

# When Kansas Stood Tall

by Scott Linden

**I**t wasn't the four horsemen of the apocalypse, but rural western Kansas was visited by an earthquake, blizzard, and tornado in the days before I arrived. How would the farming communities – and the birds – cope with a trifecta of biblical proportions? Short answer: Just fine, thank you. Here's the long one.

The Sunflower State is an intricate network of indefatigable spirit, caring people, hard-working agribusinesses, and a welcoming culture that bird hunters can count on no matter the natural disasters. I've been visiting for two decades and have never been disappointed in the land or the hunting prospects. That's in large part due to the diversity of bird habitats, much of it skillfully managed by locals: walk-in areas, state lands, local reservoirs, and private grounds.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, famously said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." He could have been referring to the people and birds in Kansas after the one-two-three punch of natural disasters. Or the hunters and dogs who gathered from all points of the compass following the temblor, snowstorm, and twister. Our three-day hunt was a good example.

## Day One...

It's a wonder there's any cover standing, let alone enough left to hunt. We covered a grand slam of habitat types in search of wild pheasants that didn't get blown into the next county.

First stop, rank CRP grasses. Tall and thick, it flummoxed the dogs just trying to bull their way through. It was sheltering cover for ringnecks during the blizzard, but today no survivors dwelled there. Down the road, cut corn with shelterbelts and tangled, overgrown fencerows and the head-scratching mystery of snow-covered landscape on the north side and bare ground on the south. Guess where we went.

Stubble led to narrow swales of low-growing grass. Birds could be at the edge if they'd been gorging on corn after shivering through the storm. Good, but there was a choice: one draw led to a summit of cut sunflowers, energy-rich feed for birds recovering from a week of brutal cold. We chose it.

Manny's first point was on old scent – we got a good warm-up ascending the slope, but no feathers flew. A couple more versions of that, and we added a blocker at the top of the next swale as a backstop, literally. My gangly young wirehair's ground track started with a meadowlark flush, another trail, and then a solid point. Two shots from two guns, and a ringneck landed at the top of the draw, feet down and head up.

I know that posture well, so I urged a swift recovery by dog with me in hot pursuit, until we were sidetracked by another point enroute. I missed. But my dog chased in the right direction, nailed the ground scent of the first bird, and zigzagged to a skulking rooster that was soon brought to hand. Manny's tail tick-tocked like a metronome as I let him savor that hard-earned bird.



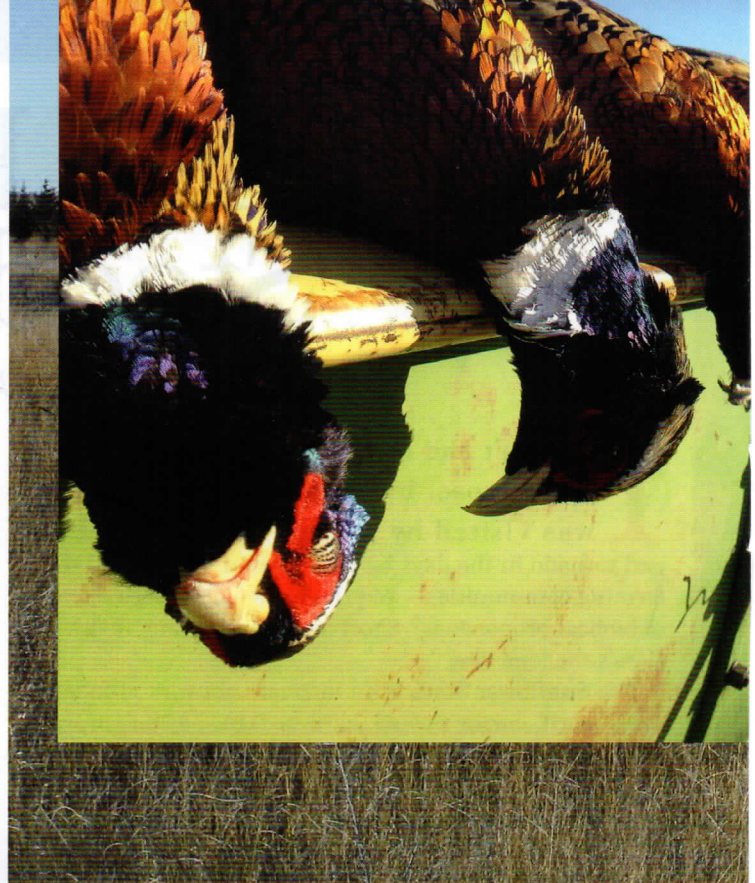


## Why Western Kansas?

Odds are you won't encounter an earthquake, tornado, or blizzard in western Kansas for a while, which is argument enough for many hunters. But the state also has over 1.5 million acres of publicly-accessible hunting land, much in its Walk in Hunting Access (WIHA) program. All of it is available at *KSoutdoors.com* and as an app. You can also get a PDF if you're old-school. Just find a colored spot on the map and drive.

There are pheasants, bobwhites, even greater prairie chickens in some areas. A license purchase is good for a year from date of purchase. The ringneck bag limit is four, and unless another epic blizzard descends (unlikely), the prevailing temperatures in late season are relatively nice compared to the northern-tier states.

Many communities offer incentives from events and contests to "million dollar birds." Learn more at *wildwestcountry.com*.



As we caught our breath, I was reminded it's the people who matter. On this hunt, we were hosted by Kansans who could have hunkered down, seen to their – and their neighbors' – storm and earthquake damage. Being a quake survivor myself, I knew it could go two ways. But Kansas stood tall, made us welcome. A "thank you" from us was small consolation.

### Day Two...

Our next stop was an abandoned homestead/straight out of a Terry Redlin painting but birdless. Twisted windmill vanes were evidence of gale-force winds of last week. Crop fields were crushed by the weight of snow, low spots buried in white stuff. The pickings were slim that morning.

As the sun descended in the west and we motored toward it, a vast, unharvested sunflower field stretched to the far horizon. We joined forces with the landowner's sons, added some newcomers met at lunch, and plotted a strategy of straight lines and maximum dog power. The local intelligence, reinforcements, and good timing worked, and we soon realized we'd been handed the golden ticket. Birds were feasting on the oil-rich seeds pecked from snow-free ground.

Most shots were hard crossers, birds cackling skyward accompanied by the rattling of dry stalks. Many birds lived to tell about their close calls, but a few thudded on the frozen ground. A first bird for young Julie prompted a whoop and fist pump. Fusillades from multiple guns resulted in maximal excitement and minimal longtails on the ground, to be scooped up by burly Labradors.

### Day Three...

We moved a few dozen miles north to an organic farm that could be the model for the future as much as an





example of the “dirty farming” of pheasant hunting’s halcyon days. Pardon the pun, but the place was a perfect storm of habitat types – cut wheat and soybeans edged by overgrown fencerows, the occasional grassy hollow, and tree lines. Add a boneyard of old tractors and implements and you’ve got the pheasant-hunting version of the full meal deal. The habitat was strategically conceived and managed by a local businessman more concerned with wild birds than market prices. And once again, someone who had many better things to do post-storm, but graciously hosted his visitors.

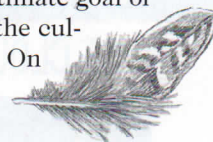
The old shorthair tottered up the swale and paused, trembling. A hen’s flush got our adrenaline flowing. A few hundred yards uphill, the dog pointed again, and a vividly colored rooster dropped at two shots. The retrieve was made by a boisterous young vizsla, tail vibrating in a fierce display of pride at a job well done. Both dogs bobbed and snuffed among the clumps like slalom skiers. Some pointing dogs will figure this out on their own, some need to be taught, but often it’s critical they “unsteady,” creeping along as they point and track skulking pheasants. Without this valuable lesson, we’d see few roosters in the air and a lot sneaking out the end of a field.

Marching both sides of a long row of cedars, we watched birds rocket from the far end, specks in the distance. Cackle after cackle always seemed to come from the wrong side of the trees – at least for me. The two dogs wove in and out, grass rustling and branches snapping, making occasional appearances in the open and pushing birds toward the harvested soybean field – our ultimate destination. The first flush for me was a massive owl whose wings almost brushed my hat brim! Thankfully, one naïve ringneck waited for us at the conclusion of our

push, presenting an exhilarating point-flush-shot-retrieve that made the shorthair’s owner beam with pride.

It was a hunt for the ages – those of the past and, possibly, those to come. And in part we have the Whole Foods shoppers and health-conscious consumers of the world to thank for habitat that produces clean food and plentiful pheasants. It was also our final lesson in the resiliency of rural Kansas residents.

Author Masanobu Fukuoka said the ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings. On my visit to western Kansas, I saw how right he was.



## Hunting Is Economic Development

Gawking sightseers aren’t the only tourists supporting a state’s economy. Hunters spend millions every year in small towns, rural counties, and agriculture-oriented states, and are often a major economic force.

But it’s a two-way street, and if you want to see the welcome mat rolled out in upcoming seasons, you might consider doing your part. You could buy fuel, groceries, and ammo in the town nearest your destination. Stop by the local chamber of commerce for up-to-date information and maybe a hunting tip. Cheer at the high school football game, visit the historic sites. Eat at the coffee shop. Hire a guide. Stay at a local motel. And go ahead, buy a t-shirt for that buddy who didn’t make the trip.