

## Eagle, mature dog make for an excellent season

GUEST COMMENTARY,

SEVEN MONTHS? THAT'S an eternity! February through August, that's how long upland bird hunters have to wait for the opening of the next season.

We do get somewhat of a reprieve this spring when turkey season opens.

Right now, it's time to reflect on the past five months.

We've had a presidential election, a World Series, a Super Bowl, a major flood, Jennifer and Ben split, Brad and Jennifer split.

Golf in Greeley on our public courses became a lot more affordable, thanks to our city council.

Pope John Paul II was given a new Ferrari. The Colorado Division of Wildlife should have asked him for some divine intervention when its moose plan backfired.

The DOW lost three of six moose transplanted from near Creede to the Grand Mesa.

Hey, how about that pheasant-quail season, though? It was close to the good old days.

Mother Nature did everything right in spring 2004. Nesting cover for the young chicks was terrific. The temperatures were favorable and an adequate amount of rainfall came at the perfect time.

Mother Nature did an about-face in early January. An ice storm, which stretched from northern Oklahoma and eastern Kansas, past the Dodge City, Kan., area and into eastern Colorado, may have taken out much of the quail population.

Nonetheless, the upland bird season of 2004-05 was a memorable one.

One of my personal highlights came while my partners -- Laurence Stanton and Dave Sauter -- and I were hunting east of Plentywood, Mont., last October.

Laurence and Dave had flushed four pheasants about 200 yards from me. The four were flying my direction, and I thought to myself, "Hey, I'm in the right place at the right time."

I flicked my safety off and was about to drop the lead rooster when he exploded in a ball of feathers and cartwheeled to the ground all wrapped around another very large bird.

That very large bird was a bald eagle. He came out of nowhere and hammered that rooster before I could.

I walked very slowly toward the eagle. He was standing on the pheasant. It seemed to be as tall as I am.

When I was within 50 yards, he hopped backward off the pheasant and spread his wings in a gesture that was intended to frighten me, I suppose. Where was my camera?

What a thrill. I've been hunting for nearly 35 years and I've never witnessed anything that can compare with what I saw that day.

Another real treat for me was watching my 9-month-old German shorthaired pointer puppy, Penny Lane, mature into a very capable bird dog.

Penny Lane comes out of Valhalla Kennel's breeding program, which is owned and operated by Russ and Stephanie MacLennan. Valhalla is in Bennett.

Penny pointed and retrieved her first wild rooster last November. Penny learned quickly with every bird that was taken around her.

She handled running roosters like a seasoned veteran. Her 12 o'clock tail and head held high on point is what every breeder of hunting dogs strives for.

On a recent trip to southwest Kansas, Penny blood-trailed, for several hundred yards, a rooster that my partner, Dick Griess, had crippled.

She delivered that rooster, still alive, to hand. Not bad for a puppy not even a year old.

She was trained by Russ MacLennan and Jeff Orwat at Valhalla.

Penny joined my 5-year-old German shorthair, Abbey Road, to form quite a one-two punch.

Abbey, Penny and I have logged about 14,780 miles hunting upland birds since September 2004.

We were fortunate to see several memorable sunrises in Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Kansas and, of course, Colorado.

To bring some closure to this hunting season, the only thing that remains to be done is the public relations.

Every year in February, my partners and I take our spouses out to a dinner somewhere special just to say thanks for being so agreeable and understanding during the past several months.

Last year, we had a terrific dinner at the Buckhorn Exchange in Denver. We've been to the Flagstaff in Boulder, The Fort in Denver and several really nice restaurants during the past 30 years.

This year, we've decided to stay right here in Greeley.

A few of the landowners, who so graciously allow us to hunt on their property, will be in Greeley this weekend to help us celebrate another successful season.

Highland Grill at the Greeley Country Club features the best seafood I've had since I was at Scoma's on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco.

Ralph "Chad" Nichols, who sang with Tony Butala and The Lettermen in the early 1980s, performs at the Highland Grill on Friday nights.

Good music and terrific seafood: It's a great way to say thanks for putting up with us hunters.

Jim Vanek has hunted for more than 25 years and lives in Greeley with his family.

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