No matter how ready you are for the whir of those stubby wings, you’re never really ready. Just as I began to suspect the birds had moved, they exploded from the grass, chirping like a dozen rusty gates in a prairie windstorm. I regained my composure in time to sort one bird out of the blur and stick with it until the sight picture looked right. The bird folded just as the covey veered out of sight around the corner of the stable.

Chief fetched the handsome gray-brown Hun, and I slipped it in my game vest. I hadn’t been able to see where the covey had gone, but I guessed the birds would head for the old corral about 300 yards away. Coveys in past years had flown to this collection of rusty barbed wire, boards, tall grass, and weeds. I’d try to find them one more time, then, win or lose, I’d leave them for another day.

After you get to know a covey well enough, you begin to take a personal interest in it. As a hunter, you want to shoot your share of birds, but you also want to leave the covey strong enough to withstand the depredations of foxes, hawks, and winter storms. You know that one evening next spring you’ll drive out to the old homestead to watch and listen, worrying a little until you hear the raspy love song of a mating pair. But now it’s hunting season, and you’re...
s much as Hungarian partridge seem to belong on the prairies of western North America, they’re not native to the region. Their natural home is Europe, the British Isles, the Scandinavian countries, and parts of Asia, where they are better known as gray partridge. We call them Hungarians because that is where most of our imported birds came from. Huns were released in various locations in the eastern United States throughout the 1800s, but the climate and terrain weren’t suitable and those early introductions didn’t take. It wasn’t until the early 1900s, when Huns were stocked in the wheat belt region of eastern Washington and Oregon, southern Alberta, Montana, and North Dakota, that things began to pop. Maybe “explode” is a better word, since the Hun quickly demonstrated the reproductive capacity that has made it a mainstay of American upland shoot- ing for hundreds of years.

The most spectacular of the western plantings took place in south- ern Alberta in 1908 and 1909. With the support of a wealthy Michigan bird hunter named William Mershon, a group of Calgary sportsmen multiplied and spread across southern Alberta and into Saskatchewan and Montana. Aldo Leopold later calculated their rate of spread at 28 miles per year. So successful was the expansion of Huns from the Calgary planting that by the mid-1930s outdoor author Ray Holland could report flushing more than 100 separate coveys in a day’s outing on the Saskatchewan prairie. Not bad, considering the province of Saskatchewan had not stocked a single bird! Those spectacular popu- lations of eastern Washington and Oregon, southern Alberta, Montana, and North Dakota, that things began to pop. Maybe “explode” is a better word, since the Hun quickly demonstrated the reproductive capacity that has made it a mainstay of American upland shoot- ing for hundreds of years.

Today, southern Alberta and Saskatchewan remain the heart of the Hun range, but Montana, North Dakota, Idaho, and eastern Washington and Oregon also support good numbers. Other states with huntable populations include Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Like other upland game birds, Huns are subject to cycles of abundance and scarcity. Although Huns get along better with modern agricul- ture than most game birds do, they are too hard by horizon-to-hori- zon plowing. Even in today’s best Hun country, Ray Holland’s 100-covey days are a thing of the past.

Pigeon hunters, future tof- ing pairs, their offspring, and other adults unsuccessful at mating, contain 10 to 20 birds. Hun pop- ulations have a 75 percent turnover each year, so a three- or four-year- old bird is an old-timer. Coveys occupy the same favored sites year after year; in good years there may be several coveys in a given locale, while in lean years the population may shrink to a single covey.

Although Huns do best in wheat country where waste grain is avail- able in fall and winter, they don’t need it to survive. One fall while hunting an uncultivated area along the Snake River in Idaho, two friends and I ran across an incredibly high density of Huns. We had been chukar hunting, climbing the rocky slopes above the river for most of the day without much luck. Toward late afternoon we dropped down to the grassy benches just above the river and stumbled into the best Hun shooting any of us had seen.

In agricultural areas, hunters will do best by checking the edges of stubble fields in morning and late afternoon when the birds are feeding. During the middle of the day, abandoned homesteads, brushy draws between grain fields, and weed patches are likely to produce birds. Huns favor light cover over thick undergrowth, and I’ve even flushed them from plowed fields where they were as invisible squatting in the dark soil as if they had been hedgerown down in knee-high bunchgrass.

One time my friend Mike Garnett and I watched a covey sail into a small patch of weeds and grass surrounded by alternating strips of wheat stubble and fallow field. Licking our chops, we quickly covered the 200 yards to the little island of cover. We combed every inch of it—twice. As we stood there scratching our heads, Mike asked, “Where the heck did you go?” Just then the birds flushed from the bare field in front of us, leaving us so rattled we didn’t fire a shot.

For a long time the Hun in America didn’t get the credit it deserves for being a first-rate game bird. For one thing, it has always lived in the shadow of its fellow immigrant, the ring-necked pheasant. Then, too, there is the nature of the places where most Huns live: big, open country, thinly populated with humans. Local folks may sing the Hun’s praises, but perhaps there aren’t enough voices out there to be heard above the yipping of lonely coyotes.

Dave Booko of Helena was a longtime editor of Montana Outdoors. This essay is from his soon-to-be-released book Wingbeats and Heartbeats: Essays on Game Birds, Gun Dogs, and Days Afield. ©2014 by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

above the yipping of lonely coyotes.

Good quail or ruffed grouse shots who visit the prairie often wonder how they can miss Huns, where there are few trees to ob- struct their view. But Huns often flush far- ther out than the birds they’re accustomed to, and snap-shooting techniques don’t work. With Huns the first shot is often about 25 yards, and the second may be 35 or 40. Once newcomers adjust to the longer distances and stronger follow-through, required, they score better. This is not to say that Huns are tougher targets than quail or vice versa—just different. Wingshooters become programmed for the birds they hunt most often, and it takes time to adjust to something new.

The best Hun shooters are the smooth ones who don’t rush things and who swing through their birds strongly but deliberately. Hurrying to put pellets in the air is a common mistake, and when I hear someone rattle off a string of shots I don’t expect many casualties. With Huns there is rarely time for more than two careful shots, and a shot at a 14-ounce bird at 35 yards has to be right on target. I hear sport shop talk about triples on Huns, but honest triples are about as common as neck shots on running antelope.

One thing that compli- cates Hun shooting is the everlasting prairie wind. When it kicks up, strange things happen to the flight patterns of birds. Duck hunters understand. If you once flushed a Hun into the teeth of a strong wind, and as I watched it over my gun barrel it began to look bigger instead of smaller. Suddenly it tired of bucking the wind, turned, and came directly toward me, buzzing over my head like a feathered bullet. I didn’t get that one.

Local folks may sing the Hun’s praises, but perhaps there aren’t enough voices out there to be heard above the yipping of lonely coyotes.

Huns can be humbling. I remember a blustery day when my partners, hunting some distance away, flushed a covey in my direction. I enjoy pass shooting and relished the chance to show off in front of an audience. But these Huns were different—they came at me like shrapnel out of a gunmetal sky, scattered, flying high, and riding the galloping wind. I missed with both barrels, and went on to miss several easier shots after that. So much for overconfidence.

Despite their small size, Huns are tough birds. Many times I’ve watched one fly 100 yards or more before succumbing to a pellet or two in the body cavity. For that reason, I try to watch the covey as long as I can see it, even if I think I’ve missed. A bird that drops straight down out of such a covey often will be dead, while a bird that appears to be flying normally but lands short of the others may be wounded.

It goes without saying that dogs are a great help in hunting Huns. There is a lot of country to swallow up the birds, and a wide-ranging pointing dog will find more Huns than a close-working flusher. But any good dog is helpful, especially when it comes to finding and retrieving downed birds.

In recent years more hunters have discovered the pleasures of hunting Huns on the northern plains with pointing dogs. Conditions are best in early fall, but I’ve had memorable hunts later in the year, too. One crisp November day my Brittany, Ollie, made a wide cast into the wheat stubble adjacent to the Conservation Reserve Pro- gram field we had been hunting. When he topped a rise and disap- peared, I didn’t follow; it was late afternoon and I was bone tired. Besides, I figured he’d be back in a minute or two. After five minutes, I trudged to the top of the hill to investigate.

As we headed for the truck, the sinking sun peeked from beneath a gray cloud bank, casting an orange glow across the landscape. In the distance, the needy calls of the scattered Huns drifted to us on the breeze—the familiar sound of a covey gathering for the night.