

# Golden Valley Pheasants

Story and Photos  
by  
David Sartwell

**P**irate and Toughy coursed back and forth in front of us, running with their heads up, trying to catch a scent on the breeze. Like two young, lightly ticked gyrfalcons, they flashed across the harvested sunflower field searching for the birds they knew were out there.

I love hunting with pointing dogs. They are incessantly enthusiastic and never in doubt, acting as if there is always a fresh bird hiding around every corner or under every bush. Following a scent trail only they could tell existed, the setters dropped off the edge of the field, ran past the windmill cranking water into the cattle tank and slid down into Bullion Creek. My son Steele and I followed them into the bullberry-choked

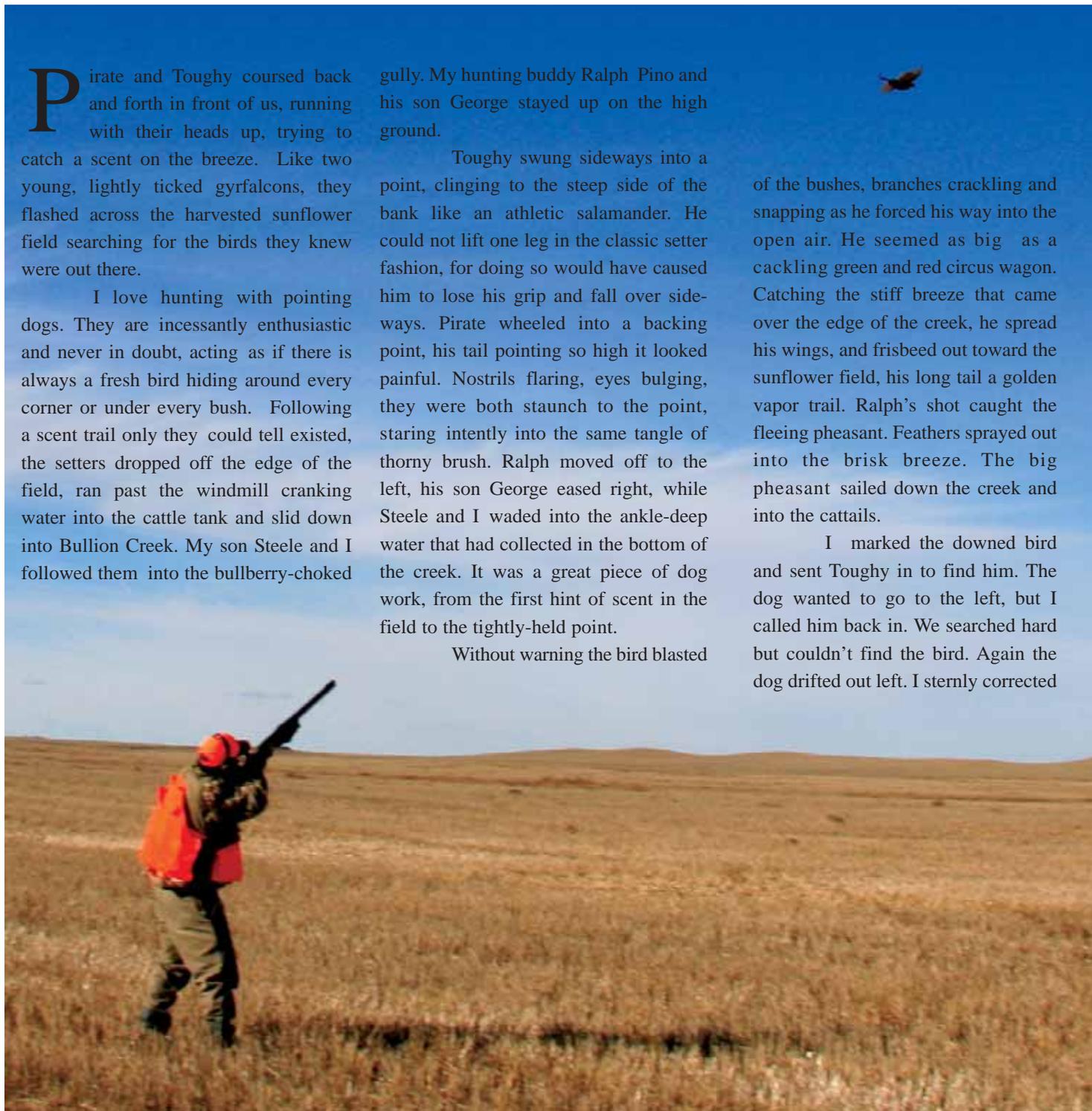
gully. My hunting buddy Ralph Pino and his son George stayed up on the high ground.

Toughy swung sideways into a point, clinging to the steep side of the bank like an athletic salamander. He could not lift one leg in the classic setter fashion, for doing so would have caused him to lose his grip and fall over sideways. Pirate wheeled into a backing point, his tail pointing so high it looked painful. Nostrils flaring, eyes bulging, they were both staunch to the point, staring intently into the same tangle of thorny brush. Ralph moved off to the left, his son George eased right, while Steele and I waded into the ankle-deep water that had collected in the bottom of the creek. It was a great piece of dog work, from the first hint of scent in the field to the tightly-held point.

Without warning the bird blasted

of the bushes, branches crackling and snapping as he forced his way into the open air. He seemed as big as a cackling green and red circus wagon. Catching the stiff breeze that came over the edge of the creek, he spread his wings, and frisbeed out toward the sunflower field, his long tail a golden vapor trail. Ralph's shot caught the fleeing pheasant. Feathers sprayed out into the brisk breeze. The big pheasant sailed down the creek and into the cattails.

I marked the downed bird and sent Toughy in to find him. The dog wanted to go to the left, but I called him back in. We searched hard but couldn't find the bird. Again the dog drifted out left. I sternly corrected





Pirate waits for the explosion of color from the high plains cover.

the usually-reliable dog and brought him back. Finally, about two minutes later he snuck out left, was gone 30 seconds and came back through the high cattails with his prize held high. I swear he was grinning at me when he laid it at my feet. Like a good friend, he didn't bring up my misdirection for the rest of the hunt. I love a dog that doesn't brag!

After months of planning and anticipation we were finally here as guests of old friends Tom and Vidette Schillo. They own a large ranch on the outskirts of a tiny farming community named Golva located right in the heart of the Golden Valley in west-central North Dakota. It is a rambling set of tidy houses, barns, sheds and corrals surrounded by rolling fields full of sunflowers, a variety of grains, corn, plots of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) and pastures filled with cattle and horses. Bullion Creek, which starts up as a mere seep at the height of the land that marks the Montana border, slides through the Schillo ranch, meanders along the edge of the town, and worms its way east toward the Little Missouri River. Joined along the journey by the hundreds of little

gullies and runs that cut across the plains in all directions, the creek provides a meager but necessary trickle of water to a normally sun-parched plain. Its brush-lined banks also provide cover and moisture for a wide variety of wildlife including deer, antelope and an unbelievable number of pheasant.

We continued the hunt by moving across a cut wheat field and slipping under a fence. I had Toughy on a leash as I wanted his brother to have some time working alone. Pirate ran easily out in front of us. This graceful, almost pure-white English Setter with a black patch over his right eye slid through the fallow field with practiced ease, the long feathers of his tail waving in the brisk southwest wind. A product of generations of selective breeding, he knew what he was there for and was all business.

It was almost comical to see him slam into his first solo point of the day. He was flying along the fence line when his nose just seemed to stop in midair. Unfortunately, he couldn't control the rest of his body as quickly. It was like watching one of those cartoons where the head stops and the rest of the body scrambles on by, trying to get a foothold in the turf.

Finally, Pirate got his two-year-old self under control. He was locked up on point, his whole skeleton frozen in place. His right leg was tucked up under him in a classic setter point, but his skin was moving with a nervous energy as if he was receiving a series of tiny electric shocks. The edges of his jet-black nostrils flared open with each breath as he vacuumed in every scintilla of scent the earth and air had to offer.

Slowly he lowered his head toward the ground and turned it sideways to the right as if he was trying to hear the scent better. Carefully Ralph and I worked our way in beside him, puzzled as to why he had his noggin cocked so oddly. Then I saw the bird, tucked in under the kochia weed, hunkered down, hoping we would just walk on by. Pirate had dropped his nose down to where the breeze was moving the scent along the ground and had turned his head to follow the stream.

I motioned to Steele to move forward to our right and George forward to the left. As I walked very slowly toward the stuck bird, I whispered more than spoke a gentle "whoa" to my staunch setter.

"Aack! Aack! Aack!" the pheasant

hollered as he launched himself up out of the kochia weed that grew along the fence line. He caught the wind and curled sharply to the right, skimming the ground as if he thought he would feather his breast with the wheat stalks below. Pirate followed the flight with widened eyes, but held steady to the flush.

The beautiful bird wheeled away from Ralph and me like a felon on a prison break and curled toward Steele. Two crisp shots echoed in the wind and the bird collapsed in midair, thumping down onto the adjoining golden stubble field. I

released Pirate from his point and he dashed off to retrieve his prize. The second bird of the season found its way into the pouch of my Barbour jacket.

We spent the rest of the day working the creek bed and the farm fields around it. Long after we had shot our limits, we watched as the dogs performed their magic for us, each point and back earning praise from the assembled. Fathers and sons, deliciously tired at the end of the day, walked quietly through the deep CRP heading for the truck that would take us back to the farm. A magnificent sunset

flamed and died as the prairie drew the night slowly and tightly to its chest.

A fiery pellet stove greeted us as we walked through the front door. Guns were cleaned and put aside, birds were plucked and packed away, and soon the floor of the huge living room was covered with snoring setters. As we laughed about shots missed and bragged about ones that didn't, the smell of a huge roast, mashed potatoes and chokecherry sauce filled the air. Dessert would be the warm apple pies resting on the sideboard. As we drifted off to sleep that night, I felt blessed to be in the company of family and friends and could not wait for tomorrow to begin.



**Toughy holds tight.**

**The secret to a double is to focus on one at a time.**

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David Sartwell, a Vermont native, is an avid fly fisherman, skier, hunter, gun dog trainer and photographer. A former professional bear hunter and bird-hunting guide, Sartwell has written hundreds of articles and columns in a variety of newspapers and magazines and his work has appeared in several books.

