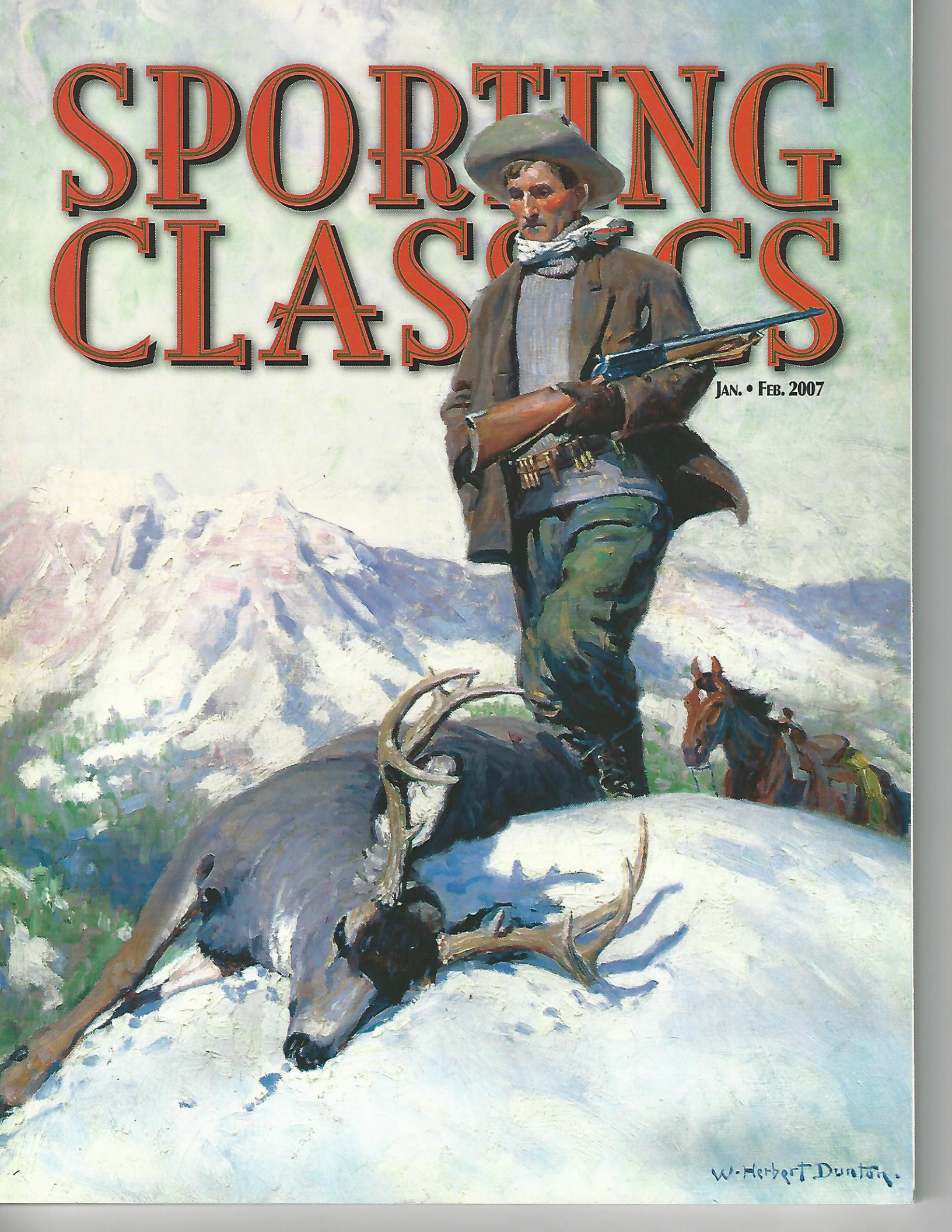


SPORTING CLASSES

JAN. • FEB. 2007



W. Herbert Dunton

T r a v e l

By John Ross



South Dakota, with its endless acres of corn and sorghum and milo, is Mecca for most of us eastern would-be pheasant hunters. Come November, the throaty cackle of wild roosters fires my spirit like no other upland game. In the eye of my mind, I see those unfathomably long tail feathers weave in the slipstream from a cock's muscular wings, driving it into the setting sun.

What I would give, as I once was able, to lift a shotgun from the rack and the game vest from the coat tree; to hie the dog from beneath the kitchen table; and to step out the back door, cross the lawn and enter a field of corn stubble, certain that we would flush a pheasant before I and the day got much older.

The pheasant is the king of farm country gamebirds. I have friends who'll argue until the bottle's dry that that regency belongs to ruffed grouse. But I'll tell you that a pheasant is as much a trickster as the wiliest partridge. Think flushing a dozen quail excites the blood? Imagine as many ringnecks! Woodcock and dove jink and twist like fighter pilots in the days of biplanes, but wild pheasants boast built-in afterburners. How much to lead 'em

Be thankful for folks like the Kneens, for their care of the gentle prairie and their willingness to share a small part of pheasant heaven with hunters.



you'll only learn after pruning their trailing plumage a time or three.

Today, conventional wisdom has it that the best pheasant hunting can only be found at Midwest lodges that manage hundreds of leased acres into which a multitude of pen-reared cocks

have been released early in the season.

Those birds merge with native stock and get wild soon enough. Gunning for them is usually grand. So too are the accommodations, vittles and other comforts of the creature. Here you'll pay to be pampered and in most cases, it's worth every cent.

Enter frugal John Moore, an old friend from Springfield, Missouri. Retired from his decades as president of Drury University and as fine a shot as he is tight-fisted, John suggested that we spend a few days chasing pheasants in the heart of South Dakota. That was fine with me. Employing his penchant for research, he discovered the beef farm of Art Kneen in Artesian, a crossroads where the train once stopped thirty miles north of Mitchell, home of the Corn Palace.

We were dogless. John's beloved lab had succumbed to old age and Aggie, my American water spaniel, was in

the final throes of terminal cancer. John and I hooked up in Sioux Falls, made the hour drive to Mitchell, checked into our motel, bought licenses at Cabela's, and headed north to Artesian to meet Art. He and his family have been wrestling a living from the gently potholed prairie for four generations. When the abandoned one-room school he attended was about to be razed, he moved it into the shade of a tree by his house and plans to restore it one of these days.

Behind his house stretch the three sections that he farms, a plot of land

roughly three miles long and one mile wide. Quills of corn lay across a mangled mattress of low rises and scales interspersed with pockets of CEP land dotted with thickets of waist-high weeds. Here and there gnarly windbreaks marched like ancient soldiers patrolling borders between the fields. Art recommended several strips of cover that we could work sans dog, and John and I set off like two school boys, filled with assurance that we'd fill our game bag before sunset.

Our initial strategy was simple. We'd


size up a likely covert, separate ourselves by thirty yards, and push our way through. Pheasants, being pheasants, weren't overly alarmed. They scuttled ahead and leaked out the end before we were in gunning range. So we altered our plans. I'd zigzag through the thick stuff and John would stand sentry at the end. That proved more productive, but often as not the birds sneaked around behind me and burst laughing into the wind.

For three days we walked, lord we walked, and chuckled at our foibles and forgot the stuff that was piling up on our respective desks. We lunched at a little bar in Artesian where the bras of biker babes hang across a potato chip rack. It was not the size of their cups that fascinated us, though I'll admit my imagination twitched. It was the order in which they were hung. The oldest, that is closest to the wall, were white utilitarian models, then came a spate of red and gold models trimmed in black lace, then a final vein of white. Did their order represent the fortunes of the watering hole?

Art and his son and wife would come and check on us late in the afternoons. They brought with them their farm dog, an enthusiastic Lab, whose bounding energy could only be constrained by the hawser of a lead Art tied to his collar. This wonderful trio would push coverts for us, and we'd see more birds than our minds ever dreamed.

At the end of the hunt, Art's mom sat us all down to midday dinner. Before we began, she led the blessing, and then launched us into a spread of pheasant en mushroom soup casserole with corn and slaw and mashed potatoes and rolls and pie from a little native cousin of the blackberry, the name of which I wish I could remember.


I'm thankful to Art and his family for their hospitality, for their care of the gentle prairie, for those forces that allow wild pheasants to thrive, and for old friends like John Moore who found me this little bit of unspoiled heaven.

If you want to hunt with Art, give him a call at 605-495-4321 or drop him a note: Arthur Kneen, 41028 - 230th St., Artesian, SD 57314-6316. He charges about \$100 per day per hunter. 



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