SADDLE UP
MAN’S SECOND BEST FRIEND WILL SHORTEN THE MILES AND FLATTEN THE HILLS.

I quickly dismounted from the horse, and while shaking the kinks from stiff legs, I pulled my double from its scabbard and filled its chambers with a couple of yellow shells. Rushing forward, I got there just in time for the flush—the first bird up dropped to the right barrel, and the left barrel made it a pair for the bag. A double on flushing birds always feels good, and that one felt even better because I’d spent quite a long time in the saddle before opportunity finally got around to knocking. Through the years, I’ve hunted a lot from horseback—elk in Wyoming, Colorado and Idaho; moose and grizzly in the Yukon; and Dall sheep in Alaska to name a few. I’ve even busted briars in Alabama quail country from the back of a mule, but this was the first time I had used man’s second-best friend to shorten the miles and level the hills in sharptail grouse and prairie chicken country.

We were hunting in the semi-arid Sandhills region of north-central Nebraska, which totals about one-fourth of the total area of the state. The region comprises around 13 million acres of rangeland where massive sand dunes snake along for endless miles and in places can reach over 400 feet into the sky. Some of the dunes we climbed must have had gradients approaching 20 to 25 percent—pretty steep when one of those tall mounds of sand is between you and a dog on point. Hunting there is nowhere near as tough as among some of the cliffs and rockslides I’ve left bits and chunks of my hide on while scrambling after chukar, but it is tough enough for me to welcome the opportunity on the final day to trade leg power for horsepower. This mixed-grass prairie land is excellent habitat for sharptails and chickens, and since its sandy soil makes it unsuitable for growing crops, it is likely to remain that way. It all adds up to miles of walking intermixed with excellent wing shooting.

Not many people live in the Sandhills, and if not for cattle ranching, there would be even fewer. Some ranches have good populations of both sharptails and chickens, and the ratio between the two can vary not only from ranch to ranch but from year to year as well. One rancher described the bird population on his property as about 70 percent to 30 percent in favor of sharptails, but he went on to say that he could recall years when just the opposite was true. Hunting season usually runs from about mid-September to the end of December, and in some areas ringneck pheasant can be hunted at the same time. You are allowed to take three pheasants and three grouse each day, and if by chance you limit out with daylight still remaining, in some areas you can trade the smoothbore for a .223 and hightail it to the nearest prairie dog town or perhaps call in a coyote or two.

Our hunt was with Rex Kelly on several privately owned ranches located in the >

The author prefers lightweight guns for hunts that are likely to involve a lot of walking, but not at the cost of too short of a barrel.
< Burwell area. Bright and early, we loaded the English pointers on a dog trailer and headed out to a different area each day. I'm not sure how many dogs Rex owns, but I stopped counting at just over a dozen. Alternating dogs every hour or so in the field kept fresh paws on the ground and enthusiasm high. With a full morning of combing the hills for birds behind us, we sought a bit of shade (pretty scarce in that country) and settled in for lunch. After a short siesta we were off to more hunting for the rest of the day. I sometimes wear a pedometer on bird hunts but failed to bring one along on this trip. My guess is we covered about ten miles each day, which is actually not a lot of walking in that country. For a crow flying overhead it might not have been that far, but for those of us who had to climb up and down those dunes it most definitely was. I love walking long distances but will have to admit that using horses that last day proved to be a pleasant relief.

So am I ready to trade in my walking shoes for riding boots? It depends. As I mentioned before, hunting from a horse represents a pleasant break from a usual day of chasing birds but it is something I enjoy only occasionally. Bird hunting to me is walking a lot and being down there on the ground with the dogs. From the back of a horse I feel more like a spectator than a participant and am convinced the dogs are having more fun. And there is another thing: I get the impression that in open country birds have more of a tendency to flush wild when I am riding rather than walking. Could be because they see me coming from a much greater distance.

Guns And Loads For Chickens and Sharpies

I’ve done most of my sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chicken hunting through the years with various small-gauge guns, and while I used a 20-gauge double most of the time on this hunt, I did use a 12-gauge Benelli Ultra Light autoloader on the first day out because I wanted to try Federal’s Upland Steel load and at the time it was available only in 12 gauge. In the Sandhills you can count on leaving many tracks between breakfast and dinner, and for me, that calls for a lightweight gun. An old favorite of mine is a 6½-pound Weatherby Richards double in 20-gauge choked Improved Cylinder and Modified. At six pounds, the Benelli I used is lighter than some 20-gauge guns I have hunted with, and the recently introduced 20-gauge version is even lighter at a bit over five pounds. Ounces are trimmed away by the use of an aluminum receiver and a ventilated barrel rib made of carbon fiber and by the use of a shortened forearm and magazine tube, the latter holding two shells. Barrel lengths are 24 and 28 inches in 12 gauge and 24 inches only in 20 gauge (which I think is too short).

Good guns are of no use without something good on hand to feed them, and I was in excellent shape in the 12-gauge department with the new Federal Wing-Shok Pheasants Forever load with 1½ ounces of Nos. 3 and 5 steel shot at 1,450 fps. A 20-gauge version with an ounce of those same shot sizes at 1,350 fps was more recently introduced. The Federal Heavy Field 20-gauge load I used during the hunt pushed an ounce of No. 6 lead out the muzzle at just over 1,150 fps, and believe me when I say it killed birds stone dead in the air. I found the lead shot load to be more deadly at extended ranges, but inside thirty yards the steel shot load left no room for criticism or complaint.