

Journal

Publication of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association's Big Game Records Program

PHEASANTS WITH A MUZZLELOADER

By Tom Caceci

I am fortunate to live in southwestern Virginia, where opportunities to hunt and fish are mere minutes from my door. I do a lot of seasonal deer hunting, mostly with a .54 caliber muzzleloader, and pretty much every year I tag one or two deer for the freezer.

What I miss, though, is the chance to hunt upland birds. We have Canada geese on the New River, but I'm of an age when sitting in a wet, freezing blind to shoot geese is no longer appealing. There are some opportunities to take doves and wild turkeys, but there isn't much of anything in the way of upland wing shooting. There are reasons for this. The terrain here is mostly matured hardwood forest that offers only limited cover of the type quail and grouse need. Agricultural land is farmed wire-to-wire, and we have many foxes, feral cats, and coyotes that prey on ground-nest-

ing birds. The ruffed grouse and bobwhite quail have all but vanished and the magnificent ring-necked pheasant of the Midwest needs cornfields with shrubby edges, neither of which are locally common so we don't have those birds either. If I want to do some wing shooting for upland birds, I hire myself out to a put-and-take hunting preserve about two hours from here. The proprietor makes quail, pheasant, and chukar available on a put-and-take basis at reasonable prices; plus he guides, cleans the birds, and has exceptionally well-trained dogs. What's not to like?

While shooting preserve pheasants isn't exactly the same as chasing wild ones through South Dakota corn stubble, it's a reasonably good facsimile, is fairly challenging, and a heck of a lot of fun. Plus, one of the best aspects of shooting on preserves (as distinct from hunting wild birds) is that



First kill: The first rooster pheasant brought down with the Pedersoli.



Pheasants on the truck: Two magnificent birds ready for plucking.

you know you're going to get shots. This makes it possible to experiment with different guns, loads, chokes, etc.

In the past I'd bring along a 12- or 20-gauge side-by-side (my eyes being set side by side, I don't see the point in an over/under!), but last season I decided it was time for something different. Since I hunt deer almost exclusively with black powder rifles, in the fullness of time I'd bought a Pedersoli 12-gauge muzzleloading shotgun to use for squirrels. But the time had come to try it on flying game birds. So one day I went with some friends to the preserve to see what I could do on pheasants with a muzzleloader. I had specifically chosen pheasants, reasoning that they're big enough that even I—one of the most mediocre wing shots that could be imagined—could hit them.

Muzzleloading shotguns, to a greater degree than is true of rifles, perform as well in the field as more modern guns, except for the slow reloading, the miscellaneous bits of stuff you have to account for in the process, and of course, the smoke. While today's "modern" shot shells are rated in "feet per second," sometimes you still see the older "dram equivalent" nomenclature on boxes. I wanted a load suited to the size of the birds I was after. Pheasants are pretty big, so heavier charges are advisable: I settled on a 3-dram-equivalent load using 70 grains (by weight, not volume) of FFg granulation Hodgdon 777 powder under 1-1/4 ounce of #6s. It's very hard to get "real" black powder here, so I save that for my flintlock and percussion rifles. But 777 is everywhere. It's more energetic, but less dense than "real" black powder, so I load it by weight, not volume. "Real" black

powder nominally weighs 27.3 grains per dram volume. Thanks to the difference in density, my 3-DE charge was equal to 82 grains of "real" black powder. With 1-1/4 ounce of shot it's an authoritative load!

All of my charges were all pre-measured. Black powder loads in the "Good Old Days" were measured volumetrically, but I prefer the consistency and repeatability of weighed charges. The wad column consisted of a hard card wad on top of the powder charge, followed by a 1/2" fiber cushion wad heavily lubed with Thompson/Center's "Bore Butter." On top of the cushion wad went the shot, and next a hard, thin, card over-shot wad.

I had bought 4 birds: two each hens and roosters. I am pleased to say that I knocked both those roosters tail-over-teakettle very handily. But the dense smoke cloud emerging from the gun actually obscured my view for a second or two after the shot! Both hens were hit, but they flew off. The dogs found one later in the woods, the other one seems to have high-tailed it for the hills and if a hawk or a coyote didn't get her she may be in South Dakota by now. Three out of four isn't a bad start!

I had so much fun with the 12 gauge gun that I found and bought another Pedersoli double in 20 gauge. I'll use it on quail and squirrels come fall. I'm also experimenting with slugs out of the 12-gauge, finding that if I keep the ranges reasonable I can hit "minute of deer" with them, so perhaps I'll give that a try as an alternative to my .54. A man could feed himself with one of these things! MB