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Three hundred yards to my left, a white, motionless speck in a brown expanse of sparse, knee-high prairie grass, my 7-month old English setter, Pauchek's Purdey Patches, was locked on point, the scent of a sharptail grouse racing through flared nostrils. To my right, out 200 yards, another setter pup, 8-month old Havelock's Watch Mego, silhouetted against a South Dakota sky, tail at twelve o'clock, had pinned down another. I wasn't dreaming, I was hunting what has to be one of the finest places on the planet for sharptail grouse right now, the 17,000 acre Schauer Ranch, near the village of Faith, in northwest South Dakota.

As a Lake Ontario charter captain, I live trout and salmon fishing from early April through mid September, when I store my charter boat for the winter. After that, it's all about bird hunting. So it was this year, when my son Jeff and I awoke early on the morning of September 18, in sharptail country on opening day of the 2010 South Dakota season.

After twenty-six hours of driving from northern New York State, Jeff and I had arrived in the small village of Faith, in northwest South Dakota with my three English setters, food, and hunting gear. Our destination, the Schauer Ranch, where Doug Schauer and his family have created a wildlife mecca through a combination of wildlife habitat management, hi-tech agricultural practices, and controlled use and harvest. Nowhere in South Dakota this season did I see as many whitetails, mule deer, antelope, pheasants, and easily accessible sharptail grouse.

The first morning on the ranch was an eye-opener for Jeff, with lots of pheasants near the sorghum food plots, but no sharptails in the grassy cover we hunted. After lunch we headed for the half mile long shelter belt, extending north from ranch headquarters, bisecting a wheat stubble field and 500 acres of lightly grazed pasture. Doug noted, "The grouse seem to like the trees on a sunny afternoon." Was he ever right! Sharptail after sharptail flushed ahead of us, many within range. We were only a 20 minute walk from our mobile bunkhouse in an area we could actually drive to with my Subaru.

One of the bonuses of hunting and bunking at the Schauer ranch is its location one hour from the 242 sq. mile Grand River National Grasslands. In three years hunting this vast, rolling grassland, I have seen other bird hunters there only twice. It has always held plenty of birds, but September 2010 was exceptional. If you hunt Grand River, though, be prepared to walk, and walk, and walk, because sharptails there are widely scattered and have a huge range

The first day at Grand River this year, we flushed 39 grouse in three hours of hunting. Five days later, hunting the same area alone, I flushed only two birds. Four miles further, that same day, I found the mother lode.

Topping just one more of a seemingly endless sea of parched, rolling, grassy hills I found myself overlooking what I now call "Sharptail Valley", a long basin dense with buffalo berry and prairie rose, their fruits choice sharptail chow. Hunting just a portion of the valley with my young setter Patches, flocks of up to 20-25 sharptails rocketed out of the kneehigh buffalo berry along with singles, doubles, and triples, in total, 60-70 grouse. Later that day on the Schauer Ranch, in the last hour before a Big Sky sunset along the edge of a wheat stubble field, I counted 41 sharptail flushes with coveys of up to 12 birds, numbers I have never seen there before.

Locating sharptails using a well conditioned, wide ranging pointing dog is simple, if you remember these prairie grouse like a high vantage point, prefer the leeward side of the top of a rise when it's windy, like sparse cover, and need a food source, especially buffalo berry and rose hips in nonagricultural areas and wheat in farm land.

Sharptails don't usually hold as close as pheasants, and are a bit larger than a ruffed grouse, so don't under gun yourself. Often enough, you're taking longer shots where clean kills are more certain with a 12 ga., a tight choke, and an express load of #6 shot.

Because sharptails hold best for pointing dogs early in the season before they group up in larger coveys, plan your hunt in September. Order the public access maps you'll need for national grasslands at www.fs.fed.us/maps/ or "The South Dakota Hunting Atlas" www.sdqfp.info/Publications/Atlas/Index.htm.

Having your dogs in top condition is crucial, for their sake. Carry plenty of water, first for the dog, then for you. Another canine consideration in arid areas like Grand River, foot protection with dog boots because of ground cactus and sand spurs. Cautiously pace your dogs in the heat.

I'm convinced that wide ranging pointing dogs were placed on this earth to hunt the open, rolling grasslands of the west, and I intend to hunt mine there next season. If sharptail grouse are as plentiful as they are this season, it will be quite a show.

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