

Tim Eisele

OUTDOORS

Elusive birds draw friends, dogs together



Eisele

"If God could have made a better bird than the ruffed grouse, he would of. But, he didn't," my hunting partner, Don L. Johnson, said while chasing the elusive bird last week in Langlade County.

Johnson knows a thing or two about ruffed grouse. He has hunted grouse throughout North America for 50 of his 71 years, and three years ago shared some of his knowledge of the bird in his book, "Grouse & Woodcock — A Gunner's Guide."

Last week in the Langlade County woodlands, not far from the picturesque Wolf River, I joined Johnson, who is from Menomonie, Ned Vespa of Oconomowoc and Dick Matthisen of Hartland. We were headquartered at Matthisen's cottage north of Lily, a place which Matthisen has named "The Grouse House."

Although it is grouse and woodcock hunting that draws these three hunters together each fall, it is their love of hunting dogs that runs deep through all three.

Johnson hunts with an 11-year-old German short-hair named Brighton, while Vespa owns two English setters, Molly and Gracie, and Matthisen owns a 7-year-old German shorthair named Calypso.

Johnson and I set out for county forest land and were fortunate to hit a flight of woodcock, which provided good shooting. But, even better was the work of Brighton.

We hunted thick habitat, beautiful stands of young aspen, hazel and occasional pine trees. Brighton worked ahead of us, but never ranged very far, each time coming back toward Johnson as if to check in. With nose to the ground, Brighton worked back and forth in front of us and soon went on point. We'd walk in and Brighton's nose was right on the money, as a bird flushed.

Woodcock provided enjoyable shooting, and Brighton found and retrieved the two birds we each shot that morning. Grouse provided a different matter, as some flushed in habitat too dense to shoot, and others we just plain missed. It was one of those days that just makes you shake your head and look forward to tomorrow.

But the hunt was special for me because of the opportunity to learn from Johnson about grouse and outdoor writing. Johnson retired after working 23 years as an outdoor writer for the Milwaukee Sentinel, and 12 years before that as outdoor writer for the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram. He is respected by his peers as one of the leading outdoor writers ever in Wisconsin, and that's saying something in a state with writers like Gordon MacQuarrie, Mel Ellis and Clay Schoenfeld.

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He covered some of the first ruffed grouse research in Wisconsin in the early 1950s. That sparked his interest, and he corresponded with researchers in the eastern United States to learn more about the whys and wherefores of the grouse cycle.

"There were always more questions than answers," he said. "My inclination is that the cycle has more to do with weather than anything else. There are a lot of other factors, but if you have two or three relatively dry warm springs, you'll have an upsurge in the grouse population. If you have two or three cold, wet springs, you'll certainly have a drastic drop in the population."

In Langlade County, we hunted classic grouse cover with a mixture of aspen, conifers and hardwoods.

"I can't think of any of my favorite covers that don't have a coniferous component to it," Johnson said. "The grouse is such an adaptable bird that hunters and researchers tend to get provincial in their views. They look at this bird in a particular setting. The grouse adapts and responds differently in different habitats."

One thing Johnson does after he shoots a grouse is open up its crop to learn what it was feeding on, and then hunt that vegetation. In southwestern Wisconsin, he said grouse tend to eat more acorns and ironwood catkins.

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Outdoor writer and veteran hunter Don Johnson takes a break with his German short-hair, Brighton, after a successful hunt for woodcock last week in Langlade County.

Ruffed grouse are his favorite

Johnson's book aimed at grouse, woodcock hunters

By Tim Eisele

Special to The Capital Times

Don Johnson has hunted grouse for 50 years, including sharp-tailed, Franklin, blue and spruce grouse as well as ptarmigan and prairie chickens.

But without a doubt, he likes ruffed grouse best.

"Many of the other species are not as sophisticated, perhaps because of where they live in remote regions," he said. "But, ruffed grouse in the Midwest and New England states are pretty dog-gone wary, and there is a subtle beauty to a grouse. Ruffed grouse hunting is my love."

Johnson shares many of the nuggets he has learned about grouse and woodcock in his book, "Grouse & Woodcock — A Gunner's Guide."

Johnson wanted to make this book a celebration of grouse and woodcock hunting from the Great Lakes states. The 224-page, soft-cover book includes tips for the upland gunter and insights into the natural biology of grouse and woodcock.

In his chapter "Drumbeats and Heartbeats," Johnson describes the first day of each new year that he hears old ruff on a drumming log: "It is a sound more felt than heard, and it reaches deep into the being of those who love the bird and the places it abides."

He goes on to cover all of the basics from guns, chokes, loads and tips from top shooters, to dogs, beepers and the acquaintances that dogs make in the form of porcupines and skunks. The book discusses maps, hunting gear and great recipes.

It also spends several chapters on habitats and lifestyles of ruffed grouse and the wonderful woodcock. Readers learn that a hen ruffed grouse lays 10 to 12 buffy eggs in the nest, with chicks hatching in about 23 days. Their high-protein diet of insects is needed for the first month, after which

more grouse than hunters are seeing further south. Johnson had been averaging about six flushes an hour further north, but fewer than that in Langlade County.

Johnson prefers to hunt grouse over woodcock, primarily because he doesn't feel right about shooting a limit of woodcock when their populations are down. He practices voluntary restraint on woodcock, and usually will only shoot one or two a day rather than a limit of three.

He also enjoys eating grouse and woodcock.

His favorite way to cook woodcock is cubing the woodcock breast and "drumstick," and frying them in grease from smoked bacon. He often uses them for appetizers for other wild game and, at a concluding lunch after our hunt, I found the recipe very tasty.

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The diet of adult grouse should be of interest to hunters, and Johnson does a masterful job of discussing the varied menu of grouse, including photos to help hunters identify the vegetation. He encourages hunters to make a list of favored grouse foods and use the list when hunting.

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Johnson writes that in Wisconsin, the peak of the fall flight is usually during the second and third weeks in October, though it is a leisurely thing for these birds that are "almost lighter than air."

There's also a list of suggested readings by some of the most prominent grouse researchers, from Gardiner Bump to Gordon Gullion, and Wisconsin's John Kubisiak and Wallace Grange.

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"Really good management for woodland species isn't always aesthetically pleasing and takes a large chunk of land. The key is mixed age rotation of aspen plus a variety of other species."

Johnson is concerned, however, that county boards will someday view the county forests as a cash cow and start selling the public land.

"These county forests are a big component of the public land up here, and I don't even like to think about what will happen 20 years from now with the way land prices are going," Johnson said.

But on this day of hunting, the October weather was mild, making it a beautiful day to push the thick brush in a shirt and hunting vest.

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"An experienced hunter will look at an area and think that it looks birdy, and more often than not be right. When you can do that, you're starting to think like a grouse," Johnson said.

Hunters who hunt farther north this fall are seeing

including sharp-tailed, Franklin, blue and spruce grouse as well as ptarmigan and prairie chickens.

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"We're really fortunate in Wisconsin to have public lands available in prime grouse country," he said. "National, state and county forests, plus the land can

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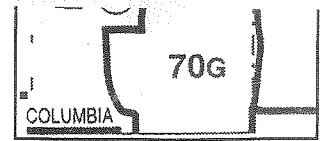
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But on this day of hunting, the October weather was mild, making it a beautiful day to push the thick brush in a shirt and hunting vest.

"Today is the type of day that I'd like to place in a jar and put on the lid, and let it out during the winter," Johnson said.

It, indeed, was one of those days.

hunt is to "listen to the agricultural community that deals with a high population of deer year-round."



The DNR came up with deer management Unit 67A to assist farmers in controlling the amount of crop damaged caused by deer. The unit consists of portions of Marquette, Green Lake, Columbia, Dodge and Waushara counties, and free antlerless permits are still available.

The unit has a high goal of 35 deer per square mile of deer habitat, and Mytton said whenever the over-winter goal exceeds 25 deer per square mile, the area is asking for trouble.

"With goals over 25, if there isn't a significant kill during one season, the herd gets ahead of us," Mytton said.

A major problem in the unit is that much of the land is in private ownership, and hunters will have to receive permission to hunt before entering private land.

Mytton said what contributes to the significant agricultural damage in the unit is non-agricultural landowners purchase land to hunt on and don't allow the same hunting pressure that agricultural landowners do.

"It's a bedroom/kitchen result," Mytton said. "The deer stay on the private forested areas during the day and come out onto the farms to eat at night, then go back to the sanctuaries where they are protected during hunting hours. The small private landowners shoot their one buck and post the land for the rest of the season, and we don't get the hunting pressure that we need."

Mytton stresses this is a private land situation, and the problem is on private land.

Hunters who expect to hunt on public lands will undoubtedly find heavy hunting pressure and may be frustrated when they don't find as many deer.

The key is for hunters to figure out how to meet landowners rather than just show up at their door the day before the season and want to hunt. It's the challenge of making new friends.

The over-winter goals for the unit are expected to be changed during the review of deer population goals next year.

There will be no buck hunting in Unit 67A during the early antlerless-only firearm season. All hunters, other than waterfowl hunters, including bow hunters must wear blaze orange during the special antlerless-only season.

The closed areas on Grand River Marsh Wildlife