

Classic Bird Hunts

There is a jester's cap at Brittany Coast—headquarters for Classic Bird Hunts—for the fool who shoots a high-holy ruffed grouse from amid the branches of a tree. It is a fittingly silly bit of custom: all in genuine good fun, while still a reminder that a good sport does not shoot such a worthy quarry if it is not on the wing. I certainly did not shoot any grouse from trees during three days spent with Classic Bird Hunts in northern Wisconsin's Chequamegon National Forest; I did, however, come to learn how one might become *tempted* to sluice a bird on a branch.

This was hard hunting and, for me, harder shooting. During my first visit to the fabled grouse coverts of the Upper Midwest, head guide Mark Nissen, assistant guide Randy Matis (they jokingly call each other "H.G." and "A.G.") and their accomplished canine crew put me onto more ruffed grouse than most New Englanders see in a season. I managed 18 shots at dozens of flushes, and I missed with every one.

On Day Two, for example, out of pity or a professional's concern for my well-being, Mark offered to shake loose a grouse that had landed two-thirds of the way up a conifer growing on a slope. I was on the hillside, practically even with the bird, 15 yards away and ready. The grouse's first wingbeat put the tree between us, and I never saw the bird again. And that's how it went, mostly, where wily ruffs and bad shooting converged.

Hunting season was well along, the birds had seen some pressure, and the weather had just turned truly cold. The grouse were wary and wise—flushing early, flushing fast and heading for the thickest cover. Still, Mark and Randy's Brittanys kept producing, and they bumped very few birds from overzealousness. Hunting on the third afternoon with a long-time repeat client and Mark, I finally managed to position myself perfectly on an open skidder trail beneath a bird's escape path—and missed it anyway.



Head guide Mark Nissen with a Wisconsin grouse taken in wintry conditions.

It's about a 4½-hour drive from the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport to Clam Lake, Wisconsin, where Brittany Coast serves as home base for the guides and dogs and for the hunting parties' lunches and midday breaks. Guests arrange their own accommodations, which include inexpensive motels catering to sportsmen, area inns and a large network of camps and vacation rental homes. On my nighttime drive north in mid-November it snowed hard and blew; then it turned cold. By my first morning's hunt, the temperature was in the low teens.

Mark and Randy are exceptional guides, clearly happy to be doing what they love. A day hunting with them is more than chasing dogs and trying to shoot birds—it is a daylong lesson in the life and ways of grouse. Mark started in high school, hunting behind a golden retriever with the same enthusiasm, he says, that most boys apply to football or baseball. He has been building the guiding business

for 28 years, with much of that time spent scouting the forests around Clam Lake—and it shows. Along with part-time guides who help during the peak of the season, Mark and Randy hunt a string of coverts they have hunted for years and that they have scouted during the pre-season. Last year they worked from a list of 110 named coverts, with the physical and biological inventories of each more or less committed to memory. A day's outing can be tailored to the client's interests and abilities, featuring anything from easy walking on skidder trails to busting through aspen-whip thickets and over blowdowns.

The Chequamegon National Forest consists of nearly 857,000 acres tucked under the western finger of Lake Superior. Clam Lake sits in the center of a section where the forest is more than 20 miles in each direction. The area is a mix of lakes, ponds, marshy wetlands and rolling hills, and Randy and Mark took me through vast sweeps of perfect grouse habitat: mostly mixed-age hardwood forests with lots of edge and variety.

Classic Bird Hunts has limited openings across the 90 days or so it offers grouse hunts. That's easy to understand, with a loyal repeat clientele that appreciates an average of three to four grouse flushes per hour and as many woodcock when they're in. An excellent Website and e-mail newsletter track both the ongoing season and any openings in the calendar.

With this popularity on its home grounds, Classic Bird Hunts has extended its season, heading south in early January. It first offers hunts for bobwhite quail and pheasants in southern Kansas, and then moves on to desert quail in southernmost Arizona. I would follow these guides and their energetic Brits to either locale without reservation—especially in the hope of an open shot.

For more information, contact Classic Bird Hunts, 414-915-9072; www.classicbirdhunts.com.

