

Flushing pheasants

Group offers bird hunting, habitat lessons to area youths

By Story and photos by Nick Gevock - 10/03/2009



Sorenson pulls up on a rooster pheasant on the Circle 3 Ranch north of Dillon after it was flushed by Bali. Sorenson did not get off a shot, but later bagged the bird when Bali again found it in heavy grass.

DILLON — Christian Sorenson pulled up on a flushing rooster pheasant and watched as it flew away against the backdrop of the Pioneer Mountains.

The 13-year-old from Butte learned one of the many lessons of pheasant hunting — be ready to steady the shotgun and shoot when a bird dog lets you know it's getting close to a bird.

"The first time we were down was the first time he'd ever shot a shotgun," Sorensen's grandfather Frank Howard said recently while joining Christian on a youth pheasant hunt near Dillon.

Unlike deer hunting, with pheasants a hunter often gets a second chance. If they mark the bird when it lands after flying away and then have a good dog to help relocate it in thick cover, a hunter can get another shot.

Sorensen had that chance. Bali, a Labrador retriever helping sniff out the birds, started getting excited while moving in on the rooster, and Sorensen was able to bag the bird.

The Butte East Middle School student was among 10 kids who took part last weekend in the youth hunt. The inaugural event held on the Circle 3 Ranch just north of Dillon was sponsored by the Beaverhead Chapter of Pheasants Forever, a nonprofit group that works to promote upland bird habitat.

The group just got off the ground this spring and was looking for a way to let people know about its organization, said Gary Lorenzen, one of the five founding members. They couldn't think of a better way that hosting an event for the next generation of upland bird hunters.

"By getting the youth involve we get three for one — the parents and the kids," Lorenzen said.

FIRST BIRDS The hunt actually began a week earlier. The Pheasants Forever members required every kid to attend a shotgun handling and trap shooting session to stress safety and shooting skills.

Then on the morning of the hunt, the kids were taken out into the field with an adult who explained the basics and safety aspects of bird hunting. They were told to stay in a line and ensure that any shots taken were out in front of them for safety.

The field was stocked with pheasants so they'd get into birds. But there were also wild birds concealed in the thick grass on the property, which is a shooting preserve where the group is trying to build a population.

Bali, who's owned by Jerry Meachem, worked the grass intensely while zigzagging to pick up scent. Eventually Bali caught scent of a bird and Meachem told Christian and his fellow hunter Daniel Egan to get ready.

The rooster erupted into the air, and Egan dropped him with a single shot. The 14-year-old later said while he's hunted before, this was his first pheasant hunt, and he had a blast.

UPLAND ENTHUSIASTS That's exactly what Lorenzen said they were hoping to achieve with the hunt. In

turn that will hopefully instill the passion for bird hunting and create hunters interested in developing good bird habitat around southwest Montana.

Yet Lorenzen conceded it's not the most well-suited habitat for pheasants.

"This is a tough climate, but we're going to give it a shot," he said. "The idea is to develop habitat here locally." Rick Northrup, game bird coordinator for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said it's true that Beaverhead County's climate can be hard for pheasants to survive. The higher elevation makes for longer winters and deeper snows.

And pheasants usually thrive near agricultural fields such as wheat, barley or corn.

"They're quite a ways outside of what you'd consider to be good habitat," he said.

But Northrup added there's definitely potential for habitat improvements in the county that would benefit pheasants. He said if pheasants have core habitat of thick cover to hide from predators and provide shelter from harsh weather, they can survive tough winters.

And when winters are relatively mild, he's seen pheasants expand away from those areas into draws and other habitats. Northrup said with rotational grazing places with cattle ranching can have healthy pheasant populations, and he hopes the chapter can work on some projects to improve the habitat in the county.

"They no doubt have some good opportunities in the Dillon area and certainly Pheasants Forever has been a great partner in getting some good work down throughout the state," he said. "Pheasants, like any game bird, are a function of their habitat and there may be one or two habitat tweaks that make a big difference." Reporter Nick Gevock may be reached at nick.gevock@mtstandard.com.