

Hunting Preserves offer extended upland game bird season

by Scott Staats

The pheasant lifted off against the backdrop of Mount Jefferson as the hunter raised the shotgun to his shoulder and dropped his quarry. It was a picture-perfect day to be out hunting game birds in Central Oregon.

Steve Leonard and his long-time hunting partner George Staidl took advantage of Crafty's Quail Farm and Hunting Preserve to extend their season on pheasants. They booked a hunt with preserve owner Jim Crafton for eight pheasants, half hens and half roosters.

George Staidl shooting pheasant over Mt. Jefferson " All photos by Scott Staats

Skip Geer (left) and Hobart Manns

Steve Leonard (left) and George Staidl Hobart Manns with rooster Steve Leonard and Mt. Jefferson Within a few hours, the pair had their eight birds, thanks to the help of their three Brittany spaniels. "A hunting preserve is a good deal for people with a busy schedule and a limited amount of time," Leonard said. "It not only extends the season, but also gives your dogs the chance to work with birds that you know are there." He prefers hunting with muzzle-loading shotguns.

Although the hunting season for most game birds on public lands ended about two months ago, die-hard hunters have until the end of the month to try their luck on private hunting preserves.

Crafty's is one of 74 licensed hunting preserves in Oregon. Located just south of Madras on 640 acres of private land within the Crooked River National Grassland, the preserve has a mixture of cropland, sagebrush and part of Willow Creek canyon. There are spectacular views of the Cascades extending from Mount Hood to Mount Bachelor from the preserve.

Crafton raises mostly pheasants, but hunters also have a chance at taking chukar, valley quail and Hungarian partridge. He has raised game birds for over 20 years and having a hunting preserve has always been a dream for him.

“It’s getting tougher to find birds on public land and it’s also tough to get on private land,” Crafton said. That’s one of the reasons he started the preserve in the first place.

The 640 acres has some of the finest native and cropland habitat in Central Oregon. All of Crafton’s birds are wild-raised released birds. They are raised in native habitat covered flight pens, which are designed to teach birds to live and act just like wild birds. Most of the hunting preserve consists of rolling grassy hills with some sage and juniper cover. There is some cropland and much native Central Oregon grasses. Highlights include easy walking terrain, tough canyon terrain for those desiring more challenging hunting and waterers for dogs throughout preserve.

According to Meg Eden, wildlife biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Prineville, hunting preserves are becoming more popular in Oregon. She said they provide an increased opportunity for training dogs and can accommodate younger or older hunters who may have difficulty hiking in more rugged terrain.

“The hunting preserve season lasts eight months compared with about a two month season on pheasants,” Eden said. For the general season on pheasants the limit is two roosters. On a preserve hunters may take as many birds as they wish to pay for and they can be either hens or roosters.

Many young hunters got their first chance to experience bird hunting last September at Crafty's Quail Farm and Hunting Preserve. Crafton has hosted the Youth Pheasant Hunt the past eight years on his 640-acre preserve.

"Our priority is wildlife and kids, plus we enjoy teaching young hunters about hunting, safety and ethics," said Crafton. "Kids are our future for hunting." He said he participates each year in the youth hunts for the good of hunting, habitat enhancement and helping others.

"For many of these kids, this is their first opportunity to hunt game birds," said Eden. "It gives kids the experience of handling firearms and going hunting prior to being able to hunt big game species." She accompanies some of the kids and explains the habits of game birds and gives young hunters tips on hunting safety and ethics.

For Christian Elmore of Prineville, it was an exciting hunt. "This was the first pheasant I've ever taken and it was a fun day," the 14-year old said.

Crafty's Hunting Preserve is located just south of Madras. Call 541-548-5126 for more information.

Phil Carlson, owner of TREO Ranches in Heppner recently donated a \$1,600 4-person hunt to OHA. Carlson is also the president of the Association of Oregon Hunting Preserves. All but a few of the preserves are on the east side of the Cascades. Currently, 22 of the 74 hunting preserves are members of the association.

Carlson believes that hunting preserves are important to many bird hunters. He said a lot of the private land in eastern Oregon is now locked up with leases between groups of people and the landowners. He added that between the end of January and the beginning of April bird hunting for the most part is over. Most of the preserves operate between the first of September and the end of March.

“All of these addicted bird hunters need to go some place and that’s where the hunting preserve come in,” Carlson explained. He offers pheasant and chukar hunting.

Another advantage of hunting preserves is that each offers a different experience and few specialize in the same thing. Some cater to father-son hunts, others with training dogs and some, like TREO, specialize in company or group hunts.

“We are a full-service destination hunting preserve,” said Carlson. “Hunters specifically come to our place for the lodging, the meals and the bird hunting experience.”

Hunters have been taking pheasants and chukar at the preserve since 1988. There is a wide variety of terrain to hunt including flat sections for pheasant hunting and steeper terrain for chukar hunting.

Hunting preserves range in size from as little as 100 acres all the way up to 1,280 acres. Preserves are required to be at least a half-mile away from each other. Most preserves charge by the number of birds taken and prices range between \$25 and \$35 per bird.

TREO Ranches is located in Heppner. Call 888-276-6794 for more information.

Another great preserve Iâ€™ve hunted on is the Mayville Flat Shooting Preserve in Condon. The property boasts two separate 1,280-acre licensed preserves complete with wheat stubble fields and three canyons that offer great opportunities for pheasant, chukar and quail.

The preserve has a 1,600 square-foot ranch house that can be rented by the room or the entire house. They also have an indoor/outdoor kennel and a 10-acre dog training field for year round use.

One of Mayville Flatâ€™s unique offerings is a 2-day â€œCast and Blastâ€• where hunters can go on a fully guided upland bird hunt with owner Skip Geer one day and spend the next day on a fully guided steelhead or smallmouth bass trip with Steve Fleming of Mah-Hah Outfitters on the scenic John Day River.

For more information, call 541-384-4705.

“We are trying to introduce new people to hunting preserves,” said AOHP president Phil Carlson. “We also want to provide a quality hunt on every preserve so no matter where you go, you’re not disappointed. There’s a hunting preserve out there for everyone and there’s a price range out there for everyone.”

Scott Staats is a fulltime outdoor writer who has lived in Central Oregon the last ten years. His articles have appeared in local, regional and national publications.

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