

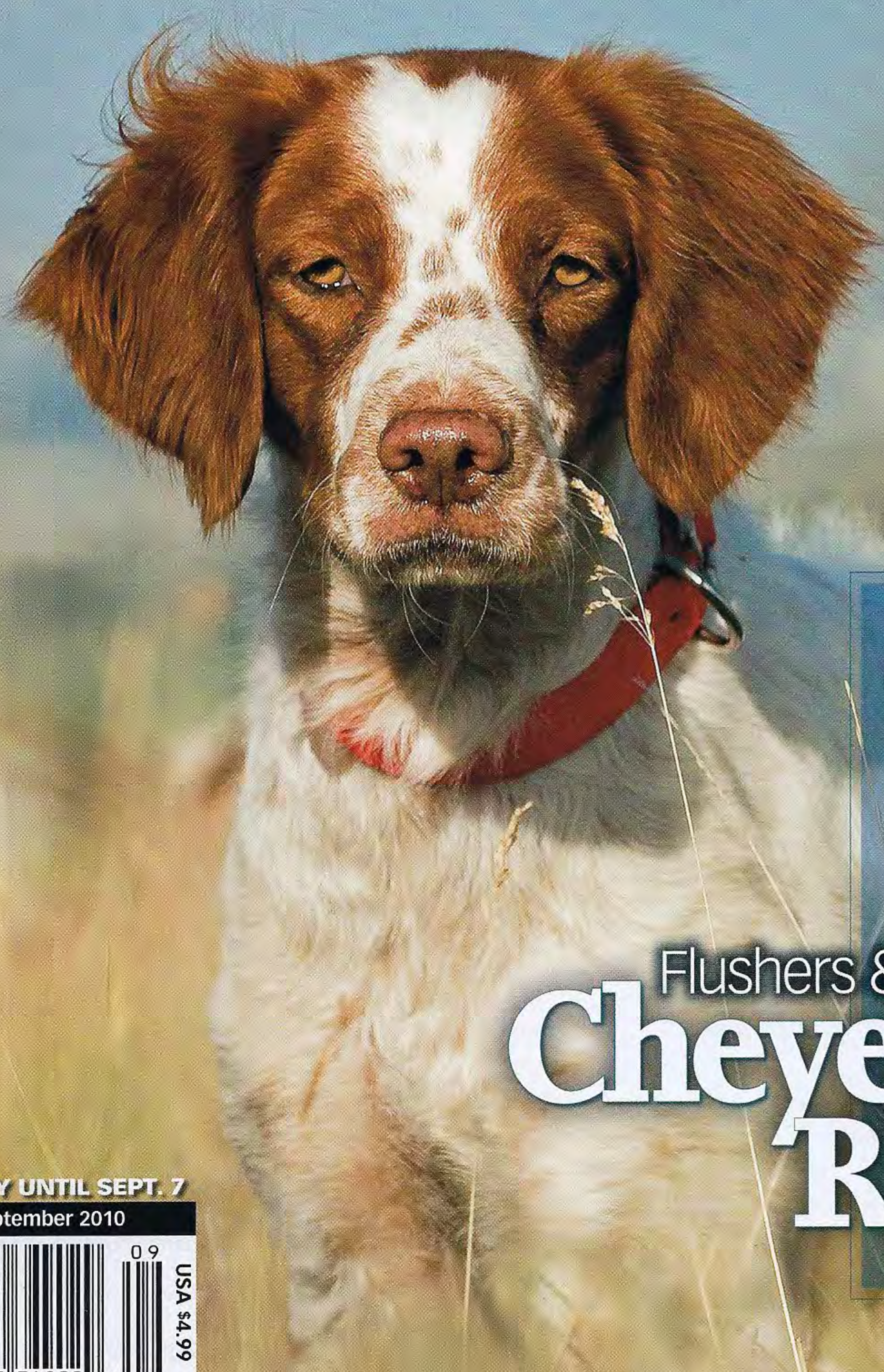
2010 BIRD HUNTER'S CLASSIC
... ■ QUAIL & PHEASANT FORECAST ■ ...

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A “signature” experience
awaits pheasant hunters at

Cheyenne Ridge

Cackling rooster pheasants, cracker-jack canine companions, amiable fellow sportsmen, delightful weather and a world-class hunting operation—those ingredients, when blended in just the right fashion, are the recipe for an exercise in

pure sporting pleasure. It was my good fortune, in company with a number of other individuals who devote marvelously misspent lives to writing about hunting, to be part of such an exercise in the late fall of this past year.

BY JIM CASADA





Anyone who pays attention to such matters, and that is pretty much everyone who savors the aura and atmosphere of pheasant hunting at its finest, knows that the last couple of years have seen banner bird production in the pheasant-rich grasslands of South Dakota. Doubtless that was one reason why Remington's Linda Powell, a lady with a rare flair for getting everything just right when it comes to arranging outings for ink-stained wretches such as editors and freelancers, had billed the outing as "The Ultimate Pheasant Fest 2009." Accordingly, my expectations and excitement upon arrival in Pierre in mid-November were at a level commensurate with those associated with "Christmas in September," as a longtime buddy likes to describe the opening day of dove season.

The ensuing few days, spent in company with Powell; her Remington colleague from the company's shotgun division, Brian Lasley; and four fellow writers/editors—Jim Wilson, Slaton White, George Conrad and *Gun Dog* editor Rick Van Etten—would be the stuff of dreams as we dealt with a fine and fancy feathered immigrant.

A lovely import to this country that has, as the mountain folks where I grew up would have put it, "taken holt," the male version of the ringneck pheasant is a thing of rare beauty. I've hunted them numerous times over the years, but never does a rooster burst from underfoot, cackling like the choir in a fictional insane asylum as it takes flight, that I don't think of the account my favorite American outdoor writer, Robert Ruark, rendered of his first encounter with the bird.

It was on a Maryland hunt with his mentor and maternal grandfather (the "Old Man" of Ruark's timeless book *The Old Man and the Boy*) and it is so spot-on, so vintage Ruark, as to merit quoting in full:

There was an outraged squawk inside the brambles, a rapid beating of wings,

And something—it might have been a bird or possibly the Graf Zeppelin—erupted in my general direction. It seemed to be less than a hundred yards long, and I could swear it was not actually breathing fire.

Otherwise, I never saw such a production in my life. I shot at this thing twice, and it went away with very little damage, although one tail feather got dislodged, very

GUNS FOR THE HUNT

The Cheyenne Ridge hunt offered an opportunity to shoot various incarnations of Remington's tried-and-true Model 11-87. As a traditionalist who holds a special place in my view of aesthetics for wood stocks, the fact that Remington is once more producing their 11-87 in wood (the Sportsman Field model with solid-walnut stock and fore-end became available in 2010) is a source of pleasure. The gun features a satin finish and fleur-de-lis checkering, dual bead sights, a nickel-plated bolt and gold trigger. The 12-gauge version has a 28-inch barrel and modified choke.

It was what I shot most of the trip, although others opted for the 11-87 Sportsman SuperMag, which had a number of upgrades for 2010. These include overmolded grip panels on stocks, a Hiz-Viz vent rib, SuperCell recoil pad and adjustable length of pull with a kit for adjusting. The suggested retail price for either upgrade version of the venerable 11-87 is quite attractive, coming in well under \$1,000 and several hundred dollars less than comparable offerings from competitors.

One final comment is in order as far as the 11-87s are concerned. Most of the time,



for whatever reason, my wingshooting appreciably exceeded my normal level of performance. I could almost hear my Grandpa Joe, who was given to pithy comments and the stark truth, saying: "Son, that's better than you know how."



Linda Powell, Remington's director of public relations, and the author with the results of a morning drive.

possibly due to the imminence of the molting season.

Give Br'er Ruark full marks for clinging to the belief that it is a poor piece of cloth which can use no embroidery; the fact nonetheless remains that in a few lines he pretty well captures the essence of the magic and mystique of pheasant hunting. The only aspect of the experience shortchanged by the above words involves dogs. However, if you take the trouble to read the full story from which this quotation comes, "But Not on Opening Day," you will find considerable evidence suggesting, and rightly so, that Ruark was a matchless writer on gun dogs. You'll also finish reading the piece misty-eyed from Ruark's depiction of the Old Man's death, or else you need to schedule an urgent trip to the nearest psychologist for a checkup on your emotions.

Rest assured, however, that thanks to the efforts of General Manager Bob Edwards and his wife, Cindy, lodge administrator, mental treatment won't be in the immediate offing for anyone who samples and savors the kind of hunting our group experienced at Cheyenne Ridge. It's hard to imagine anything more satisfying and soul-soothing than a few days of witnessing canine wizardry, enjoying fine shooting, tramping through lovely country and relaxing in a site where being wined and dined in dream-like fashion are bywords.

In some senses, our group's approach to pheasant hunting was the standard drive-and-block one, albeit in smaller numbers than one often sees in situations where there are up to a dozen blockers and a veritable division of drivers. Maybe the most distinctive feature of the hunting was the manner in which dogs were utilized. Jim Lawhon, field sports director, and guides Roger Pederson and Cory Stoeser worked in tandem with a bevy of Labs and springers (two of the latter had names, Cletus and Buford, that this staunch son of the South found absolutely irresistible).

The essence of the tactics we employed at Cheyenne Ridge involved working slowly and surely through fields that had been carefully selected with a knowing eye to size, wind direction and the likelihood of holding



Jim Wilson, Brian Lasley, Jim Lawhon and Linda Powell pause while blockers set up at the opposite end of the field. Drivers were employed to put roosters in the air, and any that fell were promptly retrieved.

goodly numbers of birds. Typically the drives, which stretched over distances ranging from several hundred yards to half a mile or more, involved sporadic shooting opportunities for most of the distance, with plenty of cries of "Hen!" being interspersed with glad shouts of "Rooster!" Whenever a bird was downed, matters came to a temporary standstill while the dogs retrieved pheasants.

The effectiveness and discipline of the dogs was truly impressive. Seldom indeed, no matter how much the heady aroma of a running pheasant or even

sight of a scurrying bird tempted them, they hunted close with only the occasional verbal admonition needed to curb their enthusiasm or a misguided tendency to get too far ahead of the drivers. Even in the final 100 yards or so of a drive, with pheasants sometimes taking wing in every direction, multiple shots ringing out and matters assuming a bit of the atmosphere of a Chinese fire drill, the dogs performed admirably.

In such settings, there are always moments when one observes a sterling example of a hunting dog working



CHEYENNE RIDGE CUISINE

Thanks to the skills of Chef Carl Hawkinson, guests at Cherokee Ridge dine sumptuously, with hearty breakfasts and lunches, along with three- or four-course evening meals nicely partnered with fine wines and preceded by scrumptious hors d'oeuvres, being the standard. It's a belt-loosening place, and short of the pheasant hunter's equivalent of the Bataan march, you are going to add pounds. In other words, the message is hunt hard and walk with a will, because you'll need every bit of that energy expenditure and then some if you plan on leaving in the same weight class in which you arrived.

As someone who has written a bunch of cookbooks and carries a richly deserved reputation as a trencherman, I pay close attention to culinary matters. To my way of thinking, the single most attractive thing about fare at the lodge focused on the varied and creative ways in which the chef utilized pheasant.

Any hunter possessed of a scintilla of ethics not only eats what he kills; he does so with gusto. Here that's a cinch, because each day found pheasant on the menu in one fashion or another, and better still, there were printed recipe cards that guests were welcome to take home with them to use with their birds.

Tempting offerings such as a pheasant terrine, pheasant chowder, pheasant wild rice soup, and pheasant breasts wrapped in bacon and anointed with peppercorn sauce were but some of the varied ways we sampled and savored as products of successful hunting.



The varied menu includes succulent prime rib and numerous pheasant dishes.

The food was, as Linda Powell put it, "beyond words." From a personal perspective, my sole complaint regarding the entire experience focused on cuisine—the addition of a whopping six pounds meant the need to do battle with the food gods for an entire month just to get back to square one.

The lodge overlooks the North Platte River, affording guests sweeping views in all directions.



those blended wonders of instinct, training and senses that seem to verge on sheer legerdemain. For me that came on an occasion when I was one of two blockers. It seemed that one splendidly plumed cock after another winged my way as the drivers worked through perfect cover in the form of a long, narrow section of waist-high grass. I wish I could say that cocks fell to earth each time my 11-87 sent a load of No. 5s their way, but that would gild the lily beyond acceptable limits.

Still, I did manage a satisfying left-to-right near the end of the drive, although I feared one was a runner

and that no one other than me—man or dog—had marked down either bird. My mistake. Perhaps two minutes after my double, the dogs emerged from the field and a pair of them, a Lab and a springer, headed in opposite directions as if they had somehow had the pair of downed cock birds on an internal radar screen. After a spirited chase, which I was privileged to see from an elevated position overlooking a sharp dip in the terrain, the springer emerged with the runner held proudly high.

Meanwhile, the broad-shouldered black Lab named Joker had already returned with the second pheasant. I could only muse in silent amazement about such feats. They lie beyond the ken of human understanding, or at least that of this simple scribe.

Doubtless every other participant in the hunt took away similar experiences to tuck safely in memory's fond storehouse, and I know for a fact that such was the case with the editor of this publication. He shared thoughts to that effect one evening as we relaxed on leather couches, satiated with fine food and finer hunting. We both realized, while surrounded by an eye-catching panorama of mounts of various species of pheasants from around the world, that ours had been three days of pleasure beyond measure.

We also conversed about the fact that while Cheyenne Ridge stocks birds aplenty over the course of a long season—something they can do thanks to having status as a hunting preserve—there was no discernible way to differentiate between pen-raised birds and wild ones when they took flight. Only when you had a bird in hand could you verify its origins.

In other words, the “planted” pheasants soon became as wild as their brethren who had never seen the inside of a flight pen, and we saw evidence aplenty of that when blockers failed to get in place in time, or when approaching too close in our vehicles, or a bit of untoward noise would send distant pheasants winging toward the horizon. Still, enough of the birds hung around to keep man and dog alike busy, and each day found us with ample time, never mind the sort of genteel pace

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Cheyenne Ridge Signature Lodge is conveniently located some 20 miles north of Pierre, South Dakota, which has regular airline service through both Minneapolis/St. Paul and Denver. Amenities include a cigar and cognac ice bar, game rooms, the availability of massages (I enjoyed the first one of my life, and what a treat it was), a sumptuously stocked bar and décor in keeping with an upscale retreat for the sportsman.

There's also an all-weather five-stand site adjacent to the lodge, a locker room where you will be pleased to find your personal nameplate on a spacious locker where you can shed your gear, place your footwear on boot dryers and seamlessly make the transition from the field to a post-hunt libation and hors d'oeuvres. For full details visit www.signaturelodge.com.



Bob and Cindy Edwards oversee the operations at Cheyenne Ridge.



Guides Roger Pederson and Cory Stoeser and Field Sports Director Jim Lawhon “take five” by the dog trailer. Both Labs and springers are used to produce birds.

that is one of bird hunting's most appealing features (i.e., it isn't necessary to rise from bed at an ungodly hour), for a lengthy, relaxing lunch break before the afternoon session afield.

Similarly, achieving our daily quota of birds proved quite manageable, and late afternoon would find us back at the lodge, weary in the wonderful way only a dozing dog dreaming of the day's feats or a hunter lolling with a libation in hand while he tells lies can

fully understand. It was, in short, one of those outings featuring impressive dog work, stellar company and an overall experience that belongs in the “trips of a lifetime” file.

Editor's Note: Jim Casada is a veteran writer with dozens of books to his credit. To learn more about his work, or to sign up for a free subscription to his monthly e-newsletter, visit his Web site at www.jimcasadaoutdoors.com. *