



Details

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Quail hunting in Alabama, I caught myself doing something I vowed I'd never do: stuffing a bird I'd just shot into my game vest without taking a moment to really look at it and appreciate it. My reason for taking that vow is twofold: One, good hunters never take the taking of game for granted. Two, because every pheasant or quail or grouse or woodcock is different, each offering some little – or big – note of individuality.



Pheasant hunting offers up what we called “armadillo” birds – pheasants humped over, looking like they have iridescent armor, scooting into the brush as if they really believe we can’t see them, reminding us of armadillos down south. Some pheasants’ movements stick in the mind, their jumpy head twitches, rigid bodies on blurred legs, eyeballs swiveling between pointing dog and tall-standing hunter. It’s always worth a few extra moments loading a downed rooster into a game vest to ponder a bird with stumpy tail feathers or another with an oddly thick ring of white neck feathers.

Most amazing about pheasants are those feathers – the colors and patterns. Many of us eventually take their beauty for granted. Up close or in the hand, it seems absurd that we sometimes can’t see a rooster on the ground just a few feet away. It’s true, though,

that nestled in the brush, he’s got some of the best camo around when his vivid blues and purples magically play into the multi-color light reflected by the burnished edges of corn or late season junipers. Hens’ camouflage is just as good, with its light and dark mottling vanishing into the world of tan leaves and brown mud.

Mandatory for ruffed grouse hunters is stopping to spread a magnificent tail fan not just to identify sex by whether or not the dark band is broken, but to imagine what those tail feathers look like in flight, helping to hold the bird aloft and directing its swooping acceleration. A woodcock in hand demands examination – length of the bill (sex), width of the outermost wing feathers (sex), bands and mottling on other wing feathers (maturity).

Then there are the sounds. Bobwhites throw their recalls like ventriloquists. Whistling woodcock wings are often quicker to

detect than the sight of the stubby brown bird flushing through thick trees. And pheasants? Not just the classic rooster cackle, but the slapping rush of wings or the scrabbly sound of spurred feet racing across brittle cattail stalks.

Speaking of feet, across from my desk two dried woodcock feet hang on my bulletin board and a huge goose foot dangles from a cord over a lamp. Feathers and tail fans sprout on all the shelves of my bookcase alongside a small turtle shell, a coyote jaw, some moose teeth and a rattlesnake rattle.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “Men who wish to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details.” The body parts I’m looking at aren’t souvenirs or trophies. They are the bearers of detailed information I have the privilege of accessing via my time in the field. 🐾