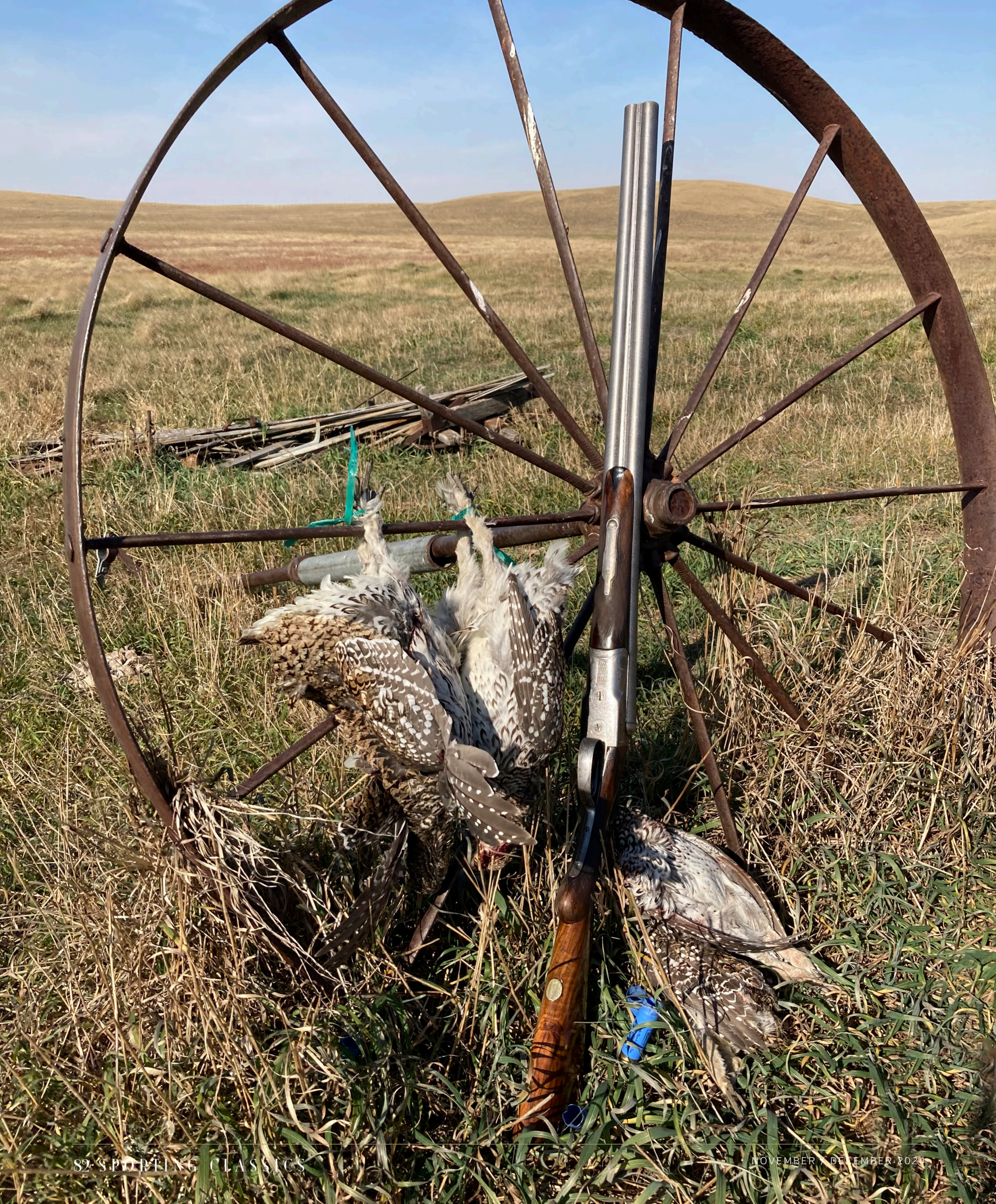


WINGSHOOTING IN NORTHEAST MONTANA

WITH A PERFECT PAIR OF COLTS

BY STEPHEN WESBROOK

I was invited by a long-time Montana resident to join him for a sharp-tailed grouse hunt in late September near the city of Malta. We had gotten to know each other through our joint appreciation of late 19th century German game guns and Boykin spaniels. He is an avid hunter and conservationist in the tradition of President Theodore Roosevelt. He has hunted this area for more than 25 years and has been a generous benefactor to wildlife and habitat conservation. He told me that his personal goal for the hunt was to teach me what I needed to know to be successful if I wanted to return on my own.

I ACCEPTED IMMEDIATELY. Only later did I go to the map to find out where this was and begin to read about the area. We would be hunting in the state's Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Region 6 (northeast Montana). The region is vast and sparsely populated. It extends from the Missouri River Valley in the south to the Montana-Saskatchewan border in the north; and from North Dakota in the east to foothills of the Rockies in the west. Most of Region 6 is generally considered to be part of Montana's Missouri River Valley country.

I had a week free between the end of this hunt and the beginning of pheasant season in North Dakota, where I had an invitation to join in a hunt during the opening weekend and began looking for other wingshooting opportunities. Fortunately, that week happened to be the start of the migratory bird season.

Most of FWP Region 6 is arid, but there are two reliable sources of water sufficient to support agriculture and waterfowl habitat. One is the Milk River. From its headwaters in Glacier National Park, it meanders into Canada before turning south to empty into the Missouri River near Fort Peck. Lewis and Clark first recorded it in May 1805 during their Voyage of Discovery: "...the water of this river possesses a peculiar whiteness, being about the colour of a cup of tea with the admixture of a tablespoonfull of milk. From the colour of its water we called it Milk River."

The Milk River passes through Malta, the region's third largest city, with a population of 1,850, and the seat of Phillips County. The 15,000-acre Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge is located seven miles east of the city. The headquarters of the Bowdoin Wetland Management District, which is located in Malta, oversees seven National Waterfowl Production Areas, four satellite wildlife refuges and approximately 150 grassland and/or wetland easements.

Glasgow, which is located 70 miles downstream of Malta, was the first city founded in the Milk River Valley. With 3,200 residents, it is the second largest city in northeast Montana and the largest city within a 110-mile radius. It is the county seat of Valley County and hosts the headquarters of FWP Region 6.

The Missouri River is, of course, the other reliable source of water supporting agriculture and wildlife habitat. I had never hunted on the Missouri River and was eager to do so. I decided to return to the region for a four-day waterfowl hunt in late November and early December. For both waterfowl hunts, I engaged the services of Milk River Outfitters in Hinsdale, 40 miles east of Malta.

I hunt exclusively with classic doubles, both hammer and hammerless. In selecting the shotguns I would take to Montana, I was faced with a similar situation as were many versatile hunters in the past decades of the 19th century. Because of the technology of the period, there was no all-purpose gun.

Most classic side-by-side shotguns were designed for one of two major markets. One was sportsmen shooting live-pigeon trap. Guns designed for trap tended to be heavier and have higher quality barrels in order to handle more powerful loads, have tighter chokes and excel at longer ranges. These traits also made them good duck guns. The other market was upland game hunters. The game guns tended to be lighter, have superior handling characteristics, more open chokes and excel at closer ranges.

Pairs of shotguns are generally described as either matched pairs or composed pairs. The concept of a matched pair, in which the two shotguns are identical in every way, developed to support the requirements of the driven shoots favored by 19th century British aristocracy.

The concept of a composed pair, in which the two guns differ in ways that complement each other, developed to support the requirements of versatile hunters shooting different game under

varying conditions. The two shotguns ideally share characteristics that favor consistent shooting results, such as balance, length-of-pull, drop, type of grip and sometimes the same manufacturer.

I chose to take to Montana a composed pair of 12-gauge Damascus-barreled Colt shotguns, a Model 1878 hammer gun and a Model 1883 hammerless gun. They shoot better for me than any other two guns, complement each other in a variety of hunting environments, and are among the highest quality shotguns built in America in the 19th century.

For historical context, the Model 1878 was introduced two years after the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment was defeated in south-central Montana Territory by Sioux and northern Cheyenne warriors on the Little Big Horn. It was in the hands of wealthy sportsmen, primarily on the East Coast, ten years before President Grover Cleveland signed the bill opening 18,500,000 acres of former Indian territory in northeast Montana for settlement, including the fertile Milk River valley. The Model 1883 was introduced six years before Montana became a state.

All three of my hunts were in natural environments that I had not experienced before. My principal goal for these hunts was to learn from my host and the professionals who guided me. These are the lessons I learned that may be helpful to other hunters new to the region.

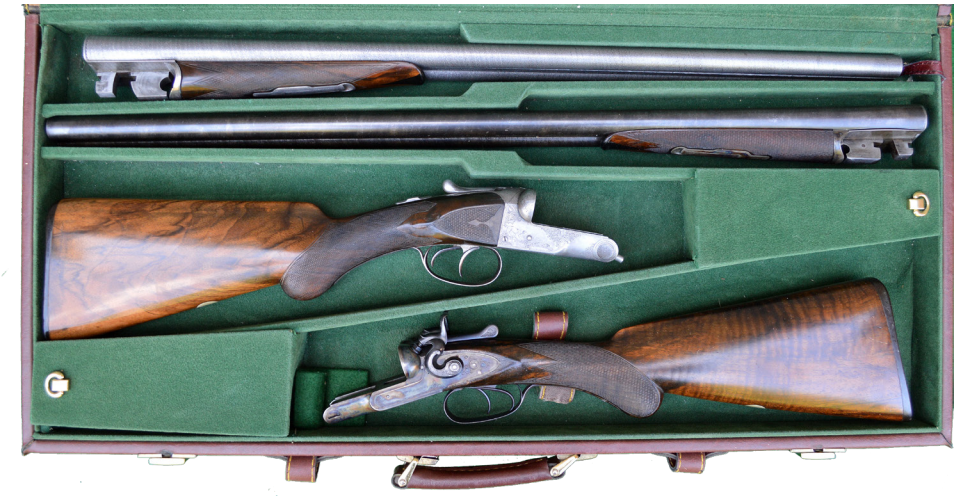
THE GUNS

The sojourn of Colt's Patent Fire

Arms Manufacturing Company into the high-end shotgun market was brief. The company sold approximately 23,000 Model 1878 shotguns between 1878 to 1891 and 7,400 Model 1883 shotguns between 1883 and 1895. When introduced, the 1878 was the highest priced gun in the Colt line. Its price was later eclipsed by the Model 1883. Neither were financial successes, primarily due to their high cost and the competition from British shotguns favored by America's ultra-wealthy.

The Colt 1888 catalog states of the Model 1878: "These guns are made of the best materials, with the best workmanship.... The barrels are made and imported especially for this Company, and will be furnished of all qualities.... The stocks are of English or Circassian Walnut, of any desired style.... Any grade of ornamentation of the metal work will be furnished.... In beauty of finish, quality of materials and accuracy of workmanship, these guns are unexcelled." Of the Model 1883, it states: "This gun...is made of the best materials and workmanship, and is in all aspects equal to the best English sporting guns. Every effort has been made in its construction to ensure close and powerful shooting, and the targets are the best possible in pattern and penetration."

These are not overblown descriptions. But to be fair, while Colt workers built the guns in Hartford, Connecticut, the parts were manufactured in Europe. In 1878 and 1883, no company in America possessed this kind of technology. One of the reasons the guns could be compared to English guns is that the locks and other mechanical parts were English.

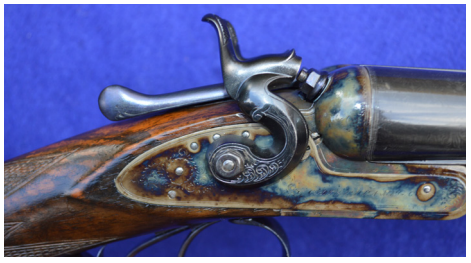


There was nothing unseemly about this; it was a common practice at the time.

The Model 1878 has no American patent marks. The Model 1883 has "Patented" engraved prominently on the bottom metal. However, *The Book of Colt Firearms* by Sutherland and Wilson, which lists the patents, explains that "Most of these applied to the lockframe or the ejectors." The barrels and wood were also imported and then finished in Hartford.

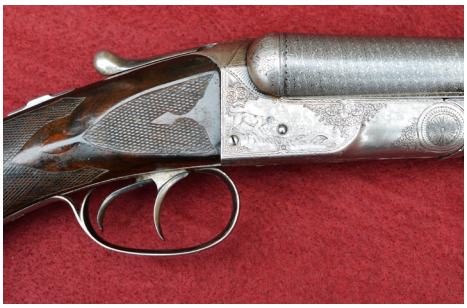
Colt Model 1878

The restored Model 1878 12-gauge that I shoot is a Grade 8. This was the highest production-line grade. This shotgun was built in 1881 and originally cost $75. A special order 1878 with moderately enhanced engraving could have cost more than $100. The sidelocks are finely machined and rebounding. When introduced, the Model 1878 was the only gun built in America



that used the Purdy double under-bolt mechanism to keep the receiver and barrels locked securely. The engraving is classic English scroll, although the coverage is limited. The Circassian walnut stock has good contrast, color and a rare fiddle-back pattern. The drop is 2 inches at the comb and 3 inches at the heel. The length-of-pull is 14 inches. The barrels are fine Damascus.

This is both the author's favorite game gun and one of his first, best rescues. Thus, selecting a shotgun to represent Doublegun Preservation, LLC on its logo was an easy decision.

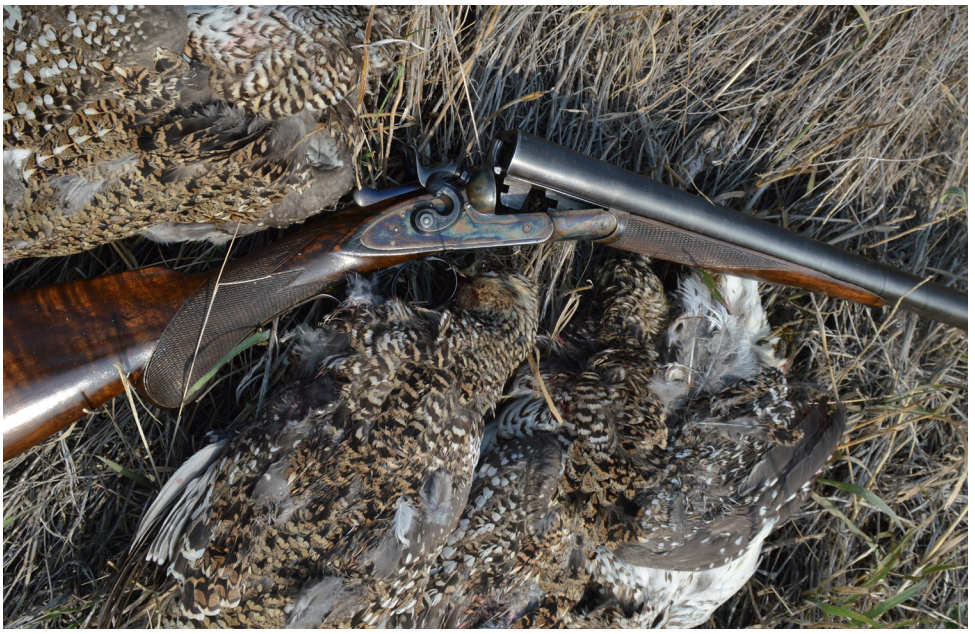


Colt Model 1883

The 12-gauge Model 1883 in this pair was built in 1891. Colt offered only two production-line grades, 1 and 2. This is a Grade 2, which originally cost $125 without any upgrades. Special order engraving could have added anywhere from $20 to $75 to the cost of a Model 1883.

The boxlock on the Model 1883 is very sophisticated. The mechanical parts were serial numbered to the gun and hand fitted. The receiver, bottom metal and forend metal is case hardened; however, none of the color remains. The standard Grade 2 game scene engraving has good detail and was cut deeply, but the coverage left a lot of space for special-order upgrades. The dark gain of the Circassian walnut stock, which is reconditioned, flows beautifully through the wrist and shows good contrast against a multi-tonal background. The stock has the same type of grip, length-of-pull and the same drop at comb and heel as its Model 1878 partner, which contributes greatly to the effectiveness of the composed pair.

One of most impressive aspects of this particular gun are the extra-fine (four rod) Damascus-steel barrels, both because of the quality of their construction and their condition after 130 years. At the time, the barrels represented approximately half the cost of a shotgun. The high quality of these barrels allowed for more robust loads to be fired safely. I prefer this gun for longer shots at wildfowl, or upland game later in the season when they are flushing wild. Its unique contribution to the pair is when hunting geese from a layout blind, since it can be unsafe to use a hammergun in that setting.



On the last day, the Model 1878 dropped four birds with four shells.

THE HUNTS

Hunting the Northern Prairie for Sharp-Tailed Grouse

My host anticipated that we would start the hunt on the Bowdoin NWR. However, during a reconnaissance a few weeks before the hunt was to begin, he called me to say that he had never seen the wildlife refuge in such poor condition. Lake Bowdoin had lost a large portion of its surface area, thus exposing the high concentration of salts in the lakebed. Also, major parts of the surrounding wetlands and grasslands, which normally supported many species of wildlife, including pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse, were dry or had been grazed off.

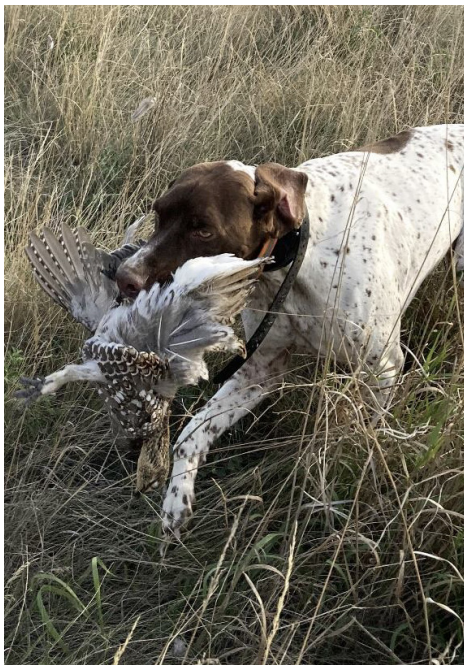
The area received only 6 inches of precipitation that year, roughly half of the normal average. In the extreme heat, evaporation also claimed more water than normal. The average daily high temperature for the three days in late September we hunted was 84 degrees; the average normal temperature was 67 degrees.

In advance of the hunt, my host had located north of Malta several pockets of protected semi-restored short-grass prairie, the natural eco-system of northeastern Montana. This is where we, or to be more accurate, the dogs, found the most birds.

Sharp-tailed grouse, which are native to the prairie, seemed to be weathering the drought better than Hungarian partridge and ringneck pheasants, which are not native. Sharp-tails are strong flyers and can travel long distances to find food, which includes insects and a large variety of prairie plants, and the drought was accompanied by swarms of grasshoppers, one of their primary foods and a major source of moisture.

We started hunting each day around 9 a.m. and ended well before noon. My host shot his limit on all three days; I was one bird short. We speculated that because most of the land was barren, the drought may have concentrated the birds in the limited remaining suitable habitat. Both Colts shot equally well. Although on the last day, the Model 1878 had a clean run, dropping four birds with four shells.

One of the most important things I gained from this hunt was understanding the structure and rules governing the immense amount of land open to the public for hunting. Montana state-managed lands include the Block Management System (BMA), Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) and State Trust Lands, among others. Federal



Short-grass prairie is the natural ecosystem of the region; not surprisingly, this is where the birds were.

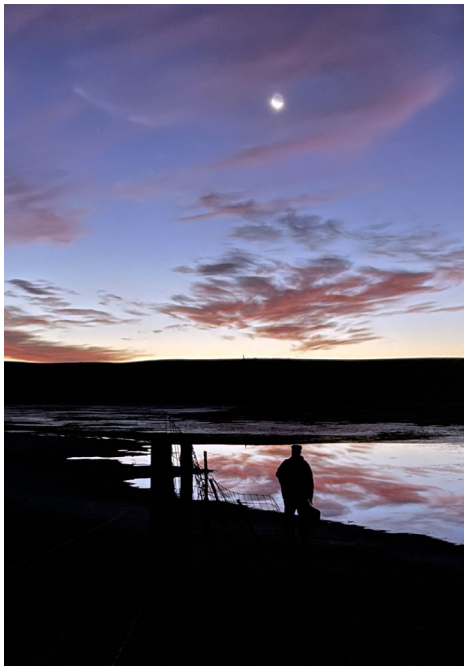
managed lands include National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) and Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, National Forests and others. To locate specific parcels of land, especially in areas where county roads have few signs and the terrain tends to be uniform, the "onX Offroad" mobile phone app is very helpful.

Another major lesson learned was the significance of micro-habitats. When first viewing what seems like a sea of grass, one can be at a loss as to where to begin. But some swales are more likely to hold birds than others depending on the time of day, weather and wind direction. Old roosts provide good clues about the type and density of the plants the grouse favor.

Shelterbelts, or windbreaks, can be very productive, even on otherwise barren land. On the second day of the hunt, a large flock of grouse busted wild on the side of a grassy hill. About half flew downhill to good cover 150 yards away. The others flew to a nearby hill that was barren except for a small shelterbelt. We followed the second group and shot two grouse. Most of the rest ran out the other end of the shelterbelt and across a gravel road into thin cover. My host said that we would come back on our way to the car near the end of the day's hunt. I asked why the grouse would return to the shelterbelt so quickly. His answer was that when the sun is high and the sky clear, "the grouse are more afraid of the hawks than they are of us." He was right, and two more sharp-tails went into the game pouch. This level of understanding of the land and the wildlife is an art acquired over many years.

The resilience of the semi-restored short-grass prairie to the harsh environmental conditions would be for me an enduring take-away. I observed a dramatic difference between the condition of the land that had been partially restored and the nearby sections that had not. Both were experiencing the hottest weather ever recorded and some of the driest months in a hundred years. Whereas the partially restored prairie was stressed, the adjacent land was almost barren.

I was puzzled by the causes of the latter, which appeared to be extensive once we left the Milk River Valley and the reach of its water. I initially considered livestock grazing during the prolonged drought as a likely culprit. But after the trip, I would learn more about the complexity of the problem and of other variables involved besides recent use of the land. These include, among many others, whether a particular piece of prairie was ever plowed, which non-native species had been introduced with settlement, the biology of the soil and the presence or absence of plant diversity.



The subtle beauty of the prairie still bathed in moonlight as dawn approached.

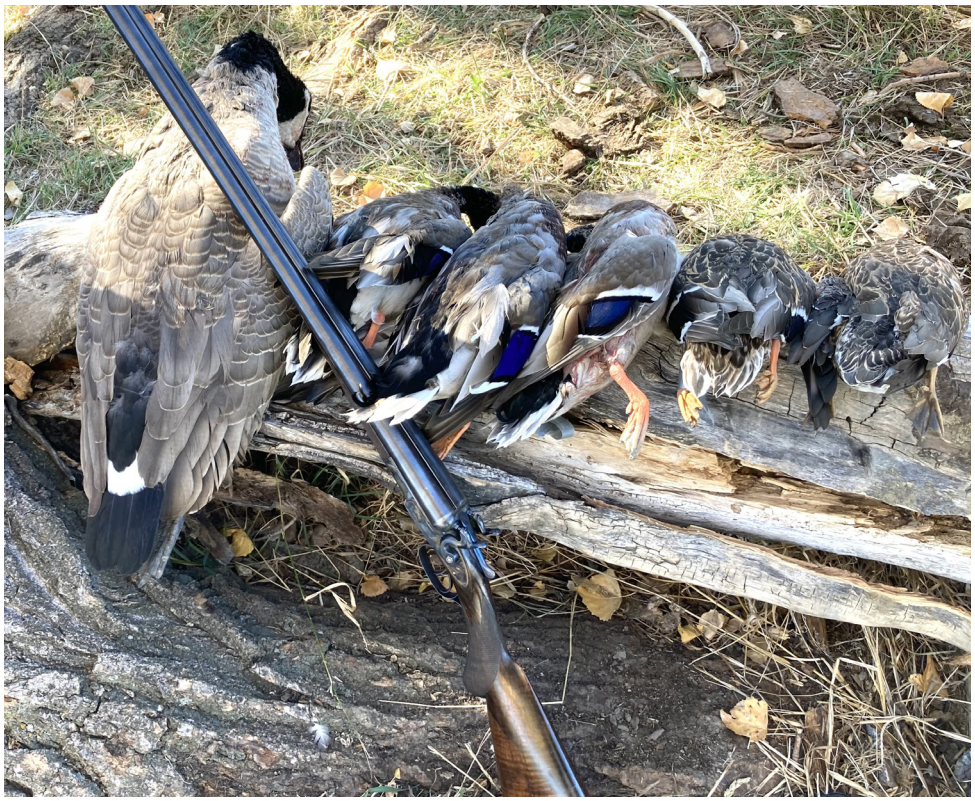
The websites of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, the American Prairie Reserve, the American Prairie Foundation and the Bureau of Land Management are good sources to better to understand the resiliency of the native prairie to extreme weather events, such as prolonged drought. They also describe current projects to protect, restore and reconnect prairie ecosystems and a future vision of 3 million acres of connected native prairie.

Hunting the Northern Prairie for Ducks

The prairie pothole area in the U.S. runs from central Minnesota to roughly the western boundary of FWP Region 6. The water in potholes accumulates rapidly in the spring. Where the soil is strongly saline or alkaline, which is common in this area, the water becomes brackish. Most of the water loss is through evaporation in the summer. As a result of the combination of the drought and record high temperatures, virtually all of the potholes I saw were either completely dry or the water so low as to be extremely saline.

However, a farm leased by Milk River Outfitters had a pond about 80-yards long and 50-yards wide created by damming a creek. Small trees, shrubs or deadfall provided some cover on about half of the shoreline. However, the wind direction that morning limited the placement of the blind to a part of the shore that was largely barren. And there were 10 yards of baked mud between the edge of bank and the water. The guide placed a one-man portable blind constructed from local vegetation at the water's edge and called the ducks from the rear. I had experienced similar tactics when hunting small ponds on the Argentine Pampas.

The guide told me to expect the first ducks to arrive at around sunrise, coming from the grain fields to our rear. Nevertheless, I was surprised when the first two mallards arrived. Rather than circle before committing to land, they



The Model 1878 was the right gun with ducks arriving rapidly and most shots at less than 35 yards.

went directly into the decoys. Three small flocks followed at about five- to ten-minute intervals. The shooting was over in less than 40 minutes.

After the sun was up, the only activity was the sound of geese leaving the fields. Most were high, but a pair flew low along the edge of pond and presented a passing shot. The 2 3/4-inch RST low-pressure shells (6,000 psi) with No. 4 bismuth shot carried sufficient energy to drop one at 45 yards.

The ducks behaved similarly on an irrigation canal we hunted another day, except the water level was eight to ten feet below the top of the bank, and the ducks came in on an even steeper approach. The hunt was over in about 30 minutes. The last duck to arrive, a single pintail, filled my limit.

However, it was a day with fewest shooting opportunities that turned out the be the most memorable. One reason was what I learned about waterfowl behavior in this ecosystem. We were hunting a small reservoir and, shortly before sunrise, three large flocks of mallards arrived at five-minute intervals and landed just out of range. They sat on the reservoir for about 25 minutes and then simultaneously picked-up and flew away.

I had not seen ducks behave that way before, so I asked the guide what was going on. He explained that after feeding in the fields the ducks had landed on the pond only to get a drink of sweet (fresh) water before moving to the safety of Lake Bowdoin and other larger bodies of water that were becoming increasingly more brackish.

This may not be uncommon in northeastern Montana, where much of the soil has a high saline content from once having been covered by an inland sea. But it was new to me. If given the choice, I would not have traded the learning experience for a daily limit. Even so, after sunrise I had passing-shot opportunities at three singles, dropping two.

The other reason that day was special was the opportunity to see the prairie bathed in moonlight in the hour before dawn.

Hunting the Missouri River for Waterfowl

I returned the last week of November to hunt waterfowl on the Missouri River near Fort Peck. I was joined by a friend and neighbor, who I had introduced to waterfowl hunting on the Chesapeake a number of years before.

Some things were similar to the October prairie pothole hunt. There had been no significant rainfall since, and the Missouri River was low. The ducks and geese were largely local, as the migration from Saskatchewan still had not started. The temperatures were at record highs. The average daily high for the four days we hunted was 53 degrees, 20 degrees above normal.

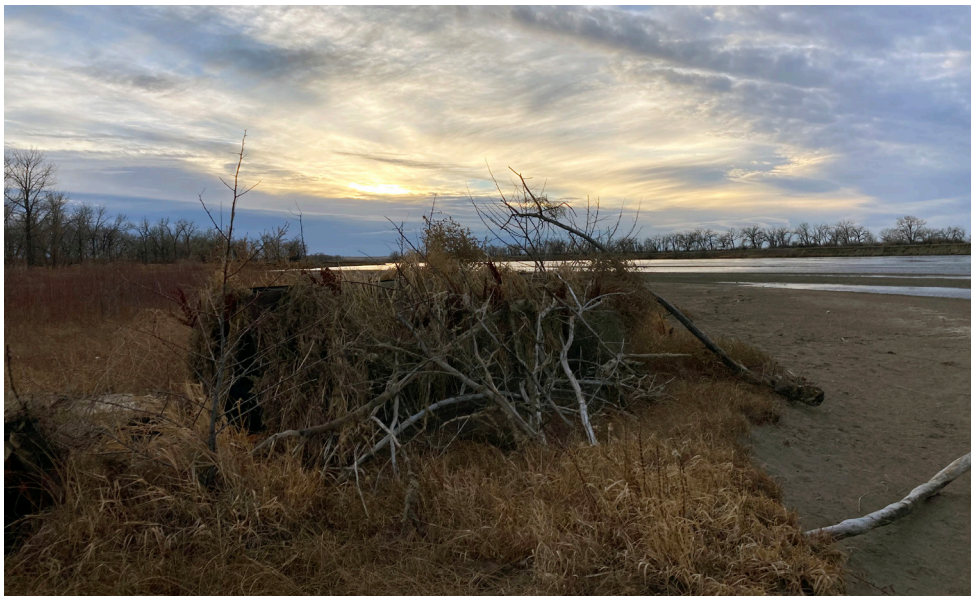
We had many opportunities at ducks, and typically took close to our daily limits. On the prairie the shooting had been intense, the shots close and the hunts over quickly. On the river, the opportunities were intermittent, the shots longer and we were in the blind for most of the day.

The river had a variety of game birds. On one day, my harvest included two species of ducks, a Canada goose and a ringneck pheasant. The latter flew from an adjacent field at dusk toward a cluster of bushes near the water, presumably to get a drink.

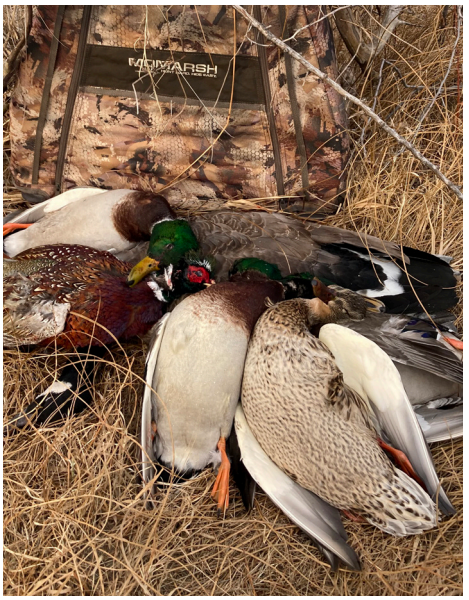
The Model 1883 did the heavy lifting during the three days we hunted ducks on the river and the one morning we hunted geese from layout blinds in a nearby wheat field. From the layout blinds, it dropped four geese at ranges of 25 to 45 yards.

With respect to the important decision of which shots to take and which to pass, I learned that on the river it was harder to judge the range to a duck. My tendency was to underestimate. Another lesson learned was to add a new consideration—the likelihood that the bird might drop into the current, or at its edge, and be swept downstream. If so, retrieving it would add significantly to the energy expended by the dog.

And the dogs already had the toughest job on the hunt. Because of the current, water temperature and steep riverbanks that restrict a dog's exit, the challenges and risks to a dog on the Missouri where we hunted were as great as on



The setting of a successful duck hunt on the Missouri River downstream from the Fort Peck Dam.



The river offered up a variety of game birds.

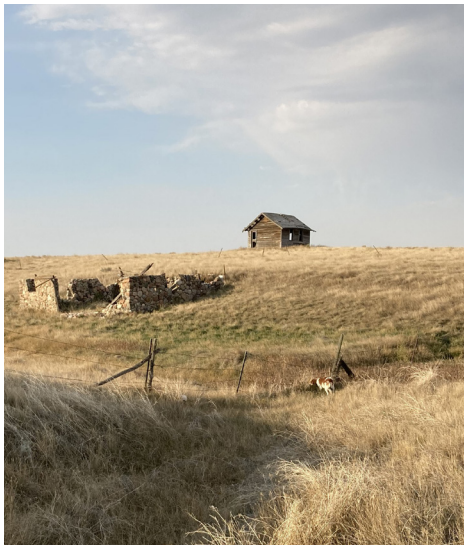
big water, such as Chesapeake Bay, where tidal currents and high winds can quickly make things dangerous.

REFLECTIONS

NORTHEASTERN MONTANA PROVIDED an exceptional hunting experience. There were good shooting opportunities on all three hunts. And it was a joy to watch the teamwork between the dogs and hunters, renewing an ancient bond that goes back at least 15,000 years. Hunting with classic side-by-sides also allows one to step back in time for a few hours and connect with the past. This feeling was especially strong using shotguns that were older than the farms, ranches and towns on the land I hunted. But the most meaningful experiences and enduring memories came, as they frequently do for me, from simply walking the land and feeling the sense of being part of nature.

While hunting north of Hinsdale on private grassland protected by hunting leases, I saw in the distance what appeared to be an authentic "little house on the prairie." Its isolated location attracted my interest in learning more, so, I walked toward it.

As I approached, I first came upon pieces of horse-drawn farm machinery that had been left in the grass decades ago. Then the remains of an abandoned homestead emerged. Down from the



Montana's famous "Big Sky" accentuated the impression of isolation and loneliness surrounding what appeared in the distance to be an authentic "little house on the prairie."

house, these settlers had carved into the hillside space to build a well-sheltered fieldstone barn. Farther downhill, there was an intermittent creek and a 5x15-yard depression that appears to have been dug to hold water for the livestock. A well near the house would have provided the family's water. I understand there was once a small town nearby, of which no trace remains today.

These homesteaders probably arrived during the unusually wet decade before 1916 and left as a result of the severe drought of 1919-1922, which resulted in the failure of half of all Montana farms. In some areas of northern Montana, 90 percent of farm mortgages were foreclosed before the liquidation ended in the 1930s.

Joseph Kinsey Howard, in his classic 1943 history *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome*, describes this period as a tragic "experiment with natural resources and human lives." Viewed at the personal level, it is hard to imagine the amount of work the family put into building this homestead in the hope of a better life. Or the agony of having to abandon it.

Howard's history and others document that northeastern Montana has always been a harsh land, both for wildlife and people. But the record heat and extreme weather is pushing the challenges to everything living on the northern prairie into new and uncharted territory. I could not but reflect on the possibility that I was looking back into the future.

After my last hunt, I set a personal goal of returning to northeastern Montana. There is so much to explore, including the 1.1 million-acre Charles W. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and the 130-mile Fort Peck Lake. Feeling uncomfortable at having personally added to the already high level of stress on the wildlife, I also made a commitment not to hunt the land again until it had the chance to heal. ■