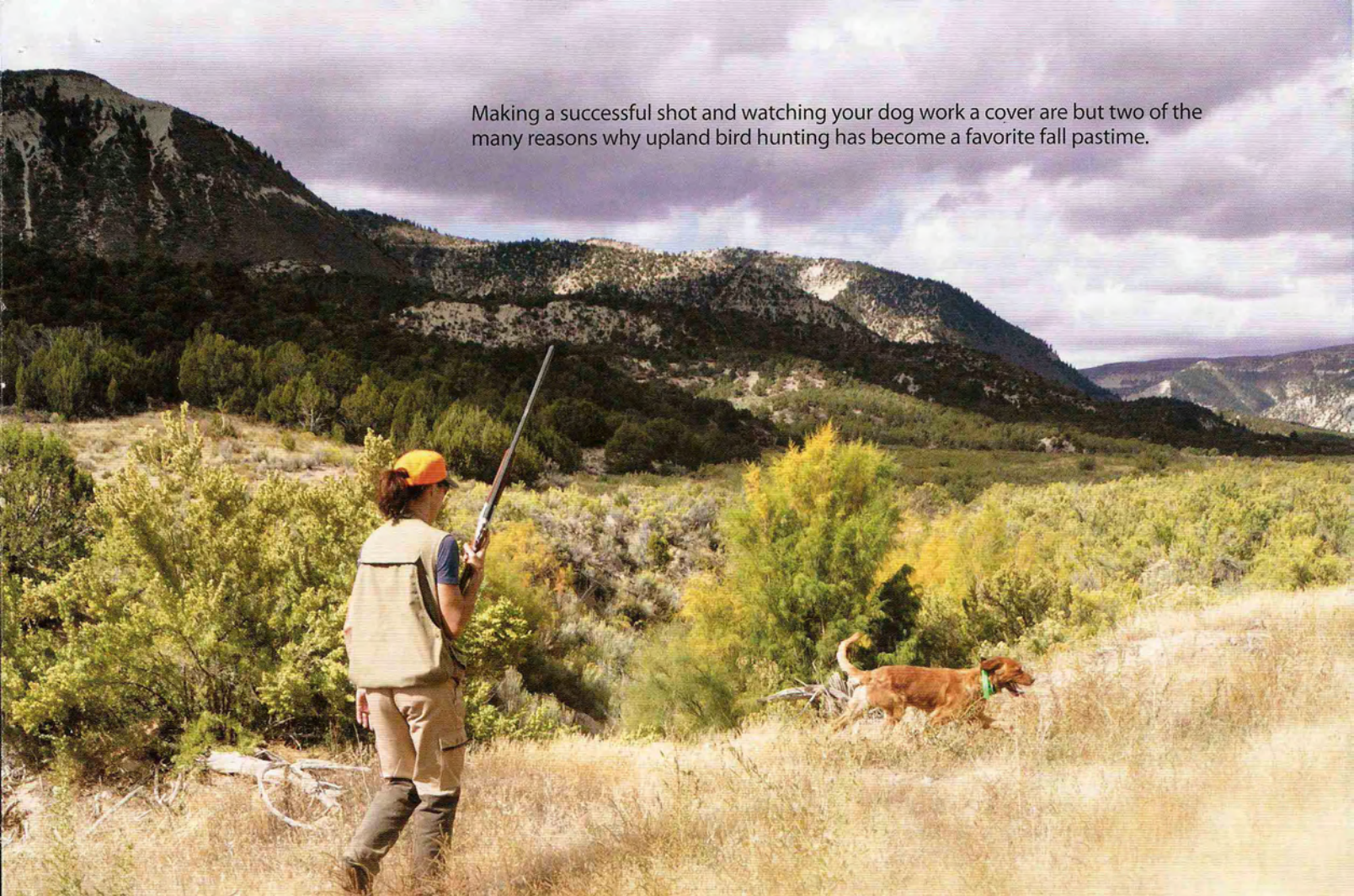


Savvy Shotgunning For Women



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By Lisa Densmore



Making a successful shot and watching your dog work a cover are but two of the many reasons why upland bird hunting has become a favorite fall pastime.

“Bird!” The shout sends my heart beating as wildly as the wings strumming from the clump of sage 30 yards in front of me. The unmistakable cackle of a rooster pheasant adds an off-key tune to the frantic percussion of the bird’s wings. Unconsciously, my thumb pushes the safety off on my 20 gauge as it swings to my face. My focus is so intense I barely feel the polished walnut press tightly to my cheek. My eyes lock on the bird’s unmistakable red eye patch as it bursts into the air. Bang. I barely hear the shot or feel my gun recoil into my shoulder. The pheasant folds and drops back into the sage as my pleased inner voice whispers, “Got it.” With delight, I watch my dog bound toward the place where the bird fell. He rummages around for a moment then lifts his head with the pheasant in his mouth, as pleased with his retrieval as I am with my shot.

Making a successful shot and watching my dog work a cover are but two of the many reasons why upland bird hunting has become one of my favorite fall pastimes. Getting outdoors, the stunning scenery, the exercise, the camaraderie with fellow hunters and the challenge of successfully finding and harvesting birds are among the many reasons why I love it. And there are few tastier treats than grilled grouse or pheasant stir-fry. But upland bird hunting hasn’t always been my passion. In fact, my introduction to shotgunning was such a turnoff that I immediately quit for two years.

I remember the day well, Oct. 1, 1988. My new husband of four months and his

regular hunting buddy crammed me into the backseat of his pickup with two 65-pound dogs, a half-dozen guns, boxes of shells, a mound of blaze orange and camo-patterned clothing and whatever truck paraphernalia resided permanently in the narrow, cramped space. After unfolding myself from the truck at the bird cover, I received a cursory lesson in hunter safety and how to load and shoot his back-up 12-gauge shotgun, a well-used side-by-side without a recoil pad.

We headed into the tall grass toward a stand of shrubs. It seemed an extraordinary effort just to stay in line with the two fast-walking men while keeping my gun

barrel away from them. My legs tired quickly pushing through the thick thigh-high flora. Now and again pricklers pierced my jeans. I didn’t notice one of the terminally zig-zagging dogs freeze by a tall clump of golden grass.

“Havoc is birdy. Get ready,” commanded my husband. I still fumbled to get the safety off as both his and his friend’s guns fired simultaneously.

“You gotta be quicker,” he coached.

Within the hour, both men had their limits and I had yet to fire a shot. They concluded a couple of clay targets would help. We piled back into the pickup and drove to the top of a small hill overlooking a large

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meadow. I remained enthusiastic as my husband placed an orange disc in a hand trap that resided under the passenger seat of the truck.

"Pull!" I shouted. As the neon disc took flight, I squeezed the trigger. The jolt almost knocked me onto my butt, and my cheek felt as if one of the dogs had taken a bite out of it.

"You have to keep your weight forward," both men chimed, "And get your face on your gun."

Get my face on my gun! My now tender face wanted to be as far away from that gun as possible, but I gallantly tried again. After the third try, I smiled sweetly, thanked them both and gladly watched them throw targets for each other from the truck.

Two years later, I reluctantly tried shotgunning again, but only because it promised to be a girl thing. One of my friends asked me to go with her to a local gun club where the state was holding a women's learn-to-shoot day. It was a blast, pun intended.

After hearing 20 stories similar to my own over coffee and doughnuts, we split up into groups of four. I was assigned to Cindy, a pretty blonde who was a master-level sporting clays competitor and certified instructor. By the end of the morning, she had us laughing at dirty jokes, singing silly songs and high-fiving whether we hit the targets or not, though by mid-afternoon we could turn anything launched from a trap into fine orange dust.

Twenty years later, I still love shooting targets, and I've taken those shotgunning skills into the field, bird hunting. I've also learned a few things that the guys didn't tell me:

Select a girl-friendly shotgun. Women have a physiological characteristic that can greatly affect how they shoot, namely breasts. If you shoot right-handed, the larger you are, the more to the right, off target, you will shoot. Lefties have the opposite problem. Righties should look for a shotgun with a stock that is "cast on" or bent slightly to the left. Lefties need their stocks "cast off," bent to the right. Some guns today have adjustable stocks such that you can move the butt left or right to compensate for your physique without expensive gun work.

I have another challenge, high cheekbones. *Vogue* might extol them as a beauty advantage, but in shotgunning, they are not. When I snug the average shotgun to my cheek, I look into the action of the gun rather than down the top of the barrel. Luckily, the top of the stock on some guns

adjusts up and down as well as left to right. There are also inexpensive pads available at most outdoor stores that layer on top or the side of the stock to get a better gun fit.

Lessen the recoil. Women are typically handed a 20 gauge rather than a 12 gauge because it is lighter and has less recoil. False. While a 20 gauge might be slightly lighter, it can still kick like a mule, often more than a 12 gauge because there is less gun mass to absorb the recoil. That said, my favorite upland gun is even smaller, a 28 gauge over-and-under with short 26-inch barrels. It weighs 6 pounds versus 7.5 pounds for my 20 gauge and almost 8 pounds for my 12 gauge. I'm comfortable carrying it all day. It also has a thick recoil pad on the end of its stock. While I give up a few pellets in my shot pattern, I haven't noticed fewer birds in my game pouch.

Some women find any two-barrel shotgun kicks too much. If that's you, opt for a semi-automatic with a ported barrel (holes at the end of the barrel). With a recoil pad, a ported semi-automatic mashes against your shoulder.

The shell inside your gun matters too. Most upland hunters opt for field loads keying only on the size of the pellet, most commonly #5 or #6 shot, but the amount of shot and gunpowder matter more. The lower these numbers, which are written on the box, the less the recoil. Don't worry about lowering your ability to hit a bird. As my hunter safety instructor said, any shell can kill you, so it certainly can harvest whatever flies out of the bushes.

Field fashion. After a hunt last fall, I ducked into the grocery store to pick up eggs and milk. A random woman in the check-out line complimented my brush pants, asking if they were a new style! She didn't realize they were hunting pants. Women's hunting apparel has certainly come a long way since my first day in a

bird cover. When I started hunting, my only options were jeans or straight-waisted men's small hunting pants.

Fifteen years ago, I found my first pair of women's brush pants. They were merely a high-waisted version of the men's, reinforced with Cordura panels on the fronts of the legs. They were stiffer than the bushes from which they protected me. Today, women's hunting clothes, not only pants, but also jackets and shirts, fit well and move with me. I may hunt like one of the guys, but I don't have to look like them any more.

In addition to my brush pants, my hunting vest is the other garment that I never leave home without. It has perfectly placed pockets for extra shells, birds, tissues, lip balm, a small camera and other personal items. If I shed a layer, there's plenty of space to stash it, too.

I also pay attention to my footwear. Bird hunting involves many miles of off-trail walking whether you're on public land or at a private hunting preserve. In Colorado, the upland terrain is typically arid by fall, and the days may start below freezing but often heat up over 60 degrees. I usually hunt in a lightweight, Gore-tex, mid-height (over the ankle) hiking boot. They are warm enough at daylight when a chilly frost covers the fields, but cool enough during the heat of the day. They give me good traction, ankle support and protection from rocks, rubble and prickly pears. And the Gore-tex keeps my feet dry as the frost melts and if my leap over a stream at the bottom of a gully is a little short.

Little things that count. I keep four other items stashed in my game vest to make sure I never forget them, namely a pair of thin leather gloves, shooting glasses, a hair tie and a blaze-orange ballcap.

My hands get stiff and cold carrying a metal gun. Thin leather gloves keep them

Bobwhites (this photo) and dusky grouse (right) are favorite targets of upland bird hunters.



warm without sacrificing sensitivity to the safety and the trigger. Knit or fleece gloves don't work, as they are too slippery.

Shooting glasses, which are required for target shooting, also protect my eyes from the glare and from branches in the field. Since I spent many hours crushing clays before I looked for my first chukar, wearing glasses is as much a part of my shooting wardrobe as my vest. Mine aren't fancy, just a pair of inexpensive sport glasses that wrap slightly and have interchangeable lenses. On a sunny day, I wear the brown ones. On a cloudy day, I wear the light orange ones.

I added the hair tie to my inventory immediately upon learning to shoot. The first time I stepped into a waist-high wooden shooting box to try sporting clays, my hair, crushed unceremoniously under a ballcap, was nowhere in my conscious thought. I focused only on my gun and the trap loaded with orange discs to my right.

"Pull!"

"Ouch!" It felt like my little brother had yanked a handful of hair out of my head just above my ear. When I mounted the gun, I didn't realize that my hair was between the recoil pad and my shoulder. A hair tie remedied the problem. What's more, my sweetheart thinks my ponytail looks cute, though not my ballcap, or more accurately ballcaps, plural. I've tried on hundreds of blaze-orange hats. They all transform into mutant mushroom tops on my small head. If I could have one upland wish, it would be for a blaze-orange hat that looks good on a girl. In the meantime, I'll concentrate on the birds. 🐦

A former competitive shooter, **Lisa Densmore** is a two-time Ruger North American All-Around Champion in sporting clays and an Emmy-award winning host and producer of outdoor television programming. She has covered shotgunning on *VERSUS* and *PBS*.

12 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL SHOTGUNNING

Guy or gal, here are some basics tips to help ensure your experiences upland bird hunting are safe and successful:

Check your gear before you go.

Check your clothes, your game vest, your footwear, your gun and your ammo to make sure you've got what you need, that it fits and is in good condition.

Practice on clays. It helps immensely to shoot a round or two of skeet or sporting clays before you head into the field. Start with a low gun rather than a pre-mounted gun. You'll have fewer mismounts and be quicker and smoother swinging your gun onto a bird.

Get in shape, both you and your dog. If you walk or hike briskly several times per week before opening day, you and your dog will have more stamina and cover more territory while hunting.

Get a new orange hat. Last year's hat has likely faded from ultraviolet exposure. It's a good idea to wear orange on your shirt, jacket or vest too. Visibility prevents hunting accidents.

Walk in a line. If everyone stays in a line, you're more likely to flush a bird where someone can shoot safely at it.

Talk loudly to each other. Stay in verbal range, particularly if you can't see each other. Calling out "bird" or something similar when a bird takes off stops the line and let's everyone know to prepare to shoot if they don't see the flush. A bird can fly in any direction.

Practice gun safety ALL THE TIME! Walk with the safety on and your fin-

ger away from the trigger. Always keep your barrel pointed away from other people. Always be sure of your target before shooting. And if hunting with dogs, let the bird get at least six feet off the ground before pulling the trigger.

Don't rush your shot. Taking the extra moment to assume a balanced stance and to mount your gun properly greatly increases the chance of success even if the bird flies an extra five yards away.

Avoid bulky clothing. Practice mounting the gun a couple of times before you step into the cover to make sure it doesn't hang up on your vest or jacket.

Swing through the bird. In shotgunning, you've got to keep the gun moving through the bird to create lead. If you stop the gun as you pull the trigger, you'll shoot behind it. The faster the flight and the farther away the bird, the more lead you need. Key on the head. If you look at the entire body, you'll likely shoot behind it.

Use tighter chokes. If you normally shoot targets with skeet or improved chokes, you'll be happier with improved or modified chokes in the field. Many hunters consider a bird beyond 40 yards to be out of range. Better to skip the shot than wound a bird that you might not be able to find.

Mark your birds. Take careful note where your birds fall to make sure you are able to retrieve them.

When you walk in a line you're more likely to flush a bird where someone can safely shoot at it.

