

The Novice, the Pup, and the Badlands

An upland hunter and her young dog embark on their first wild bird hunt for sharptails and roosters in the hills of NoDak.

BY KALI PARMLEY

This is a dog story. But it's not about the farthest retrieve or a last hunt together. It's about two rookies—hunter and her dog—learning and growing together.



Our journey would take my young lab and me far from home, out of our comfort zone, to chase sharptail grouse and pheasant in the Badlands of North Dakota. But not just the Badlands—our first journey together would be more meaningful than that because we would be hunting the public land found around Elkhorn Ranch, the homestead of the father of conservation, Theodore Roosevelt.

Embarking on our first wild bird hunt together, we would be tested, tried, defeated, and victorious. Most importantly, we would grow together as hunters.

THE BEGINNING My time with Lincoln, my 110-pound Labrador, began a little over two years ago. I chose him for companionship, but soon realized that my passion for hunting meshed with Lincoln's natural ability. His will and, most importantly, desire to hunt were clear after one casual day afield.

"We're taking the dogs to a game



farm to get practice in," Brian Koch, a friend and an avid upland bird hunter, said over the phone in March 2015. "Grab your gun and bring Lincoln."

I laughed. "I don't think you understand. He has no hunting experience...only obedience training."

"It doesn't matter," Brian replied.

"This is a training day. Lincoln is coming."

I met Brian by chance at the SHOT Show in Jan. 2015. He was a fellow Ohioan and a lover of upland hunting, and we became close friends. Brian is founder of ultimateupland.com, a website devoted to all things upland hunting. I had a lot to learn about

chasing wild birds, and he would become my mentor.

Lincoln did go with me to the game farm that day, and I left the field filled with pride in my pup. I watched my young Lab study the actions of the experienced hunting dogs, bury his nose in the tall grass while hot on the scent of birds, flush, and bring directly to hand four ring-necks—all with no prior field experience.

Knowing that our mutual passion for hunting could be shared and that wasting his demonstrated natural hunting ability would be shameful, I decided that day Lincoln was to be trained and I would be the one to do it.

I bought books, watched YouTube videos, and sought advice from friends for any knowledge I could use to train Lincoln to hunt birds with me.

THE DESTINATION I was a novice upland hunter, and Lincoln was a novice flusher—but all rookies have to start somewhere. I had three stipulations for our first wild upland hunt together: It had to be completely do-it-yourself, on public land, and only the stars as our roof.

Teaming up with Brian and our mutual friend Steve Derr, we planned a three-day trip that would test not only my training skills, but also my physical and mental limitations.

North Dakota is home to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, which comprises the Badlands found



in the western side of the state and the Little Missouri National Grasslands. The North Dakota landscape is expansive and contrasting. Filled with thousands of acres of public land, the terrain includes steep, fractured sand buttes; rolling bluestem; and cottonwood culverts. It's an uplander's paradise: The steep slopes

and ravines are home to sharptail grouse, while the dense cover surrounding adjacent farmland shelters pheasant and Hungarian partridge.

Roosevelt headed west in 1884, drawn to the solace and beauty of the Badlands after suffering the loss of his mother and wife on the same day. He would come to love the area

and the wildlife that inhabited it—enough so to establish a homestead and ranch he would name Elkhorn.

Roosevelt's time spent in the grassy plateaus under leafy cottonwoods broken by steep canyons and meadowland would be where his appreciation for the game he hunted, both big and small, would come and the understanding that a need to protect it was a must.

The history of the area was ideal for my first adventure with Lincoln. We would be hunting relatives of the upland birds that inhabited the same lands the leading figure behind the North American Conservation Model traversed.

THE HUNT We set camp north

of Medora, North Dakota, on the outskirts of Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch. Surrounded on either side by towering sand and red clay cliffs, the unforgiving landscape would be our home for the late November hunt.

The weather played in our favor for most of the trip and wavered between crisp, fall blue skies and cold, dreary days. We awoke each morning to the quiet comfort of the area, knowing that for miles around, we shared this landscape with only wild animals.

We were a team of three friends and four dogs. Brian had his black Labrador and Llewellyn setter, Steve his German shorthaired pointer, and me with Lincoln. Our "dognado," as we called them, would cover the vast



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hunting ground and help us find the late-season birds.

The sharpies emerged as our most engaging challenge. They foraged in the steepest of terrain in thickets of sagebrush, juniper, and buffaloberries. As late-season birds, they were wary to our presence, and the grouse would run, hidden by the dense cover, to the peaks of tall buttes, forcing an uphill dash by dogs and hunters. With gun, gear, and extra shells weighing us down, the effort to come within shotgun range of these wild birds was a test of fitness that often left us doubled-over, the cold autumn air filling our lungs.

Through the thick brush, I could see Lincoln's tail, straight as a board, making quick movements back-and-forth—an indication he was "birdy" and hot on a scent. I followed as closely as my legs would carry me. Lincoln's muscular frame moved between the briars, nose down, searching for the winged creatures teasing him with their scent. Higher

we would climb, my lungs fighting fatigue and exhaustion, only to see a covey spook 50 yards in front of me. Their white underbellies, shining brightly against the dark terrain, gliding away in mockery.

The pheasants would play the same

could see. A sharp point by the setter and GSP would send the Labs in search of the birds they were meant to flush, only for the pointers to break as the late-season birds made their escape.

The ever-changing winds had the

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games with us, their instincts keeping them silently sprinting in thick grass or flushing too far for No. 5 shot to be effective.

Storming the tall grass, our "dognado" moved quickly in silent pursuit. Their tails were all that we

birds spooked, and a mad sprint behind the dogs over miles of rolling hills was our only option for a chance at bagging a rooster.

We fought November's fickle weather and came back to camp to cold sleeping bags, hard ground, and



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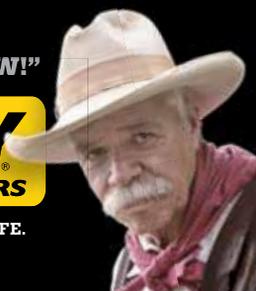
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sore muscles. This wasn't a walk in the park—but it was an experience that all outdoorsmen long for.

THE BIRD DOG His head buried in the grass, I followed Lincoln closely during the last hour of our final day. He weaved back-and-forth, back-and-forth. I raced to stay behind the young Lab, determined we would bag one more bird together. One hundred yards, two hundred yards, three hundred yards...

"He's hot on a running rooster if he's traveled that far, Kali!" Brian yelled across the roaring wind.

Running, my legs heavy from exhaustion, I kept as close as possible for another 100 yards before I could go no farther. Thinking Lincoln may have been following a false trail, I instructed an "over" command. He stopped, cocked his head, and questioned the command. From 50 yards away, I saw him rise and pounce into the grass. A rooster exploded upwards, the white ring around the large bird's neck was bold against the dark sky. I laughed. My young pup had turned into a bird dog.

I watched Lincoln scramble up fractured limestone ravines and cover over 30 miles in three days. I saw him bury his nose in the brush hot

on a scent and chase a running rooster 400 yards. I saw his cut and raw paws and the complete exhaustion in his gait. And I saw his will to go on with just two words from me: "Find 'em."

The skin around Lincoln's eyes was red and puffy, and his nose was raw

from hours spent with his head buried in grass and thickets. We came for the birds, but left with much more. Reaching a bag limit was never the goal—what was important was that my dog had done his job, and he had done it well. *



THE O/U FOR THE ROUGH RIDER STATE

The Theodore Roosevelt National Park in the western half of North Dakota is an uplander's paradise—but the terrain is unforgiving and tests your physical capabilities.

With this in mind, I knew a light over/under was best for keeping up with our four-legged companions. Franchi answered that call with their Instinct SL.

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