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HUNTING ABOVE THE HI-LINE



The Hosts of Sage Safaris, Sarah and Jacob Dusek

Bird hunters are wanderers. We love to take what we know intimately, that of dogs, double-barrels and boot leather, and bring it to places that are new, somewhat mysterious to us. We add each adventure to a lifelong journal of successes, and hopefully, just a handful of failures.

When I was invited to visit the Dusek family of Sage Safaris, a bird hunting host north of Havre, Montana, I was more than game to make the trip toward the Canadian border, dogs in tow. I was also offered to bring a guest, but chose to keep things simple, just in case I was sharing the camp with others. I would learn upon arrival that I would be the only one hunting the massive property, a practice the Duseks insist upon, to create a sense of serenity and avoid any possible hunter conflicts.

I arrived in the dark, a light mist in the air. I could see the lantern-lit wall tent from 100 yards away, a sight that made my road-weary eyes ready for bed. Jacob Dusek waved me over to the newly constructed, onsite dining area and welcomed me with a Moose Drool, a popular Montana microbrew.

Jacob a local farm boy, with a British accent (I will explain), explained to me the history of the area, his family farm and the rules of the hunt. He then inquired about my hunting style preference and about my two setters. Jacob would be walking along with me, but not carrying a gun. Arriving in the dark, I didn't have the luxury of seeing the ground beyond the lights and was excited for the morning.

After bidding me goodnight, Jacob

offered to return early in the morning and re-light my wood-burning stove, but I declined the gracious offer. I was both too proud to be pampered, as well as not wanting Jacob to possibly see my Mickey Mouse pajamas.

The night was relaxing, although the steady serenading by coyotes seem to grow closer and louder as the night went on. Eventually, I had to yell for them to stop their calls, my yelling igniting a barking episode by my dogs who were in their wooden dog box in the truck. Fortunately, when the excitement died down, I was able to go back to sleep. If coyote howling is the only noise around Sage Safaris, I must be in the right place.

In the morning, I was offered a hearty breakfast and hot coffee by Sarah Dusek, Jacob's better half and the reason for his English influence. Over the first meal of the day, I had to ask how they met and more importantly, how did Jacob acquire that unusual dialect? As it turned out, they met on a mission years ago, fell in love and now spend half of their time in England and the other half on the Dusek Farm. I will let you guess which country they inhabit during the frigid Montana winter months.

Winter is a subject we talked a lot about during my visit. According to information relayed to Jacob from his parents, who stay on the farm year-round, winter was relentless. Deep snow and many consecutive nights with temperatures below zero, took its toll on area wildlife and especially upland game birds. Jacob estimated that bird mortality was well over 50%, possibly higher.

Winter bird losses led to the conversation of habitat. Fortunately, the Dusek Farm had decent winter cover, consisting of cattail sloughs, russian olive trees and patches of willows. When combined with grain stubble and native grasses, there was a bounty of food and cover to help raise wild pheasants, sharptail and Hungarian partridge.

Only a few minutes into the hunt, Jacob and I both realized that the birds survived the winter better than expected. We weren't even 100 paces from

the camp when the dogs became birdy on the outside edge of a stubble field, their tails barely visible in the tall grass. I raised my gun on the flush, but quickly put it down again, when I realized they were young-of-the-year pheasants, birds that were not in season yet, not to mention just too young.

We saw more pheasants than sharptail or Huns, but with the help of the bird dog tandem, I did bag both legal species. One covey of Huns numbered over 20 birds, most likely the result of two broods combining into one. By midday, it was getting warm for man and dog, so we hunted our way back to the camp.

I could smell Sarah's culinary work from about a stone's throw away from camp, the dogs probably ceasing to hunt minutes earlier, assuming the meal was intended for them. After taking some quick photos and field dressing the birds, I washed for up lunch. The combination of excellent food and a hungry hunter, makes for a very enjoyable dining experience. Similar to the Dusek hunting operation, the meal was part Montana farm, part English elegance. Sarah treated me to a stuffed pork tenderloin, homegrown Montana vegetables and a wonderful British dessert called banoffe. I was in heaven. It was difficult to part ways, as I enjoyed my meal, talking about our recent hunt, all while staring into Canada, across five or six miles of unaltered prairie.

Sage Safaris was the first time I had ever been treated to a commercial bird hunting operation. However, there wasn't much commercial about it. The Dusek's shared their family farm with me, treating me more like family than a client. It was land that their ancestors had broken the soil of, making a living any way possible over the years. Jacob and Sarah were continuing the tradition, working hard at introducing people from Montana, other states, and even from abroad, to the wide open spaces of Montana. While many will come for the bird hunting, just as many will return for the entire experience. I hope I am one of them.