HUNS ALONG THE BORDER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVE BOOKS

Tess, my Brittany, raced ahead in a ground-eating lope, her pink nose testing the fresh morning breeze sweeping down from Canada. The breeze carried the clean, rich perfume of the northern prairie, wild as the hawks and eagles riding its chilly gusts. My heart skipped a beat when she whipped into a point near the edge of a field of wheat stubble, neck outstretched and right foot raised.

Time to get moving. I covered the seventy yards or so between us as quickly as I could, but the covey flushed at the edge of shotgun range – as Hungarian partridge often do in the thin grassland cover they favor. I knocked down a tail-end Charlie, and Tess charged ahead to make the retrieve. When she brought in the bird, I took a few minutes to smooth its gray and russet feathers and admire the cinnamon-colored head and rusty tail. Beautiful.

Huns are native to Europe, the British Isles, the Scandinavian countries, and parts of Asia, where they are better known as grey partridge. We call them “Hungarians” because that’s where most of our imported birds came from. When a group of sportsmen from Calgary, Alberta, released 800 partridge in 1908 and 1909, the birds quickly multiplied and spread across southern Alberta, into Saskatchewan, and farther east.

By the mid-1930s, outdoor author Ray Holland could report flushing more than a hundred coveys in a day’s outing on the Saskatchewan prairie. Not bad, considering the province of Saskatchewan had not stocked a single bird. Even though Huns don’t exist in the numbers Holland saw almost a century ago, southern Saskatchewan, parts of Montana, and northwestern North Dakota remain the heart of the Hun’s range.

The Border Region

The area is steeped in history, from Sioux and Cree warriors, to Lewis and Clark, to the trappers, homesteaders, cowboys, outlaws, Mounties, and bootleggers who came after. Novelist Wallace Stegner, who grew up in the little town of Whitemud, Saskatchewan, described it this way in his book *Wolf Willow*: "Across its empty miles pours the pushing and shouldering wind, a thing you tighten into as a trout tightens into fast water . . . There never was a country that in its good moments was more beautiful. Even in drouth or dust storm or blizzard it is the reverse of monotonous, once you have submitted to it with all the senses."

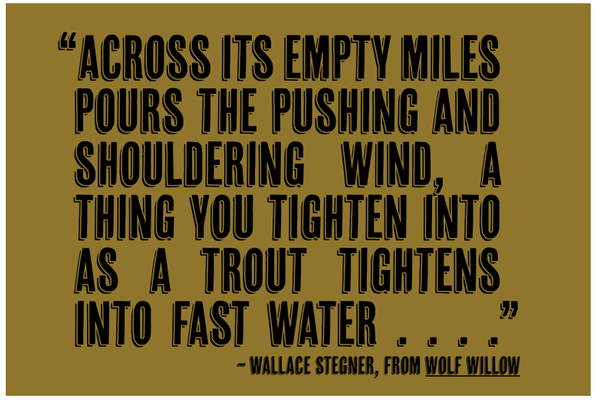
Due to its remoteness, around the end of the nineteenth century this part of our northern border provided a sanctuary for western outlaws like Dutch Henry, the Sundance Kid, and the Wild Bunch. First-class horse thieves, Dutch Henry and his associates operated with impunity for a time, stealing horses and selling them on both sides of the border. While western lore has most horse thieves ending up at the end of a rope, Dutch Henry – a likable fellow by many accounts – was shot and killed in 1906 by a fellow outlaw. Sundance fled to South America with his friend Butch Cassidy, and we all know how that tale played out.

Today the border is a place where bird hunters can lose themselves in a landscape marked by wheat fields, grassland, brushy draws, sloughs, and abundant wildlife. It's a land of wind and weather – scorching hot in summer, freezing cold in winter. It's a sparsely populated land of immense sky and sweeping prairie vistas, the skyline broken only by rolling hills, scattered buttes, and small towns with their trademark grain elevators.

Tess's bell grew muted at times as she disappeared over a low hill or dived into a patch of snowberry, only to grow louder again when she re-emerged. Finally there was silence. On a grassy slope fifty yards ahead she stood still as a statue. These Huns held better than the wheat field covey from earlier in the morning. When I walked up they clattered from the bunchgrass in a chirping swarm. Even when you think you're ready, you're never *really* ready for these explosive little birds. I fanned on the first shot, then got my nerves under control in time to tumble one with the second. Humbled by Huns, and not for the first time.

With the day warming up I stopped to rest and give Tess a drink of water. While I sat admiring the view, great puffy clouds crossed the sun, casting intermittent shadows on the dun-colored grass. Far above in a pale blue sky, a flock of south-bound sandhill cranes sent their eerie, rattling cries earthward. Tess cocked her ears at the strange noise and looked to me for an explanation. "They're cranes, Tessie, carrying the souls of the dead to heaven, if you believe the legend."

As the morning continued to warm we set off toward a distant grove of cottonwoods where I'd found a small pond in the past. I could see another field of golden wheat stubble not far from the trees. While Huns do well in wheat country where waste grain is available to get them through the fall and winter, they don't need it to survive. Many Huns live and die in grasslands where they make do with insects, seeds, and forbs. Yet, checking the edges of stubble fields early and late in the day is always a good bet. During the middle of the day, abandoned homesteads, brushy draws between grain fields, and weedy strips of cover are likely spots to find Huns resting.



As I got closer to the cottonwood grove, two things happened that set my heart to hammering in my chest. First came a crashing in the trees, and suddenly a young bull moose, all Roman nose, antlers, and gangly legs, burst from cover and ambled north toward Canada where he'd likely come from in the first place. As strange as it may seem to see a moose striding through a wheat field, it's not a rare sight in this dissected country where brushy creeks and river bottoms provide safe thoroughfares for visitors from the north.

Second, Tess had locked up on point again near the weathered remnants of an old corral. Over the years I've learned it's never a good idea to creep up behind your dog and stand there admiring the view. Huns are nervous birds, especially in thin cover, prone to flight at the first sign of trouble. It's better to walk in quickly off to one side and keep walking until the birds are in the air. True to form, the covey flushed a bit far out but close enough to offer me a shot. The Hun slanted down and landed fifty yards away. Tess marked the fall and soon came bounding back with the bird held gently in her mouth.

I took it from her and gave her a scratch behind the ear. "Good girl, Tess." At eight years of age, she already knows that; she spit out a few feathers and whirled away to chase down more of the intoxicating scent. I hadn't been able to get a good fix on where the covey had gone so I wasn't surprised when they gave us the slip, swallowed up in the shimmering vastness that stretched away in all directions. We circled back to the pond so Tess could take a swim and flop down in the mud. She re-emerged looking happy and dirty as a pig. I envied her.

The day had warmed to about sixty degrees – a bit toasty for a tired, hard-running dog on a sun-drenched day – so we headed for the truck, a sandwich, and a cold drink. I happen to find rural cemeteries to be peaceful places to rest and reflect on life and luck. I'd seen one not too far down the road and headed there.

After eating lunch I took a stroll among the headstones, looking at names and dates. A gust of wind blasted through the cemetery, bending the sun-cured grass and rattling the golden leaves of the lone cottonwood standing mournful guard. The inscriptions on the stones are sometimes hopeful, sometimes sad, but always poignant. When you see where some young person's life had been cut short back in the early 1900s, it always leaves you wondering what happened. Spanish flu? Smallpox? Diphtheria? The answer is a secret held beneath the prairie sod, inscrutable as the wind. Our dogs are lucky in a way; they live in the moment, without reflecting on what happened yesterday or feeling the coming breath of winter.

Late in the afternoon as the sun dropped lower in the west and the air began to cool, Tess and I tried a different spot, hoping intercept a covey of Huns heading out to feed. After we'd gone a quarter of a mile, she made a looping cast into the wheat stubble and tip-toed fox-like to a point.

Had the stubble been taller I might have gotten close enough for an in-your-face covey rise, but as it was I could see a couple of wary little heads poking up from the stubble and knew we'd been made. The covey of about a dozen birds launched in a flurry of wings, and I swung well ahead of the closest bird, now perhaps thirty-five yards distant. To my surprise the bird folded, and Tess raced ahead to make the retrieve.

On the way back to the truck, with the fading sun bathing this lonesome land in golden light, I thought I could hear the ghosts of Dutch Henry and Sundance whispering their sad stories in my ear. But maybe it was just the prairie breeze singing softly in the grass.

Dave Books is the author of Wingbeats and Heartbeats: Essays on Game Birds, Gun Dogs, and Days Afield, published by the University of Wisconsin Press. He lives in Helena, Montana, and explores the northern plains with his Brittany, Tess.