

## Black Pheasant

Sadie, my black pointing lab and I went down to Vancouver Lake Release Site to hunt pheasants on opening day of general season. Sadie and I are about the same age in human years. Since one dog year equals seven human years and Sadie is just over 10.5 years old and I am 80.

Usually I get up around 5:30 am and get dressed in my hunting clothes. About this time, I heard Sadie barking from her pen, just behind our house, which means she has noticed the light is on and something is happening. I decide to get her fed because I know she won't stop barking. As I get to her pen to let her out, she notices I have my hunting clothes on and she becomes even more excited. She heads to the patio to get her breakfast, still jumping up and down, full of energy and excitement. I set her pan down, make her sit until she calms, then I tell her she can eat. While she is eating, I get the garage door open and also the back door of the Explorer, because I know what will happen next. Sadie starts barking, and as I let her in, she tries to get through the door to the garage before I even get it open. I get her to sit down, then open the door and tell her she can go. She runs and jumps into the back of the Explorer and I close the door. My wife, Eloyce has said that is a long time for Sadie to wait because I have to eat my breakfast, brush my teeth and get my boots. I figure she wants in the Explorer, she quits barking and she is sure the Explorer is not leaving without her.

We got to the site about 7:45 am, and I get us ready to hunt. I put Sadie's electric collar on and her protective orange three-quarter Cordova body vest which covers much of her front legs. I put on my orange hat and vest, my backpack and get my gun out of the soft camo gun case and load it. There were a lot of hunters in the parking lot. We waited to see where the hunters were going and decided to go out into the open field adjacent to the main access road, since there were no hunters going that way. As soon as Sadie got out in the area where they had not mowed, she got on a hot scent. I got ready and she got up a black pheasant. I locked on to it and hit it. It was listing to the left, but managed to glide over the main access road and came down near the tree line. Sadie saw it going down and headed across the road.

As soon as I got across the road, I saw there were a lot of blackberries in the area with only a small opening in the middle with short grass on the ground. A narrow path went through the blackberries to the opening. When I got to the opening, I was worried the black pheasant may have come down in the blackberries, and Sadie would not be able to retrieve it. I noticed Sadie was running along the southwest edge of the blackberries in the opening. When I came over to the blackberries, she came over in front of me and was really birdie. She stood up on her back legs and peered into the blackberries. She moved a few feet to her right and went into the blackberries several feet, then came back out, but did not have a pheasant in her mouth. She ran around the edge of the blackberries and occasionally stood up on her back legs, but never went into the blackberries again. I did not send her into the blackberries because I wanted her to make that decision on her own. I thought maybe the black pheasant came out of the blackberries and had run down the path, so I went down the path with Sadie. She ran down the path and when off both sides of the path but never got birdie, so I was pretty sure the black pheasant had not gone down the path. We turned around and went back up the path, and I figured I was not going to get the black pheasant. Just as we got near the blackberries, where Sadie had been birdie earlier, she came on point, and I was hopeful that she was going to get the black pheasant after all. She crouched down on the ground in the low crawl mode looking into the blackberries. I was standing beside her, and I was also looking into the blackberries but couldn't see anything but blackberries, though obviously Sadie did.

I could tell by her body language she was prepping for launch. It was black retrieving black. Sadie hesitated a few seconds then plunged into the blackberries. I could hardly see her, even though she had on

an orange vest. There was a lot of rustling in the blackberries. Then, I noticed Sadie continuing through the blackberries, and she popped out a few feet up the path with the black hen pheasant in her mouth. She brought the hen over to me and dropped it in my hand. Boy, I was one happy hunter and so was Sadie. I wrung the pheasant's neck. I gave Sadie a lot of praise and a couple of treats. Yes, Sadie girl you were **Born to Hunt**.

I was thinking back when I had my first encounter with a black pheasant several years ago and how confused I was when Sadie got up a black pheasant at Shillapoo. Sadie had got up a pheasant and it was coming towards me off to my right. I locked on to it and started to squeeze the trigger, but didn't because the pheasant was dark, so I was not sure if it was a pheasant. As it was flying away, it looked like a pheasant the way it was flying. I was pretty sure it was a pheasant by this time, but it was out of range. Thought maybe it had gotten wet. I vowed in the future if Sadie got up a dark pheasant, I would shoot at it.

I never thought any more about the incident until the following year when I went to a Vancouver Wildlife meeting just before pheasant season. Chris White, the manager of the Bob Oke Game Farm at Centralia, was the guest speaker. In his presentation Chris indicated that they were releasing black pheasants to give hunters something to think about. I told him that I had been confused by a dark pheasant my dog got up, so much so, that I didn't shoot at it. Everyone laughed, including Chris. I told him I had vowed to shoot at any dark pheasant in the future after the incident. Chris said they would continue to release dark pheasants hatched at the farm.

Just maybe, Sadie was also confused when trying to retrieve the black pheasant, since it was her first experience in retrieving one. She was used to looking for a rooster with an iridescent copper and gold plumage with black spots, a white neck collar and green head, or a hen with overall brown plumage with black spots. She had stood on her hind legs trying to locate the pheasant before she ventured into the dense blackberries. Can't blame her for that, since it's not fun getting into a thorny situation.



Black Rooster Pheasant

The experts say the black pheasants are melanistic mutant pheasants. The black color on pheasants is the production of excess pigmentation (melanistic) darkening the feathers. The dark pigmentation is also found in other animals from deer to wolves and can be partially to fully black. The dark pigmentation is found in breeding populations, but is generally a small percentage. The black panther is the most famous melanistic animal. Black mutant animals are hardy and live a life that is comparable to their unmuted brethren.

I remember when I was a teenager growing up in Bonanza, Oregon, a hunter brought a three-point buck mule deer into town. The buck was only moderately black. At first the hunter thought it was a black angus cow, since he was hunting near a ranch, but that thought quickly faded when he noticed the horns and the size of the animal.

On the fourth day of senior pheasant season, which is immediately after the youth hunt and a week before the general season, Sadie got up a black pheasant. Just before that she had got up a brown hen pheasant which I had hit and knocked down. Then she got up the black pheasant, but I could not tell whether it was flying towards me or away from me. There was a grove of cottonwoods out in front of the black pheasant, so it blended in with the cottonwood background. Finally, I figured out the black was flying away from me, but it was out of range by then. I took Sadie over where I thought the brown hen came down, but was hoping it had not come down in the blackberries. As we approached the area Sadie became birdie and was looking into a clump of blackberries. I was disappointed, but Sadie ran around the other side of the blackberries and appeared to be on a hot scent. She then went into the blackberries and I heard some rustling in the blackberries. A few moments later Sadie came back around the

blackberry clump with a brown hen in her mouth. I was disappointed I had not gotten the black pheasant, but happy I got a pheasant. This was the first shot out of my new over and under (O/U) Stevens shotgun for pheasant hunting. I am very pleased I got the O/U. It has extended the sport of pheasant hunting for both Sadie and me. The O/U is light (6.8 lb.), easy to mount and has a good pattern. Beats packing around my 8 lb. Benelli autoloader. I will still use my Benelli for waterfowl and turkeys since I can stand it in the corner of the blind.

Back at opening day, I put the black hen in my backpack, and we came back across the main access road.



Sadie and Al with Black Pheasant

I could get one more pheasant and it was early in our hunt, so we continued hunting in the open field to the east. Many of the hunters had dispersed, but there were still a couple of hunters left in the open field. As we got closer to the boundary fence, two hunters were out in front of us with their dogs, so I decided to hunt over to the old fence line. We hunted along the north side of the fence line to the boundary fence. We dropped down along the boundary wetland and hunted the north edge back to the west towards the parking lot. There were three hunters on the south edge of the wetland and they each had a dog. A rooster got up in front of them and

Sadie and Al with Black Pheasant

flew north across the wetland. I heard three shots but the rooster kept coming across the wetland and crossed in front of me. I got off two shots, missed the rooster on the first shot but hit him on the second.

He went up in the air then dropped to the ground, but I don't think Sadie saw him come down because he was behind some tall canary grass and blackberries. I took Sadie over to the area and she immediately got birdie and started moving toward a clump of blackberries, stopped and came on point at the edge of the blackberries. She held the point for several seconds, then plunged into the blackberries. There was some thrashing around in the blackberries for a few seconds. Then Sadie emerged from the blackberries with the rooster in her mouth. She brought it over to me and dropped it in my hand. I gave her a lot praise and a treat. I put the rooster in my backpack, unloaded my gun and we headed back to the parking lot. When I got to the Explorer, I gave Sadie some water and dry dog food. Got the hunting gear off of Sadie and myself and loaded everything into the Explorer.

It was a great hunt, one of our best. I was really proud of Sadie, and let her know how well she had done. I got to check a black hen off my bucket list. Still have a black rooster on my bucket list and look forward to checking him in the blackberries, retrievals from the great upland game near 80. I could not ner.



it off. I want to avoid dropping berries, since Sadie may not be but she hasn't failed to make blackberries to date. Sadie is a and waterfowl hunter, who is ask for a better hunting part-