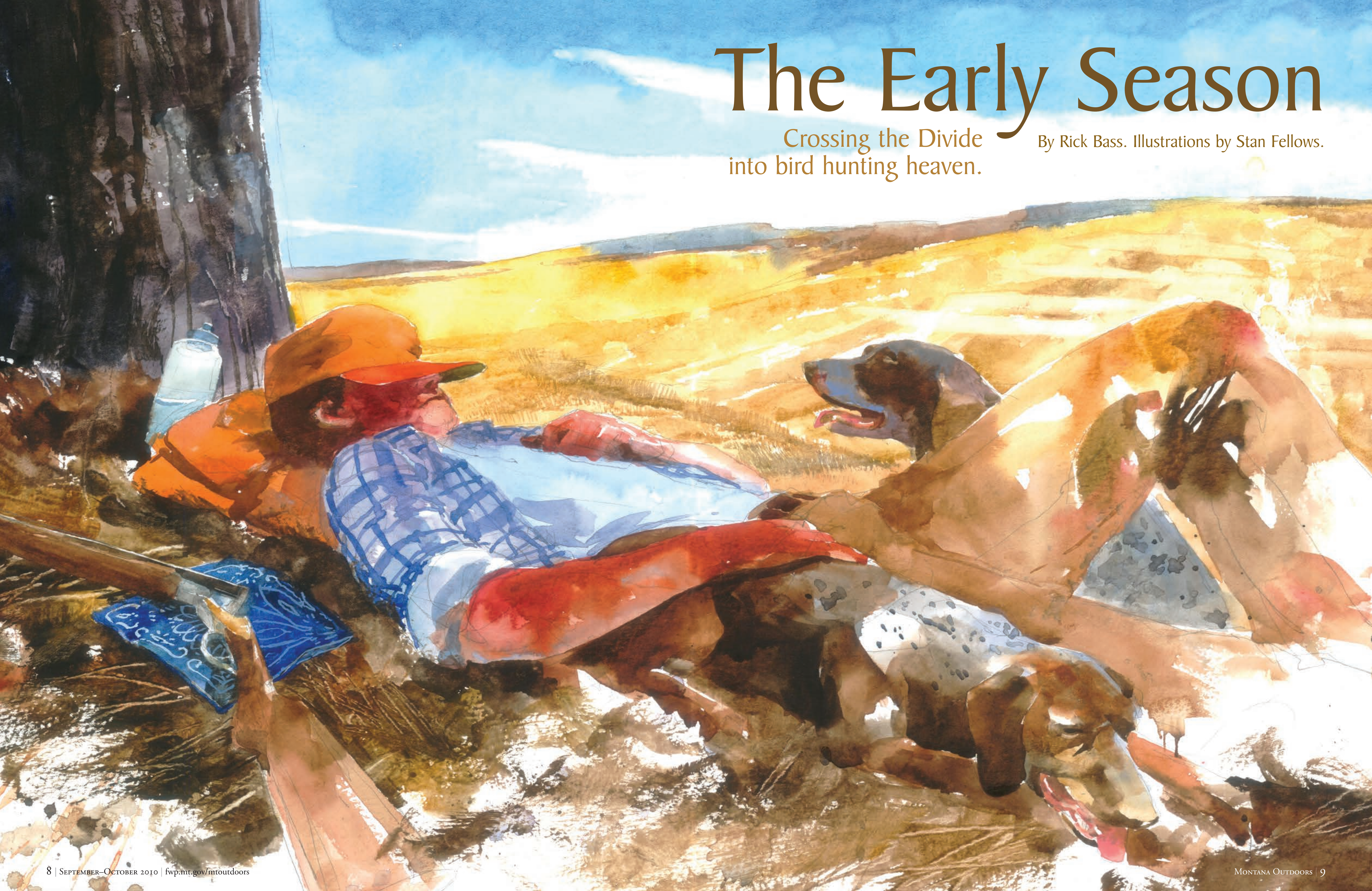

The Early Season

Crossing the Divide into bird hunting heaven.

By Rick Bass. Illustrations by Stan Fellows.

I love the sprawl and stretch of bird season in Montana, which begins so early, still in the grip of summer's delicious—and dangerous—heat, and runs so late into the grip of equally dangerous winter weather, where the dogs you helped keep safe from heat stroke must now be protected from frostbite. Over the years, upland bird hunting has divided, in my mind, into an Early Season and a Late Season, defined essentially by a rough midpoint of November 1. I couldn't begin to say which I love most. Whichever one is coming up next, I suppose. For most of the waiting year, that's the early season.

Even though you have been counting down since, well, perhaps April, September always catches you with its onrush, its heated surprise. Summer's been great, but now it's time to go, whether you're quite ready or not. And so with a strange mix of the old eagerness and yet reluctance, you break free of summer's embrace and head east, out of the smoking mountains, with the fires of summer still licking the ridge tops here and there, and you cross over the Divide and drop down into the flatlands, hoping to intercept the first few migrations of the season—the thinly clad stone-gray bullets of mourning doves, which race south well in advance of any hint of colder weather. And you hope also, in September, to reacquaint yourself with the ever-faithful native upland birds—the exquisitely patterned (and exquisitely delicious) sharp-tailed grouse, which are always waiting for you, as well as the immigrants of only a hundred years ago, the reddish mahogany and faster-flying Hungarian partridge.

The country is always parched, though usually, in those first days of September, the summer ends with a purple thunderstorm, boiling up one evening, violet anvil-shaped clouds filled with gold lightning bolts, so that the next day, rather than having limited water concentrating the doves, the doves have an infinitude of puddles from which to sip. They spread wide and far across the country; but no matter, they are still out there, and for a little while, the land is cooler. (A day or two later, the water will dry up again, and it will be as if the rain never came, as if summer will never end.)

You're not ready, in September, but sometimes you manage to hit the birds anyway—shooting instinctively in front of them, in your unreadiness, as if not yet fully focused on the fact that hunting season is really here again, that the first eight months of the year have fallen away now, and that from here on everything will be fuller, and, for many of us, more deeply and sharply felt, in every way.

Somehow, a few birds accrue. The doves, with their thin feathers, are easy to pluck, and in the heat you have to keep them in a cool place. You wait for them early and late in the day, and shortly after they have come and gone you take your out-of-shape dogs and out-of-shape self a short distance away from the shade into the bright yellow, drought-anguished, windy country, the alkaline gray dust rising from your boots. The dogs gulp water at every opportunity from the offering of your cupped hand, and again, you start to realize—slowly at first, but then in a hurry—that summer is fully behind you now, this year's summer gone forever, even though it may yet be the hottest week of the year. Beware the rattlesnakes.

And when a flock of September sharptails launches in front of you, with their distinctive laugh going away, and you fire and tumble one or sometimes two—the snowy-chested birds seeming even larger than ever, after the small sky-piercing torpedoes of the doves—summer is fully gone.

In its own way, the heat helps you in this adjustment. By late morning it is already too hot to hunt, and you retire to the clattering shade of cottonwoods, many of which still possess deep green leaves, but some of which already show yellowing or even browning leaves. You nap there with your dogs panting locomotive-breathed beside you, plopped down belly-cooled and early-season tender-footed in that shade, and with the shining brilliance beyond.

Your mind is still sluggish, as slow as the doves are fast. And some of the covey-birds that get up, the Huns and sharpies, are still too young to shoot, a little too unformed. It's best to ease into it. Lying in the shade reading, I encounter a passage in a short story by Eudora Welty, in which she compares the color of a faded pink rose to that of the tongue of a panting bird dog.

October, the second half of the first half. The case can be made that this is the best month, in that almost everything comes into season now—pheasants, waterfowl, even a little antelope on the side, as well as deer and elk—a lovely distraction, a crescendo of wild meat approaching later in the month. And furthering the case for October-as-peak is the incredible foliage, particularly along the river bottoms, where the birds are often to be found: crimson chokecherry, yellow cottonwood, clear blue skies, with snow dusting the distant mountains now, good hard frosts each morning, and the geese heading south, calling each night.

It is not uncommon, in October, with an antelope iced down in the big ice chest in the back—in those years when I have been fortunate enough to find one—for me to stop

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in the ever-more-yellow prairie and with the colder, more northerly wind in my face, to park not far from one of the windscreens of thirsty cottonwoods that signifies the presence of an autumn-shallow riffling river and creep toward it, shotgun broken open for safety and loaded with steel shot, dog-on-a-leash (they are, after all, naughty big pointers, better at running powerfully ahead than anything else), and creep into that hedge of whippy cottonwoods—my heart pounding surely beyond its middle-aged limits as I hear a nervous gabbling of the ducks cloistered just on the other side of that screen, so close now that perhaps I could catch one with a lasso, were there room to throw. The dog is panting, coughing, frantic at being so restrained, and at hearing the birds—hopefully, they cannot hear him over the sound of the riffles—and then we step—burst, really—through the last of that screened cover, announcing ourselves. The raft of ducks converts instantly into a tower of ducks, and then a tornado of ducks, ascending; and yet look, a small miracle, one of them is falling from the tornado, pale belly bright and downward-moving against the all-else rise of flashing emerald, earth-color, violet, and black duck-color; and then, from higher up and farther out, another one falls, hitting the water with a splash, and I unsnap the dog and he hits the river like an arrow fired by an archer.

But duck-water is rare in this country—rarer each year, in the continuing and historic drought—and the October days are more often spent following the upland birds. It's the month when pheasant season opens—the showcase-species for my pointers, the rooster pheasants being the only creature in the world, perhaps save for maybe a cheetah, that can flat outrun these dogs; and here in their seventh year of existence, my hard-headed dogs are finally just about ready to make their peace with this fact, and are learning when to run full throttle and when to skulk and sneak and pussyfoot along. It almost doesn't seem fair: Each year there's a new crop of birds—brilliant with the instinct of their long existence in the world but newcomers nonetheless—while the dogs now have seven seasons under their belts, as well as their own blue-chip databank of instinct, and by now have seen, on these same familiar fields, pretty much everything the pheasants can and cannot, and will and will not, do.

As the new snow on the tops of the distant mountains—the Beartooths, the Crazies, the Big Belts, Little Belts, Absarokas, and even the Rockies themselves—summons the blood to a wondering and joyful heart's leap, so too does that amazing moment when, after your dog has tricked the pheasant into giving up the running game and hunkering down to hide, and when, heart-thrashing, you and the dog both stand over that hidden and completely unseen bird, and yet knowing, godlike, of his certain presence, and precise location—the bird's heart thrashing as hard as your own, and with the tension so electric that anything, anything at all, will spring the bird into the sky now, and you stand there, thinking, How can my old heart take any more of this? How?

You take a deep breath. Sometimes you look away for a second, back toward those snowy mountains, and the blue sky, and the rattle of the yellow leaves, trying to remember it, trying to absorb and inhale and consume it, trying to embed it so deeply that it will be with you even after you are gone, and you, in it; and then you look back down to the moment at hand—the dog still quivering, like an arrow that has just been fired into a stump—and almost gingerly, you nudge the tuft of grass with the tip of your toe, and the giant bird appears from the grass like a dream created.

The bird's coal-red eyes fix on yours in the fiercest of glares as he rises, wings flapping furiously, copper-and-black banner of tail unfurling beneath him, the priestly white collar so clearly visible, and the violet-and-crimson-and-emerald head, with the bird peeling away from you now, and further confusing and discombobulating you, the rooster is crowing and cackling, daring you, challenging you and your fading old heart. But you remember to shoot in front of the bird, aiming not at the spectacle, the incredible pageant of color that is the bird, but instead a short ways into the future; and when the wings stop flapping suddenly, and the flight is no more, and the bird is falling, you praise your dog, congratulating his or her excellence, and command the retrieve.

All birds are beautiful, coming back to you in your dog's mouth, but there is no dog-gift, no present quite as beautiful as that of a pheasant, with the bright iridescent head and the long elegant sweep of tail feathers, and the joy and pride and confidence in the dog's eyes, as well as some other unnamable thing, some ancient thing. And again, out here in this open country, you are a part of it, in October.

A thirty-five-dollar-a-night hotel room, a flickering ball game on the television, and falling asleep well before nine, both dogs warming the foot of the bed, snoring quietly. The next day carries you farther into the interior, and into the paradoxical knife edge of greater contentment, and greater loneliness, deeper into the hunting season.

The dogs and I pass an abandoned school, Depression-era. What kind of adults did these children grow into, I wonder, staring around at the now completely uninhabited landscape. The chain halyard on a flagpole 70 years flagless still bangs in the wind—as if the children have only gone out to recess—and I remember with sudden clarity and surprise a childhood friend who died young, whom I have not thought of in perhaps a quarter-century. Ghosts, another of October's prairie migrants.

Later in the day, the dogs and I walk up on two golden eagles sitting in the branches of a cottonwood. The eagles lunge forward into flight, breaking the rotting limbs when they lift off, and in the heat and wind I am dazzled, confused—two birds rising, and two great limbs crashing to the ground. I feel invisible, and though it is again a lonely feeling, it is one that is, I think, good for the soul, and particularly accessible, out here.

Nearer to dusk, I stop near a bench of public land I wish to hunt, a place I've never hunted before—the ground before me appears overgrazed and the creek banks eroded by cattle hooves, but with a nice chokecherry thicket on the hillside—though first I want to listen to one of the baseball playoff games. The Astros, the team of my childhood, have squeaked into the playoffs and are improbably leading the mighty Cardinals. The old man, Roger Clemens, is on the mound, injured and ancient, with a full count against a young slugger. He tries to rocket a fastball past him one more time, as he has done so many tens of thousands of times before; but this time, this one time, it doesn't quite work out, and the Cards advance to the World Series, and to their appointment with destiny and the Boston Red Sox.

Years ago, I would never have sat there in the car, so near to day's end, with hunting still to be done, and listened so comfortably to something as fleeting and irrelevant as a baseball game. I would have been out charging the hills, pounding the hills, hunting hard all the way through the day's end.

But now the ballgame is over, and I still have twenty or so minutes. I take little speckled Point out toward those chokecherries, where he finds for me a single sharptail, which I hit with a long second shot. He retrieves it, and as we walk back toward the truck, a long skein of tundra swans passes overhead, flying low and slow, descending to open water. He lifts his head, starts to run after them, then just stops and watches, until they are too small, too far away to see, disappearing into the dusk and the velvet folds of the foothills, as if into a cave for the night.