

## Rifle Ridge

There was a time amid all the wonderful coverts I was gunning, when I designated certain ones my “annuity coverts”—nice flat country where in my mellow years I would shoot somewhere other than on the steep lung-bursting ridges that make up much of the Alleghenies. Now that I have topped eighty, I find myself still climbing the rocky hillsides with Kay and my setters, seeking grouse that seem to have been crowded off the easy terrain by other hunters.

Rifle Ridge, one of those “retirement” coverts, lies on the big flat top of Allegheny Mountain, a place that in pioneer days had been a grazing farm. Its old fields, reverted to wild hay, are surrounded by regrowth timberland dotted with medium-sized hemlocks and native red spruce that grows on those high elevations under a sky that is more blue and windier than other skies. It is a wondrous land where, when things are right, woodcock drop in and some residual grouse hold on in the level woods and hawthorns that survive the bitter winters.

Outlanders are not welcome, for all that no one lives there anymore. Cattle seem to find sustenance on the thin grass, lonely creatures hungry for human attention, while rolling a nervous eye at my dogs. The nonresident landowner sees them only several times a year—once, when they are put out to graze in the spring, again when they are taken up to be shipped to the slaughterhouse in the fall, and when he checks on them at odd times.

One late March that had misled us into thinking spring had come, Kay and I took a friend with Briar’s daughter Kim to try to find returning woodcock, either passage birds or some of the natives coming home to nest. Briar reveled in the cover for the memories he

had of it, but what we found were not woodcock but unsociable snowdrifts in sheltered places. We were in bottom-land swamp with tea-color water in a small brook running full through hawthorns, when something sang over our heads, followed by the spat of a distant rifle report.

On rare occasions I have heard the gentle patter of spent pellets coming down around me like a sudden shower of rain. At no time has it been the result of a deliberate shot at me, but it isn't pleasant. Pellets don't sing, but rifle projectiles do, and when they are meant particularly for you, the sound is nasty and unfriendly.

Assuming this one wasn't, I remarked that someone had an odd idea about when to hunt, and our companion suggested they might be shooting at a mark. In a leisurely minute we were treated to another round from the same direction up on the ridge near our car. The rifleman couldn't possibly see us, but he could have heard us whistling to our dogs, and the fact that he could lay a blind shot directly over us was disturbing.

The two shots were followed by four more, and rather than pursue the issue on the receiving end, we circled to the mountain road that led up the ridge to our parked station wagon.

The landowner and a farm hand were sitting in his pickup truck beside our car, waiting. He had given me permission to hunt on his land and recognized Kay and me as we walked toward him. He was cordial enough, but there was no apology for having shot at us, just the comment that he didn't recognize our car and that in the future I might leave a note with my name under the windshield wiper so he'd know who was in there. He didn't like "outsiders coming in."

Regrettably, outsiders came.

The first signs were little moldy cabins of plywood and asphalt shingle siding that seemed to deteriorate almost as soon as they were set up. Other than esthetically, they weren't objectionable to us as summer cottages, for the people were gone by the shooting season, but they soon spawned a brood of migratory tenants in the fall—a pack of bow hunters from Kentucky who moved in for the first two weeks of the season in an annual visitation that preempted our normal woodcock gunning there.

I had been writing for *Gun Dog* since its premier issue, and in October 1982, having sent off my most recent manuscript, we took advantage of our freedom and headed for the Blackwater-Canaan to open the season. Autumn color was at a gorgeous pitch but thinning as we reached the higher elevations, reminding us of the time we had passed a caravan of gypsies stopped on Backbone Mountain. Indian summer color does things to my mind, and I suggested that we stop off and try Rifle Ridge and hope that if gypsies are on the move at this time of year, why not woodcock?

We found "gypsies," but they weren't playing guitars.

A new locked gate made of four-inch pipe blocked our way into the old farm lane. While we pondered that, a couple of 4-wheel-drive vehicles passed us, coming from the cluster of summer cabins scattered through the trees on the near side of the gate. I tried to take comfort that the two loads of hunters were headed somewhere else, but it didn't persuade me they hadn't been beating my old covers the earlier part of the week.

And then came Papa, soaking drunk, driving a jeep with one hand and holding a big coffee mug in the other, looking like a stoned Lou Grant from Springfield, Ohio.

There are men who will buy a 4-wheel-drive and keep their buttocks in better condition than their heart. This one got his vehicle stopped without spilling his drink and sat scowling at me as I walked over. There was an autoloader on the seat beside him, muzzle to the floor, and the mug was nearly full of what looked and smelled like straight whiskey.

He seemed to get me in focus through the open window. "You're old enough to be my father—about 62 or 64?"

I thought he had his generations reversed, but at that, he gave me about twelve years.

He said he had bought 400 acres extending to the highway far to the north, and when I mentioned the landowner whose place adjoined and who gave me permission to hunt, he said he didn't like the S.O.B. There was nothing personal, he just didn't like anyone.

Once he had me listening, he glued onto me and it was past 3:00 when I broke away and he drove off. One thing he had seemed

serious about: *Was that my wife or my girl friend in my station wagon with the dogs?*

Tubby had no more than gone when the next one came along on foot—a young fellow with red chin-whiskers and acne. He carried a clubby autoloader—don't they shoot anything else?—with a polychoke pointing at my middle, and he was drinking from a beer bottle in his left hand, with the neck of an unopened bottle sticking out of the right pocket of his hunting coat. He noticed my footwork dodging the mouth of his gun and changed position, resting the muzzle on the toe of his boot while he talked.

I don't know what he was hunting, but he said he had shot a grouse that morning. It takes all kinds, if only to subtract one grouse and add two empty beer bottles to the environment.

Rifle Ridge covert has a low wooded knob about the shape of a large Indian burying mound where we had almost always found several woodcock in October. There was an empty pickup truck parked in the big grassland near the base of the hill, and even as we moved closer, hoping the truck belonged to bow hunters, we saw two distant figures with guns walking away from the knob. We tried the nice cover anyway, on the chance they had left some woodcock. They hadn't.

As we came off the hill, two separate shots sounded in the distant spruce/hardwood to the east, like two disturbing remarks. Taking our bearing from the sounds, we headed another direction to a stand of large hawthorns reaching into the field from the woods, where I had a wonderful memory of Belton pointing a brace of grouse and his subsequent retrieve from the dark spruce trees beyond. Today there were only the hawthorns.

Below the old barn ruins and a shed with twenty-inch-broad planks, the wooded slope descends to the swamp where we had heard the bullets sing like testy bees out too early before the snows had gone. We worked down to the lower level, following a small run through thinning autumn color with sugar maple leaves gold against black-green hemlocks. There should have been both woodcock and grouse in cover like that. All we heard were voices somewhere above on the lip of the swamp.

There seemed nothing left to do but return to the car and drive on to the Canaan and the cabin. As we climbed the muddy path, Belton

found them first, at one of the shanties. Our beefy acquaintance was sitting on the rough wooden steps with his cup in his hand; he had returned for refueling.

This time he greeted us as old pals. He was surrounded by a group of young men, one of them with a Brittany on a leash, apparently about to start out hunting. The tallest boy said he had shot a grouse earlier, and gave us directions to where he had flushed others. As we moved toward our car, the one with the Brittany suddenly pointed at us: "That's the dog! That's the man! That's the gun!"

Our drunken buddha stirred. "What gun?"

"In *Gun Dog* magazine. That gun." The boy was still pointing. "That man and that dog."

I had to show them the gun and explain: "It's an English gun. A Purdey."

Big Boy waved it aside. "They copied the Fox. Ten feet away you can't tell them apart."

Properly enlightened, we said goodbye and left, with the young fellow still pointing after us.

At the station wagon we decided to try the old fields where the boy said he had moved six grouse. Six minus the one he had shot left better than anything we had found today.

We were nearing the place where we had been told to go when our informant barreled past us on the bumpy road. When we reached the deserted house we saw his car parked exactly where he had said to hunt, which took care of that.

Turning back, I pulled to a stop at the ruins of a log barn where, years back, our absentee landowner host had described a flight of woodcock one late afternoon. "The sun was going down," he had said, "and they were everywhere."

The sun wasn't far above the treetops today, and we took it as our last chance, crossing a rough field toward the woods. Partway up the swell of the hillside we saw something in a tree that turned out to be a camouflaged bow hunter in blackface sitting on a tree stand. He said he had moved grouse that morning in a clearing on top.

The clearing was well up, and having made the long climb, we now found ourselves in big country far from the car and running out of time.

Going back down the mountainside was easy walking and we moved fast. We came to several scrub cows scrounging among red haws scattered under some hawthorns. They raised their heads and regarded us wearily, either tired of seeing people or just tired of life. Suddenly Belton wheeled left and flashed into a point. "That dog" and "that gun" and "that man" tried to put it together but the grouse lifted before I could reach Belton. Kay heard two other grouse flush at the same time, and later there was the sound of a fourth—probably the group the tree hunter had moved earlier in the day.

We walked a rocky woods road in post-sunset light back toward the station wagon, our booted feet twisting on loose stones among fallen leaves. The woodcock were not in, and on all this enormous mountaintop we had found one small clump of hawthorns with four grouse. The autumn color and wonderful mountain air seemed to be trying to reassure me, but it was the people—16 men to 4 grouse—people crawling all over my "annuity covert" that were taking away from me something even more precious than the birds.