

Goshawks and Grouse My Final Salute

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Author and goshawk hawking sharptail grouse.

Over the last eight years I have written several articles about my female goshawk, Tomahawk. Who could have known that in March, a day that started out like any other, with the gos and my team of beagles chasing snowshoe hares in the boreal swamps of northern Ontario, that she would meet her demise? I always figured that when her time came she would be taken by a lynx or timber wolf that was chasing the same prey as she was. As it turned out, Mother Nature apparently had other plans.

So this is my final salute to this great gamehawk!



Female goshawk, Tomahawk, ready to launch after grouse.

It was still two hours before dawn on this clear cool morning. The predawn temps were hovering around the freezing mark and, although still early, the ol' falconer was up and moving around. He really couldn't help himself; it had become such a ritual over the years. He had already fed and watered the pointers, and they had been staked outside for a good half-hour alongside the falcons sitting on their blocks. The fresh smell of perking coffee (not Tim Horton's) inside the tent made even the deepest of sleepers, the young falconers, begin to stir. "Better get your asses moving

guys! It's going to be a great morning—let's rock and roll!" There was just a hint of wind from the north and with that came the coolness only a falconer and his birds learn to love. The multicolored eastern sky gave a glimpse of the sunrise while the moon was just setting. A perfect day!

The three falconers had four birds to fly that morning, and with the amount of upland game they had seen on the previous day's scouting, their hopes were running high. There was a constant chatter among them (as they weighed the birds and attached telemetry to them) about who was going to

be up to bat first, and what coveys they should check out in the early dawn mists. Were they going to try for huns or go after the sharptails? With the dogs and birds all loaded, everyone jumped into the truck and headed out as the first pink colors of dawn appeared. The choice had been made earlier: the first year peregrine would fly at the first good setup of huns. They drove across the frozen wheat stubble, their excitement rising as they crested each hilltop, until the first covey was bumped and the huns visually followed, then marked down. It was a perfect setup: no cover for at least 400 yards in all directions, and no power lines or fence lines. It looked almost too good to be true; it was just what this young bird needed to build up her confidence. The truck was stopped in short order and the young apprentice lifted his falcon onto his glove. They knew what was up next, and the anticipation in both peaked with the chill of the morning air.

The apprentice lifted the hood and the falcon took her first look at the morning. She flapped her wings a few times, mostly just stretching the night stiffness from them, roused, and lifted into the crisp air. The group of falconers watched and took in the scene that was playing out before them. The peregrine flew straight away from them, climbing all the while, and when about a quarter-mile out, she made her turn and then climbed in earnest for the heavens. When she was up close to 1000 feet, the falconers gave the command to their dogs to "hunt 'em up."

This is how countless mornings start each fall—falconers hunting upland game on the open prairies with those long-winged birds called falcons. But for us dirt hawkers who hunt with short-wings, taking grouse or huns with our birds is mostly just a dream—albeit one that *can* become reality with shocking regularity if all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

As in the wide open, vast prairies, you need the right terrain and quarry to make it all happen,



Pair of spruce grouse at roadside.

and that is exactly what I have in northern Ontario. A few years ago I wrote an article in this magazine entitled "Goshawks and Sharptail Grouse" (Vol. 31) about hawking sharptail grouse with a goshawk. Doable, you bet! It is now several years later, flying the same goshawk in her eighth season, and I have expanded my search for all three species of grouse that live in my home territory, namely the ruffed, spruce and sharptail. I can hear all the naysayers right now. "DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME—your bird will get discouraged, lose its confidence...let alone the time blown when you could be chasing something catchable like bunnies!" I just want to say to other short-wingers, "DON'T LISTEN TO THEM!" The dream *is* possible and as long as you have gas money for the truck with which to go in search of the grouse—it's a definite reality.

First off, let me explain where I live and the terrain in which I hunt. If you look on a map of Ontario and look north of Lake Superior, you will see a small town along Hwy #11 called Longlac. Basically, there are few paved roads north of where I live, but a lot of bush/logging

roads that were built by logging companies for hauling timber to their mills. Now I am talking over 500 miles of what we locals here call "bush roads," which range from two-lane, 50 mph gravel roads, to little one-lane trails into the logged-over regenerated areas. In some areas you can drive for hours without seeing another vehicle. Along the main logging roads, where the ruffed and spruce grouse like to hang out (as seen in the pictures), the trees grow to within 20 yards of the side of the road; once inside the bush line, the trees are thick! The cutovers the sharptails frequent, on the other hand, vary from wide open to regeneration around 15 feet tall.

Although our grouse are the same three species that are found all over the USA and in other parts of Western Canada, they have adapted quite differently to their predators here.

Ruffed grouse, for example, are hunted by locals who walk along small bush roads and shoot the grouse in the head with a .22 rifle as the birds walk ahead of them in the brush. Don't get me wrong, once they have been shot at a few times by the gun-hunters, they do start to

put their head down and run off the road into the bush at the mere sight of an approaching vehicle, but overall they are seen feeding on clover/berries, and picking up grit throughout the day along the roadsides. Our spruce grouse are commonly referred to as "fools' hens" by old timers because it is said that if you go hungry in the bush and need food, you can walk right up to one and throw a short stick at it as it sits in a tree looking at you—voilà, supper "à la stick." These grouse live mostly in the coniferous forests and, though they do eat berries and such, their main diet is the needles of balsam fir, jack pine and tamarack. These spruce grouse also come out to the roadside, mainly in the mornings, to get their fill of little stones and grit.

Our sharptail grouse are also a little different from their cousins that inhabit the wide open spaces. Fifteen to twenty years ago, we never had sharptail grouse around here, except every so many years some would migrate south from the Hudson Bay lowlands because of lack of food farther north. Over the years they have adapted very well to their new habitat and are



Spruce grouse eating pine needles.

now considered a native species, breeding throughout our young cutover areas. They have their leks, which can be viewed in the spring, and they stay fairly close to these areas in the fall hunting months. When driving, most of the grouse seen along the roadside generally just walk off into the brush. Once shot at a few times by gun-hunters, though, they change their escape tactics and bust out flying as soon as they see or hear a vehicle coming close, much like sharp-tails in the prairies.

Looking at the information in the previous paragraph, one would surmise that falconers can just drive along, stop their vehicle, get out, walk over, and pick up the grouse with their bare hands. ALMOST—but not quite; thus we have the reason for a using a raptor, specifically a goshawk. A tiercel or female? I have used both, and in my experience the tiercel is faster off the glove and wins hands-down in terms of maneuverability. One

must remember, however, that the ruffed and spruce grouse have to be caught within 20 yards, as they are home free once they hit the bush line. Beyond 45 yards, I have yet to have my gos fly one down; the grouse are just too fast. It is truly a survival game of seconds.

The reason I prefer a female is because of her large feet. When the grouse are busting off the side of the road, they are mostly flying out at a 45 degree angle, so the gos does not have time to come from underneath and sink her talons into the grouse's breast, but has to be able to grab and hold onto the grouse's back. When one looks at the body structure of a grouse, the back is where all the protective bones are, with very little meat for a raptor to sink its talons into. To be successful at this type of grouse hawking, the raptor's talons have to be very sharp, and I mean *needle* sharp, or they will not hold the grouse; they will make contact and take some feathers, but the grouse will break away.

How does a typical day of grouse hawking go for my team? First off, I have a long season stretching from mid-September until the end of March. From September until the snow flies, we get cold temperatures ranging from 10° C down to minus 30° C (50° F to -22° F). In mid-December, I am up like my fellow falconers out West, well before the crack of dawn, sitting in front of the TV with my coffee, watching the weather forecast. The most productive days are the ones that are clear and cool. I do not have to stake out my pointer, but rather weigh my gos and put her in the back of the truck. Once there, she knows the game. She will ride back there as I drive slowly down the logging roads in the predawn light, looking for grouse out feeding at the roadside.

The spruce grouse are usually out at first light and, believe me when I say the gos can spot one on the roadside from a quarter-mile away if the road is flat and straight! Because of the miles that need to be driven to find these grouse, the gos is tethered on her round perch in the back of the truck enclosed with a cap. As soon as I start driving down the gravel road, the gos faces forward, looking through the front of the cap, out the front window of the truck. If she sees a grouse, she will lean forward on her perch, not unlike a pointer on point. Her feathers flatten right out against her body and she stares it down. Once a grouse has been spotted, I pull over to the side of the road, go back to get her, and bring her up front to ride on my glove as we do a drive-by.

Once again I can hear it loud and clear "NOT FAIR!!! NOT FAIR!!! That is NOT how you hawk grouse!" Just a minute here: Isn't that how crows are hawked with Harris' and goshawks, and how kestrels and Harris' are hawked at starlings? What's the difference? To me, the difference is that the grouse has a way better chance of escaping than a crow or a starling. What about those magazine articles about the



Tomahawk on male spruce grouse.

coveted “kill-me-ponds” on the open prairies? You know the ones I am talking about, the ones young falcons “break their teeth on” getting into this sport, used by all long-wingers to give their birds the confidence they need to move on to bigger water—small dugouts with wide open spaces all around, and the falcon above at 500 feet. For me, it is all about whatever works to improve the bird’s confidence, and I have no qualms about others doing that, just as I know car hawking grouse in this manner is a great and sporting way to hunt a gos!

Remember what I said about how close the bush grows to the side of the road? Twenty yards—that’s it, and the grouse are home free. What about the spruce grouse? They are so innocent; they sit on the side of the road and, without a hawk on your fist, you sometimes have to drive around them to avoid hitting them with your vehicle. Enter Mother Nature - remember *cruel* Mother Nature? Something has to feed those higher up the food chain. These grouse, from the very start of their lives, are pursued by predators both in the air (eg., hawks, owls) and on the ground (eg., marten, fox, lynx). They know in a split second whether or not their life is in danger. If they miscalculate, they forfeit their lives. The second that grouse sees a raptor it is instantly in flight. One second it is eating grit and the next it is moving at mach speed.

Sorry about that outburst at the purists. It’s just that I have seen how the hunt unfolds, and how both prey and predator have advantages, depending on circumstances. Ya sure, I could pick up my .22 rifle or shotgun and go out and shoot my five grouse, but I prefer to use the goshawk as my weapon of choice; it’s way more challenging by my standards. So back to the hunt. I now have the gos on my glove and the driver’s window open and start to drive toward the grouse. The gos is lying flatter on my glove the closer we get and, as we close in to the magical 30-yard mark, she is ready to blast off with anticipation.

Usually the grouse makes the first move, but if not, at that range, the gos rockets off my fist. Very seldom do the grouse fly straight for the bush, but rather upward at a 45 degree angle. *If* the flight starts within the 30-yard mark, *if* the grouse busts out on the driver’s side, and *if* it has been feeding on the driver’s side when first approached, *then* the goshawk’s success rate goes up to 75% or a tad higher.

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If the grouse are in the center of the road, at times they take off and fly low and straight away. These are great flights because they are more prolonged—no bush, just speed against speed. If the gos has not made contact within 50 yards, the grouse blows it away with its superior speed. For grouse feeding on the passenger’s side of the truck, the success rate goes down to about 40%. Remember the 20-yard rule to freedom: Most times, the extra seconds that it takes the gos to fly out the driver’s window and then across the hood is enough for the grouse to escape.

The success rates were not always that high, as it took the goshawk a good two years to figure out the game and get her footing down. You must also remember that all our grouse populations

are cyclical, and if we get wet, cool weather during the first few weeks of the hatch, most of the young will perish. We are also competing for the same birds as the gun hunters, and there are a lot of them early in the season!

As with all types of falconry, the cost of gas associated with each hunt is extremely high, especially here in northern Ontario. Two winters ago, gas went as high as \$1.45/liter (equivalent to \$5.80/gallon). When you are driving some 100 miles a day to find grouse, and only get one or two slips, you quickly change your prey species to snowshoe hare, which can be hunted just three miles from my house.

Part Two of my season involves hawking in the dead of winter, with temps in the -30° to -35° C range (-22° to -31° F). It is cold. There is no other way to define it; it’s “cold for nothing,” as I say. The sound of tires driving on the frozen snow wakes the grouse, who seem to be dozing from the cold along the roadside. On these mornings, the grouse do not get out to the road until around 11am-1pm, once the sun has warmed things up a bit. But the game is much the same with the gos on her perch in the back of the truck until a grouse has been spotted, and then stopping and bringing her up front. It only takes a few minutes with your hand in a falconry glove to start the process of frostbite. If I am hunting a favorable stretch of road that normally holds grouse, I place the gos on my glove with the window open and truck heater blowing full blast on panel to keep the gos warm, and I travel along at very slow speeds. After a successful hunt, I keep her inside the cab for a while to warm her up. Then we travel to a new area and start the process all over again.

Part Three of my season is my favorite. It is mid- to late-March, and the end of the season is approaching. We are now hunting grouse that have been hawked by Mother Nature all winter, be they goshawks that have over-wintered here, owls hunting them at dawn and dusk,

or marten and lynx sneaking up on them throughout the winter months while the grouse spend their nights under the snow until daybreak. The grouse are at the top of their game, and anything that moves is suspicious to them. But the gos is at the top of her game, too; she is at her peak weight and fitness. Chasing snowshoe hare for the last four months has made her the killing machine she now is. Her confidence reigns supreme and in her mind there in *nothing* she can’t catch. Let me repeat: SHE CAN CATCH ANYTHING! She is at the top of the food chain. All winter, the beagles have been chasing hares, resulting in her taking slips from 80-foot perches, missing, and then flying right back up to those heights to find the fleeing rabbit. There is nothing like being on the wing for hours on end (although *I* tire out from all the slogging on snowshoes)! Doing this type of flying gets her in shape. It is the time of year when everything is warming up just a bit, and the long cold winter days and nights are a thing of the past for another season. The best days are those just on the plus side of the freezing mark, with a slight dampness or mist in the air. By this time of year, the snow has melted off the bush roads and the grouse just seem to be out having a party each morning, talking about their past escapes from death.

The hunt takes place right at first light and is over within an hour of daybreak, as at this time of year it seems like only the spruce grouse are coming out to the roadside for grit. It is not uncommon to see anywhere from pairs all the way up to family groups of six to nine spruce grouse in one small area. Seeing this many grouse, one after another, in a short stretch of road seems to drive the gos to higher and higher heights of greed. Trade her off on the first one, get her back on the fist and move along the road, and she can barely stay on the glove in her anticipation, just waiting for the next sighting. She is like a rubber band pulled tight, just waiting for that grouse and the moment when she



Author, goshawk and sharptail grouse.


can burst after it. A lot of the time she is not able to control herself and wants to bate and take off after them when they are still 50-75 yards away. But over time she has learned self-control until that magical moment when both prey and predator erupt simultaneously to once again allow us to view Mother Nature up close and personal.

The following excerpts are a few pages from my diary:

**December 7, -28°C (-18°F)
weight 1010 grams**

COLD today, same as yesterday so going to try for grouse as not many people on the bush roads today. Checked the receiver for a signal and got nothing...figured hum, maybe too cold but hadn't been in the past so checked and found my transmitter's (Holohil) outer casing had broken off and no antenna. This has not happened before, even after hunting all season so it is going back. Back home, hook up another transmitter and good signal so off we go again. I figure so cold out that the grouse will be

out to the roads late anyway. Got the gos on my glove, opened the window; because every so often she bates and do not want to break any tail feathers (good reason for using a hood) and have the heater going full blast on panel so the gos and I do not freeze to death. We only travel about 30km/hr (20 mph) and hadn't gone very far when see our first spruce grouse. A good short flight, #1 in the bag, but when it is cold the grouse are a little slower by about a millisecond. I trade the gos off for a bunny leg which she does rather fast as she wants back into the truck as well. Drove another 10 miles and nothing, so turn around. On the way back see a spruce grouse out on the edge of the snow bank catching some sunny rays but it is on the passenger's side and bush is right close so decide to go by and turn around. Of course the gos sees it and bates, but I hold on as do not want to miss it. Make the turn around and do the drive-by. I think this grouse must have been sun blinded because it made it only about a foot off the snow before the gos just bowled it over into the snow. Ye ha! I will take even the easy



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ones on a day like this. My feet are cold even in the truck. #2 down, and once again trade her off but let her pluck away for a bit longer to calm her down a bit; she steps right off once I cover the grouse up. Back into the nice warm truck again and travel about another 5 miles. See a black spot on the side of the road up ahead and then see it move, but once again on the passenger's side. Just those extra few feet of having to travel across the hood of the truck cuts the catch % down by about 50%. I figure what the hell, it is out from the edge about 5 yards and so just before I go by it, I move to the far side of the road away from it and let the gos go out the window as I drive by. Usually she goes across the front of the truck, depending on how close we get. This time, though, I was almost right beside the grouse, so she went right over the top of the truck and smacked into the bird just as it was lifting off, for #3. The gos really wanted to chow down on this one but just too damn cold so pulled a leg off and traded her off and got back into the heat.

Good outing - three for three on the grouse and being so cold, called it a day. No snowshoe hares for today.

**March 8, -2° C (+28° F)
weight 1050 grams**

The temperature has been just right; above freezing during the day and just below at night which means most of the snow will have melted on the bush roads, and the gravel will start showing up. I checked 2X last week for grouse and nothing, but this morning they were out in full force, and I ended up seeing 10 total. The section of road where they usually are is only about 5 miles long and on my first pass, nothing again. I was about to give up and then on my way back I spotted two out on the side of the road, but on the passenger's side. So the first set up I blow totally; could not get the gos out the window properly, and off they go..great!!!!!! Drive a bit further and another on the wrong side, but at least the gos got a slip. The grouse was well on it way into the bush line but the gos crashed through - and came up empty handed. I called her back and was she pissed!!!!!!!!!! As we drove farther, she would just not sit still, wanting out of the truck, bent on revenge on the next grouse. I drove off down another road, figuring maybe the first two grouse would be back out in a few minutes and, sure

enough, when I returned there were three of them at the roadside. A male was prancing around for his two girlfriends all out in his Sunday best, nice red eye patch and tail fanned out. The gos had her pick, as she was right on top of them before they busted out, and she took the male out -poor guy, all preened up for his girlfriends and them lights out. Traded her off after letting her pluck feathers for a bit, and drove on to see another one on the passenger's side again, but the gos took it about 30 feet up, just as it was entering the bush line. Good foot work, and #2 in the bag. When I got back to the truck I looked down the road and could see another one out feeding about 1/4 mile up. Gos was pumped by this time and ready to rock and roll. Got in and drove on, and this grouse took off as we got within the 30 yards and went straight down the road. At first I figured no way the gos would catch up, but she turned on the jets and overpowered it within 20 yards. Great flight, and right in front of me! The foot work to take these grouse is great to see because it happens so fast - all she has time to do is grab them from the back side where all the bones are. Sharp talons make or break the game.

Limit is 3 so gave her the front leg of a snowshoe hare and called it a morning, but did have to pass on one as I drove back...damn..will get it tomorrow morning!!! This winter has been bad for grouse as just couldn't find them, and had gone out 9 times with not even a sighting so I was waiting for March and warm weather, which brings them out. Three within about 20 minutes - so worth getting up for! Still have until the end of the month before the season closes on grouse, so should be able to rack up a few more.

**March 25, +2° C (+36° F)
weight 1045 grams**

Freezing rain yesterday, and everything like a skating rink, so no hunting. Rained all night and was still a light rain this morning but it seems like as long as the temp is +, then the grouse are out even in the rain. Bush roads will be icy so stayed on the hwy to get to them and sure enough, a ruffed grouse out on the side, eating gravel, but figured better let it go. Finally on the bush road and still hasn't melted too much so still single lane. Had only gone about a mile and a spruce grouse sitting right in the middle of the road. The gos is still in the back of the truck - she sees it while still 600 feet off through the front windshield, and is leaning right over on her perch. I stop, get her out ,and move in, but the grouse breaks out early.

Travel another couple miles and see another, but it also busts out too early. The next one, though, is perfect for a drive-by shooting. It is on the snow bank, about 30 yards away, when the gos launches and only makes it about 10 feet in the air before she scoops it up. Ah!!!! worth getting out of bed for now! See 5 others that all bust out while still 50 yards out - spooked by the sound of the truck tires on the frozen snow surface. Not a chance for the gos. She was getting pretty pissed seeing all these grouse get away, so luckily the next one held a bit tighter. I let her go, thinking she didn't have a chance, but once again, she proved me wrong! The grouse broke off into the bush on the passenger's side, and went up at a

45 degree angle - the gos took it in a puff of feathers about 20 feet up, just before it made the bush. Great foot work. I let her pluck for a while and then traded her off. One other one busted out early on us, so drove to a different logging road. This one was two lanes wide and although 9:30 am, figured with the rain and warm temps might still be out getting gravel. Sure enough, only went about 4 miles and saw one tucked right

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against the snow bank. It was a perfect set up, and as I got closer, the gos leaned over on the glove, just waiting for the right moment. We were about 25 yards out when the gos pushed off. The grouse immediately took flight, but only made it 30 feet or so before being dragged down. #3 and so call it a day. Only a few more days left of grouse season for this year. Would like to put a few more in the bag, but I am very happy with the triple.

Hunting sharptail grouse is a little different. They like to inhabit the large cut-overs that range from low ground vegetation and wide-open spaces to regeneration about 10-15 feet tall. The traffic is minimal and often you might only see one

other vehicle in a half-day of hunting. In the fall, the sharptails prefer to eat berries, their favorites being the blueberries and rose hips that grow along the roadside. I normally drive at very slow speeds, around 10-15 mph. I have my driver's window open and the gos is sitting on my glove, partially out the window. She knows the game and is constantly on the lookout for the smallest of

movements by the grouse. Most of the time the gos sees the grouse before I do. As I mentioned earlier, these grouse are a little different from their prairie cousins in that they mostly run when you get close with the vehicle, or they fly up a few feet into the air; if they are not pursued or don't sense immediate danger, they might fly 10-20 yards and set back down again. Notice I said only when they *don't* sense any danger—once they see that gos flap its wings just once, they are heading for mach speed, and the chase is on. This is speed against speed, and the gos has to overtake the grouse within 75 yards or they blow her away. The grouse's other escape tactic when they sense the gos is closing and about to grab them is to simply fall out of the sky as if hit with a load of #7s from a shotgun. They

drop-hit the ground and take off in completely different direction, and this all happens within a heartbeat. Doable? YES. With regularity? YES. All it takes is the game species and gas money! Did I forget to mention it also helps to have a gos on your fist that just can't help herself from busting off after them the second they are within that magic zone?

Here are a few more examples from my diary of how well the gos fared with sharptails:

October 5
Finally getting her out for the first time this year. Going moose hunting with Tom, and taking her along, as lots

of grouse around this year. Drove up around Spade area, and on the drive in, in the dark, saw a lot of snowshoe hare, like we used to. Too bad it is so far from town. Drove around for sharptails and finally found two by the road. They jumped up as I drove past. I stopped and backed up, and they came right down again. I got the gos out, and she remembered the game right away. I got up close to them, 20 yards, and they broke, but instead of going out straight away, they went up high. They were both together and she transferred off the one and did a barrel roll under the other just as she overtook it and grabbed on. Gave her a half crop, then traded her off. Her manners are still bad but her killing instinct is right on. I am being very careful around her. Her weight the night before was 1070gm, and her normal flying weight is about 1000gm. Doesn't get much better than that for first slip of the year taking a sharptail

October 22

Temp around 0°C. Checked the bird's weight: 975 grams – should be bang on and ready to go. Off we went down the Blueberry with the gos in the back of the truck. We'd only gone about 9 miles when we noticed two spruce hens just poking up on the side of the road on the passenger's side of the vehicle. Since success rate going out the driver's side is very low, decided to try to send her out passenger window. Drove up on the birds, gos saw them, bent down low, and out the window she went. Took a male spruce grouse from 25' up in the air – good slip. Had it right by the tail end; she pulled out most of the tail feathers. Traded her off with a goose leg, but she was reluctant to do it – finally did, though. Put her back into the back of the truck, and drove for about another 20 miles before seeing our next spruce grouse. Stopped the truck, got her out, and once again, was going to try to send her out the passenger window. Got within 25 yards, pulled over to the middle of the road, and the gos saw the grouse starting to walk.

I let her go, then all hell broke loose! Instead of going out the side window, the gos was on the dashboard, trying to get out the front window. Next, she was on the passenger's lap, Boots the beagle was freaking out, trying to get under my legs on the other side of the truck – the gos spread out her wings and tail, and I wasn't sure if she was going to grab the beagle or just make herself look big and fierce. Finally got things under control,

first pass, no sharptails were seen. There was still lingering smoke in the air, so I decided to turn back. In one of the two spots where we usually see the sharptails, we saw five on the road. The gos noticed them, bent low – as we got closer, the closest one broke off to the left over the cut over, and three others about 30 yards out, started to fly straight down the road. The gos was out in a flash. I almost died when she went right past the easy one, and started chasing the three. It was turbo against turbo, and the gos closed the distance fast. She really is in pretty good shape this year – as she could never have overtaken a sharptail last year like she is now. She pressured the last grouse so hard, it pulled one of two tactics: they usually pull a 90 degree turn in the air or they drop out of the air as if shot with a shotgun. This one chose the latter, which proved to be its demise. Usually they hit the ground in grass, bounce and take off in a different direction but this one misjudged and struck some burnt out tops 2-3 inches in diameter laying parallel to the ground, which stopped it immediately. Feathers flying, the gos did a complete wing over, hovered in the air for a second, found the sharptail, and took her prize. A good, hard flight, with a well-deserved kill. That's four sharptails for this year – she's really learning how to handle these grouse.

January 16

COLD that is what this weekend was, cold for nothing!!!! Yesterday it was -32°C and with wind -46°C so didn't even bother to try flying. Today wasn't much better. Since I wanted to try for grouse I had to go early so when I looked it was -38°C which is almost the same in Fahrenheit. BY the time I got the gos loaded and in the truck and moving out it was -40°C. WE drove to the spot (35miles) to where we had seen the sharptails the week before. I got the gos out of the back and into the front of the truck with me and had the heaters on full blast with the window open. We



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looked back, and the grouse was still on the side of the road eating gravel, oblivious to all that had just taken place. I said, "hell with this!" and turned the truck around. We went back into our routine – gos saw the grouse, bent low on the glove, 30 yards away, let her rip. She took the male spruce grouse just as he was inside the bush line, about 20 feet up. They look like an easy slip sitting on the side of the road, but once they see the gos, they are moving! #2 for the day – traded the gos off, still early, so looking for #3.

There was some slash burning going on the last couple of days, with a lot of smoke in the area where we usually find the sharptails. When we made our



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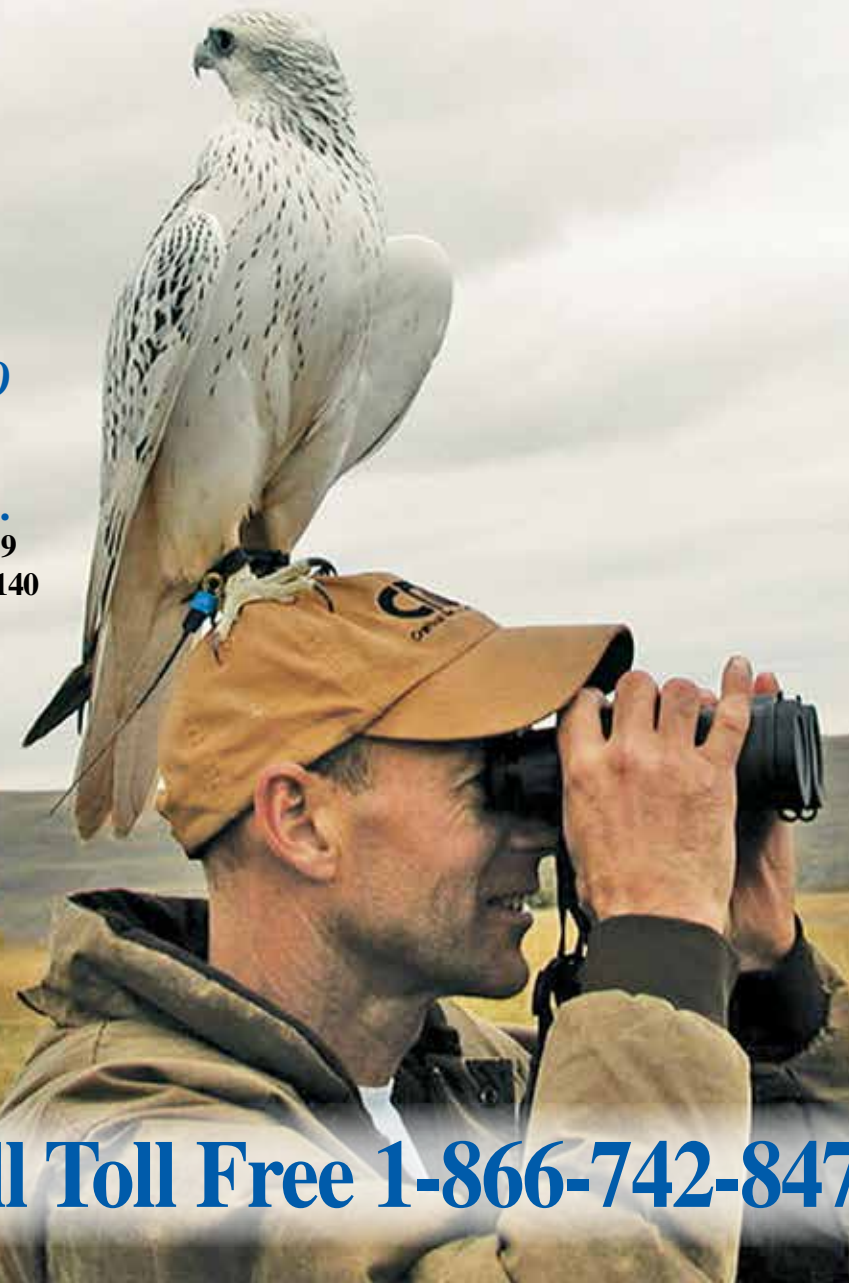
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saw a few fresh tracks on the snow and looked up and saw a sharptail sitting in the snow 30 yards out. Not sure how the gos sees them as they aren't moving but she knows the game. The second she sees it she is out the window and I thought it was going to work perfect. There was a little hill between us and the gos was able to get right on top of the grouse. I looked like a gimme. The grouse got 2 feet into the air and the gos was right on top of her next thing you know the grouse fell out of the air like it was shot and the gos took feather and as soon as the grouse hit the snow it was up and moving again. The gos pursued it for a bit but the game was over. All in all a good slip. I had seen sharptails do this in deep grass with my other gos's but first time i saw it in the snow.

So how did Mother Nature have a role in taking this great goshawk from me?

The two beagles and I were hawking in a 10 year-old forest fire area. Small scattered pine trees about 15-foot tall and lots of blown-down stumps; oh, did I forget to mention there was also four feet of snow and this was taking place with me on snowshoes, as all the hawking is done from December through the end of March? The snow-covered, blown-down stumps afforded the snowshoe hares much-needed cover from nightly visits of wolves, lynx and owls.

The gos had already taken two hares that day, and the young beagle had another one going. It was non-stop action, as once the hare knew it was being chased by the gos, it stayed in the thickest of cover. Only the beagle on it tracks would bring it out for that split-second burst to the next thicket. The beagle was right on the hare's tail when it broke cover, and I saw the gos launch from her overhead perch 70 feet up in the poplar. The fast wingbeat and the angle of the slip told me where to head. I snowshoed over and listened for the telltale squeal of the hare or the gos's tail bell, but I heard nothing. I waited a bit, snowshoeing around, looking in the area I thought she should have been, and nothing. Normally, if she misses she is back

up into the treetops and I hear her bell. Nothing. After about 10 minutes, I was starting to wonder if she had seen another bunny and tried to get a signal from the transmitter. NOTHING. I snowshoed around for a while longer, but still could not find the bird or get a signal, so I headed out to the truck and drove the roads to see if I could pick up a reading. STILL NOTHING. (New batteries were placed in the transmitter the day before and I did have a good signal before the hunt started.)

I was out looking for signals an hour before first light, with no luck, so I strapped on the snowshoes and started combing the woods, swinging the lure and calling for her.

By then it was about a half-hour before dark; a cold chill started running up and down my spine at the realization that the hawk was going to spend the night outside. Not a good feeling. My instinct told me that she had made a kill, cropped up, and I would find her in the treetops in the morning.

I was out looking for signals an hour before first light, with no luck, so I strapped on the snowshoes and started combing the woods, swinging the lure and calling for her. After several hours of snowshoeing, I kept coming back to the place her last slip would have taken her. It was noon by then, and as I came over the rise one more time, I spotted a great horned owl sitting on the

snow in full sunlight. I was able to walk within 10 yards of it. That cold chill from the night before turned into a knife being sunk into my heart. I looked around frantically, but saw no feathers on the snow; no sign of a struggle or anything, but I knew the hawk's body had to be close.

The only possible hiding place was under one snow-laden blown-down stump with a small opening on one side. I got down on my hands and knees and looked in. There, three feet down, I could see a few feathers and the half-eaten body of the gos.

I stood on that very spot, calling for the gos, the night before for several minutes, with not a sound from her tail bell or reading from her transmitter. What I think transpired was that when the gos made the initial kill on the hare she was dragged down into the snow cavern, and the owl must have been right overhead and heard the bell. On hearing it, the owl must have followed the gos into the hole, and being unable to pull her back out, killed her on the spot. As I said earlier, there wasn't a feather on the snow surface anywhere, and if the gos had been alive when I was standing above, I would have heard her tail bell.

Tomahawk had her game face on each time we went hunting. She knew just what to expect from me and what was expected of her. She only ever refused two slips off my glove in her eight years of hawking; she was just one of those very aggressive game hawks that loved to hunt within a weight range of 995-1100 grams, depending on the weather and time of year. Once she learned the game, it was more about the routine and what she knew was expected of her than what weight she was being flown at.

She ended up taking a variety of the usual goshawk quarry, but also took huns, geese and 71 grouse. Her best season on grouse was 26, so it is very doable under the right circumstances and with the right bird!

She will be missed!



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