



Photos by Jim Lee/Wausau Daily Herald

Dennis Carey and his dog Max walk a Marathon County forest trail after a successful snowshoe and ruffed grouse foray into the adjacent popple and alder thicket.

A hunting dog for all seasons

Versatile pointer has nose for fur as well as feathers

By Jim Lee
Wausau Daily Herald

RINGLE — Twenty minutes into the hunt, a grouse flushed.

A bit skittish, it rattled out of a thicket of bat-handle size popple at the edge of a tag alder-lined creek bottom 40 yards ahead of the dog ... and just out of our gun range.

"Be on the lockout," Dennis Carey cautioned.

"There may be other grouse in there. They sometimes group together at this time of year."

Moments later Carey fired his 20-gauge.

Seconds after that I pulled the trigger on my 16-gauge.

Then we both shot simultaneously.

By then, Max, Carey's 6-year-old pointer, was scrambling to keep up.

When all the retrieving was done, he had brought in two snowshoe hares and a ruffed grouse to a beaming Carey.

"That's what I like about having a versatile dog," he exclaimed.

"I don't mind it at all when my dog runs rabbits. In fact, I like it. That's what Max is born to do — hunt game."

Max is a Drahthaar, a dog more commonly known as a German wire-haired pointer.

With a mutton-chop mustache and the lean, muscular body of a football strong safety, Max does not prance through the forest. He rips through it.

"I don't have any worry about someone stealing my dog," Carey says with a laugh. "He looks like a mutt."

White-coated hares

Actually, Max looks more like the town tough, the unappreciated social outsider who is not about to back down from any challenge ... or from anybody's idea of what a grouse dog should look and act like.

"I've killed more than 100 birds over Max this year, including

ducks, geese, woodcock, pheasants and grouse ... plus a half-dozen rabbits," Carey said.

That is the beauty and purpose of having a versatile dog ... a dog that will hunt whatever game is on that day's agenda.

Carey is an avid member of the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association, a group that firmly believes the true test of a dog is its ability to hunt fur or feather.

Carey doesn't go hunting specifically for cottontails or snowshoe hare but if Max gives him an opportunity to bag a bunny, he usually takes it.

On this early December day, we had a distinct advantage over the snowshoes that Max flushed. Being hares, snowshoes change from a brown summer coat to a white coat as winter approaches. The change comes naturally regardless whether there is snow on the ground or not.

Mother Nature failed to provide snow for our hunt and the white bouncing hares stood out in stark contrast to the drab brown underbrush. Sitting still in cover, they remained well hidden but once they began running the movement was easy to spot.

"A lot of bird dog owners don't want their dogs chasing after rabbits," Carey said. "They think it will ruin their dog for hunting grouse or pheasants."

"They're afraid that if they encourage it, their dog will want to run rabbits when it should be searching for birds."

"I don't worry about that because I can control my dog. If he's running a rabbit and I don't want him to, I just call him off."

"If you can't control your dog, then you might have a reason to worry."

Allowing Max to hunt rabbits doesn't affect his ability or willingness to hunt for grouse, pheasants or ducks, either.

Duck hunting

Most pointing dogs are not used for duck hunting but Max, who has a bristly coat, seems to relish a plunge in the water almost as much as a Labrador retriever.

"I firmly believe in having a dog



Retrieving and pointing are two major assets of Max, the Drahthaar owned by Dennis Carey. Max, shown here with a ruffed grouse, retrieves waterfowl and a variety of upland game, including rabbits and hares.

retrieve," Carey said. "That's part of its job."

"Whether it's a duck, woodcock or a snowshoe, I want the dog to find the game and bring it to me. That's very important to me and Max does that."

Carey said he bought Max as a pup and trained him after joining the North Central Wisconsin Chapter of NAVHDA, one of four chapters in the state. It has members from throughout central Wisconsin, from Wisconsin Rapids to Rhinelander, Chippewa Falls to Green Bay.

Club members meet informally to work their dogs and exchange training tips the fourth Sunday of each month at the Department of Natural Resources' designated dog training area along Highway O at Mead Wildlife Area in southern Marathon County.

Thirty-three breeds, nearly all of European origin, are recognized by NAVHDA as being versatile dogs, including the Brittany spaniel, Labrador retriever, golden retriever, German shorthaired pointer, English setter, Munsterlander, Weimeraner, griffon and

drahthaar.

"Working with other NAVHDA members was a big help in learning how to train my dog," said Carey, who has begun to train dogs for a few other people.

During the course of our hunting day, we hiked through three different areas of public land in Marathon County, covering about six miles of tag alder thickets, popple slashings, beaver pond edges, tiny creek bottoms and upland brush.

Grouse were not numerous but we managed to flush about a dozen birds in seven hours afield.

When the session ended, we had seven grouse and four hare in the bag, a pretty fair day behind any hound or pointing dog.

All of our success came courtesy of Max, who pointed grouse and hassled hare with equal aplomb.

Some of his best work was done locating and holding grouse for us as the hunt drew to a close.

Carey was pleased.

"And they say you'll spoil a pointing dog by letting him run rabbits," he said in mock disbelief.