

Savoring a season on the brink

Grouse hunting prospects bright but looking dim

By Jim Lee
Wausau Daily Herald

ANTIGO — Sometimes it's not the quantity of ruffed grouse flushes that highlight a day in the woods.

It's the quality. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" exclaimed an excited Dennis Carey as Max, his German shorthair pointer, could barely be seen through the thicket 60 yards away proudly carrying a mouthful of feathers.

"I can't believe I got that bird. I mean ... wow! I can't believe it."

By this time, the tender-jawed all-purpose dog had delivered the downed bird to his master and resumed his nose-testing tour of the brush-strewn forest.

The grouse Carey placed in his game bag had gotten up, as all grouse seem to do, in an unlikely place at an inopportune time with the distinct purpose of putting the shooter in an untenable position.

There are few easy shots in grouse hunting. Opportunity is measured in split-seconds.

A nimrod waiting for the perfect, clear shot at a flushing target will usually be found at the end of the day ... still waiting.

But Carey, as all veteran grouse hunters seem to do, ducked, shifted and swerved in time to point and pull the trigger on his 20-gauge shotgun just as the bird slipped from sight.

At the sound of the shot, Max, who had pointed the bird and was following its flight path, powered forward in pursuit.

Carey could have called

the dog back but didn't because ... well, all grouse hunters are natural optimists.

Occasionally, that hopeful outlook is rewarded.

Seconds later, Carey's face lit up in a smile that he carried the rest of the day.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much of it left.

The bird was the third grouse in our bag but just the fifth grouse we had seen in five hours of hunting.

Grouse populations are cyclical and the current cycle is at the top and teetering. In some sections of the state, grouse numbers remain high but in others a downward trend is already obvious.

Carey and I were hunting an area of Langlade County that produced a fair number of grouse and woodcock flushes in 1999. However, despite an abundance of good cover, we put up just three grouse and no woodcock during the first four hours of the day.

As luck would have it, and there's no other way to explain it, we put two of those grouse in the bag.

Shifting our attention closer to a creek bottom after lunch, Carey came up with his miracle shot and the day took on a brighter hue.

In the next two hours, we flushed six woodcock, collecting four, and five grouse, adding two to our bag.

The sight of just 10 grouse in nearly eight hours afield may signal a downturn in the area we hunted or it may just be a case of the birds being in other areas of the woods, which is certainly possible.

"I don't think there are as many grouse around as a year ago," Carey, who has hunted Marathon and Langlade counties, said.

"I haven't found anywhere



Photos by Jim Lee/Wausau Daily Herald

Max takes a mud bath. When warm temperatures invade October, as they did for much of the fall, hunting dogs need lots of water and time to cool down. Max, the German wirehaired pointer owned by Dennis Carey of Wausau, took regular advantage of mud puddles and any stray pools of water found in the forest.



Dennis Carey accepts a woodcock from his dog, Max. The bird was pointed and retrieved by the versatile hunting dog in heavy cover.

near the woodcock I did last year. I keep records and they show the flight birds usually come through here around Oct. 10-20 and they haven't appeared."

Woodcock are an impor-

tant adjunct to grouse hunting in Wisconsin.

In years when the grouse cycle is down, grouse hunters with dogs depend heavily on woodcock as a dependable alternate target

to get through the lean grouse times, a period that may last five to seven years or more.

However, woodcock — a migratory bird that breeds in Wisconsin, Michigan,

Minnesota and Canada in this region — are steadily declining nationwide and the daily bag limit has been reduced from five to three.

No one knows exactly why woodcock numbers are fading. Breeding habitat loss has been blamed as has habitat depletion in the birds' wintering grounds.

With both ruffed grouse and woodcock cycles headed for negative territory, the future — after this season — could be a bleak one for Northwoods upland game hunters.

The next grouse peak could be seven to 10 years off, if it occurs at all.

Grouse hunters with memories will recall the last time grouse numbers approached current levels was 20 years ago. Severe winters and poor spring breeding weather left the scheduled grouse peak — which arrived in the late 1980s — noticeably lacking.

Avid grouse dog owners like Carey are savoring every opportunity this autumn hunting season provides.