

Chukar Hunt

by Scott_Staats

Below us, the Malheur River ran like a thin ribbon through the vastness of steep, rocky hills and countless canyons. The area looked treeless, barren and uninhabitable -â€“ perfect chukar habitat.

On a late afternoon hunt, we hiked down one side of a ridgetop toward the river. We found the first covey of chukar under a high point on the ridge. On the climb back up we ran into a covey of about 50 quail. Two hours later, we returned to camp with five chukar and five quail.

Gary Madison chukar hunting on the Malheur River - photos by Scott Staats Gary Madison has lived in Prineville, Oregon all of his life and has hunted chukar in the state the last 40 years. â€œChukar hunting is the Cadillac of all hunting,â€• he said, referring to challenging aspects of the hunt.

One of his favorite places has always been the Juntura area in eastern Oregon, where we spent the last three days of October a few years ago in search of the elusive game bird. There are hundreds of square miles of public lands along the Malheur River open for hunting.

When wetter weather begins in the fall, the birds leave the lower ground near the river and head for the higher hills where they can obtain water from the grass and pockets in the rocks after a rain.

We figured we hit the transition period when the birds began this migration. The first afternoon hunt was warm and dry as we hiked up a steep ridge and found only a few birds. On the way back down, we flushed a large covey of chukar only 20 to 30 yards from the river.

The next morning, we hunted in cold rain and high winds. Itâ€™s not the rain, Madison said, that will make for difficult hunting but the high winds. The birds are spookier and often flush even before the dogs go on point, he noted. After a storm, the birds get more active â€“ feeding and calling to each other. During the rain, they seek shelter and donâ€™t move around much.

Scott Staats with a chukar Madison has done his share of exploring Central and Eastern Oregon for good chukar hunting. â€œYou go to a lot of places then keep track of the ones that have paid off,â€• he said. Ideal chukar habitat consists of treeless, rocky, open slopes. The birds thrive on cheatgrass and prefer areas near cliffs and crevices where they can escape to safety.

This year appears to be fairly productive for chukar. Madison and most wildlife biologists agree that hunting pressure doesnâ€™t have a lot of impact on numbers of birds. The weather conditions during the nesting season and the severity of winter determine a successful population each year.

It takes a top-notch dog to hunt chukar successfully. I consider myself to be in pretty fair shape, but it took a lot to keep up with Madison, about 20 years my senior. From February through August, his dog training keeps him in shape. Then it's bow hunting for deer and elk. In between he exercises at athletic clubs and is out with his dogs everyday.

It takes a top-notch dog to hunt chukar successfully and a hunter has to be in good shape. Many hunters don't realize that the dogs must also be in top condition. We probably hiked close to 20 miles in the two and a half days we hunted and not much of that occurred on level ground. Of course dogs travel many more miles in a day than hunters.

He trades off with his three English pointers, giving each a rest between hunts. "Two or three hours out in the rocks and on steep hills will tire most dogs out pretty quickly," he said.

Besides the Malheur River drainage, Madison also likes to hunt the Deschutes River canyon, the John Day River area, the Steens Mountains and the Snake River canyon. When one of his dogs goes on point, Madison likes to get on the downhill side so the birds can't see him approach. When he holds his hand up, the dog knows to hold the point. Then he'll walk in quickly ahead of the dog and the birds will flush.

Madison said it's tough to hunt chukar effectively without a good dog. He offered this perspective. "The dog hunts the chukar, you hunt the dog."

Chukar can fly at about 45 miles per hour so you have to be fast and lead them accordingly. They can fly even faster when heading downhill or in windy conditions. If you stop your swing, you'll most likely miss the bird.

It's important to limit your talking and make no unnecessary noise because the birds are voice sensitive. Madison uses hand signals for his dogs and other hunters. If birds see or hear you, they get nervous and flush without giving the dogs a chance.

The hunter also has to be proficient with a shotgun. Madison often sets up his own clays for practice shooting. He prefers a double barrel 12-gauge with 6 shot, backing it up with 5 shot.

Be prepared to go through a box of shells in a day. Heâ€™s taken out champion sporting clay shooters and had them come home with no birds and an empty box of shells.

That made me feel much better after shooting about five or six shells per bird taken. We figured we saw well over 300 birds on our three-day hunt. Madison has seen upwards of a thousand birds in a day on past hunts. He gives the following advice to anyone wanting to get into chukar hunting. â€œLearn to shoot your gun well, get in shape and get a good dog.â€•

On our last hunt, one of the dogs disappeared over a nearby ridge and seconds later a bighorn ram ran out ahead of us and made a dash to a rocky butte, where he was joined by two other sheep. As we worked around the butte, I looked up to see about 30 more sheep grazing right toward us. They got within about 30 yards before they saw us and ran down the slope at a full gallop. We also saw antelope and deer in the area.

Many of the back roads in the Juntura area contain a lot of clay. The least bit of rain can turn them slick. Be sure to have a four-wheel drive vehicle and carry chains.

Madison has hunted chukar in every kind of weather. One day while hunting on steep ground in freezing rain, he pulled up and took a shot at a bird. The recoil took his legs out from under him and he tumbled down the slope. "I broke that gun in two pieces," he said with a grin, "but I got the bird."

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