

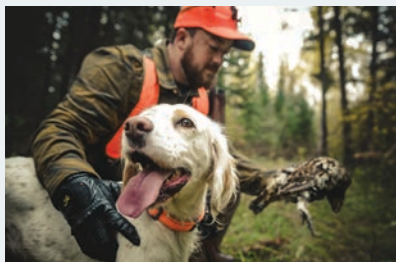
RUFF COUNTRY

GROUSE HUNTING IN THE NORTH WOODS IS A TEAM EFFORT

BY NATALIE KREBS



From top: Heading into the fall undergrowth; Andrew Howard and Annie with a ruffed grouse.



Leaves are already falling when I arrive in Minnesota, but the popple forest still smells alive. There's only a whiff of decay, and the forest floor is quiet underfoot. It's easy to see why grouse thrive here: For every ruff bagged over the next few days, we will flush five more, heard but unseen—or just plain missed—in the dense undergrowth.

My buddy Andrew Howard drove 14 hours from Missouri for this hunt. He makes this trip nearly every year. We pull up to a gate in the Beltrami Island State Forest and unload, dogs and all. Annie, a ladylike Llewellyn setter, rests her chin on Andrew's shoulder as he buckles her vest. Meanwhile, Boscoe races around the truck. He's a low-slung English cocker spaniel named for the cheesy breadsticks sold hot at the gas station.

The sign fixed to the gate reads: "Foot Traffic Welcome." Another sign, this one carefully painted, announces the spot we're hunting is a collaboration of the Ruffed Grouse Society and the Minnesota DNR. The local chapter busted ass before the opener to mow this particular route—one of the 500-plus designated hunting areas in Minnesota's ruffed grouse range, and just one slice of the state's 11 million acres of public land.

This is big country. We encounter one parked truck but no other hunters. It's also thick country. I shoulder my way through stands of young popple and patches of thorns, grateful for the safety glasses on my nose. Both dogs range ahead, bell collars clanking.

Andrew knows these woods well enough and has learned about the best trails from a few friendly locals over the years. Minnesotans are notorious for their geniality, and as we work these woods, it becomes clear just how far their manners extend. Local grouse hunters donated time and toil to this piece of public land, knowing anyone—including us out-of-staters—might show up to hunt the ground they worked so hard to manage.

On our way through town, local hunter and RGS member Justin Partee ducks out of his day job in Warroad, jogs across the street, and hands Andrew a map with new trails highlighted and a few suggestions on where to hunt. We almost feel guilty when we pull up to his spots. Later we join forces with other resident hunters, and they're delighted by our success. They ask questions: How many grouse did we flush? What trails did we check? Are bird numbers strong? And they answer our questions in turn.

The first grouse of the morning flushes as I'm crawling under a brier. The second departs at a distance and we never even see it. But the third breaks midmorning when we're off-guard, taking a rest to give the dogs water. Andrew is midsentence, uncapping a tube of lip balm, when we hear the blast of wingbeats, then see the grouse hurtle by. It flies beyond him and banks, and then, just before it escapes around the bend, one shot echoes and the bird falls.

We cheer, though we can't believe Andrew managed to make the shot. But Boscoe can, and he fetches up the first ruff of the day. 🌲🌲🌲

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