

Ptarmigan Hunt 2007
By Kirklan Oler

Day 1

Friday started off bright and early with me driving over to my friend's house Jon to pick him up at 4a.m. We were scheduled to meet up with a couple of friends at a remote basin in the High Uinta Mountains to go hunting for white-tailed ptarmigan. We had a long hike and day ahead of us and the sooner we hit the trailhead the better.



We arrived at the selected trailhead on the north slope of the Uintas after a few hours drive. The temperature read a cool 36 degrees in the old Tahoe. It was definitely going to be a nice and cool hike into the basin. We hit the trail and in no time developed a good trail eating rhythm. Darko, my DD and Hades, Jon's GSP, set to chasing squirrels and chipmunks right away. It wasn't long before Darko managed his first kill of the day. A helpless little chipmunk that Darko retrieved to hand.

The rest of the hike was rather eventless and we managed the 10+ mile hike in about six hours. Not the fastest, but we weren't hunting until the opener the next day, so there was no hurry. We set up camp and quickly pulled out our fly rods for some hot fishing in the high alpine like we were camping near. Thirty minutes later found Jon and I was pulling in numerous 16"+ fish, cast after cast. Sorry, no pictures as we both left our cameras at camp because we were so excited to try out the fishing.

We headed back to camp and in no time we met up with the other two members of the crew, Scott and Andrew. After shooting the breeze and eating dinner, Jon and I decided that we were tired enough by 9p.m. to catch some sleep for what turned out to be a brutal day in the high country.



Day 2

Day two found me up and rolling at six a.m. after a restless night of sleep. To save weight we were cramming Jon, his dog Hades and my self in a 1 man REI solo light tent. It wasn't too bad, but I wasn't about to be spooning Jon any time soon, so there wasn't much room to spread out. Also, anyone who has slept the night in the high alpine above 11,000ft knows that it takes at least 1 night to acclimate the body and altitude headaches are frequent.

After breakfast the 4 of us and another gentleman that had hiked up late that night, decided it was time to hit the high alpine basins and slopes looking for the elusive



ptarmigan. It wasn't long before our lungs were burning, heart racing and general fatigue was setting in with the first and what will most likely be the hardest hunting day of the year. Hunting at 12,000ft+ of elevation does have its rewards. One of which is being able to be actually

look down at the mountain goats. It was quite amazing watching the goats all day long throughout the hunt. There was plenty of ptarmigan sign, but it was all too old and we didn't find a single bird in that particular location.

After the first location did not pan out, we decided to head over to a great looking plateau with about 10-15 mountain goats grazing on it. After some rough terrain and side hilling some fairly steep conditions, we reached the plateau and decided it was time to take a lunch break and water the dogs. A cool breeze blew across the grass at 12,000+ft. Unfortunately this location held even less sign than the previous and it wasn't long before we were eying a sweet little basin right above a beautiful topaz lake at least 500ft below us.



Being that I was so close to a high saddle that overlooked the south slope split off from the Uintas, I and side hilled some of the gnarliest terrain of the whole trip. The views however were as expected and were some of the best of the entire trip. After seeing good ptarmigan terrain looking



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below me on the south slope I decided to drop down a ways and try my luck on that side

of the basin. After an hour or so unsuccessful search Darko and I headed back up and over the top to see if I could locate the others.

Back on top and looking down from the saddle to the basin below, I quickly spied 2 dots of hunter orange and their dogs working their way through terrain that reminded me of something out of Lord of the Rings while Frodo and Sam are in Mordor. I decided that my best course of action would be to watch the hunters from my vantage point high above and enjoy the scenery and a few goats that were nearby.

It wasn't long before I heard two shotgun blasts echoing up to me from the basin below. The first volley was quickly followed by two more in short order and then silence. It wasn't long before Scott was on the radio informing the group that he had 3 birds on the



ground and his lab, Cider, was busy retrieving the birds for him. I believe his exact words were, "that just lit a fire under a Labrador's ass." After 10 hours of hard hunting, one of the crew finally had birds in the bag! There was a single final shot and Scott informed the group that he had his limit.

Being all the way over at the other side of the basin, I realized that if I was going to be getting any shooting in, I had better book it down and ever there ASAP. Half climbing, half sliding down a little chute in the cliff face I was perched on while enjoying the view, I quickly made my way to the bottom of the basin. I caught up with Jon in the area where Scott told him to look for the remaining birds that had flushed, but try as we might we could not find a single bird.

The dogs were pretty beat up. They were tired, foot sore, and pretty sure that we had taken them on an 11 hour snipe chase. Dejected and feeling sorry for our selves, Jon and I decided it was getting late and we still had at least an hours plus hike back to camp. We unloaded our guns due to the rocky terrain and set about putting one foot in front of the other with our tired dogs licking our boot heels. We were joking that it would be when we had given up that we would run into birds and we would be unprepared. It wasn't two minutes later when we finally got into our first ptarmigan covey.

Now, I was caught completely by surprise and quickly yelled out, "ptarmigan, ptarmigan." About 15 birds were popping out of the rocks right in front of us. The dogs still not aware of the situation and being too tired to sense our excitement, just sat by our sides while we loaded up the guns. Now, people say that ptarmigan aren't very sporty in the wing shooting department and I can't necessarily disagree with them. We pretty much had to kick them up in order to get them to flush, but when you're dead beat tired and your dogs are dreaming of your sleeping bag back at camp, it can make for some interesting shooting. It took me three shots from my Remington 11/87 to anchor the first bird and Jon didn't exactly have his best chance either as he only got in one shell when the birds flushed and missed. We located 2 additional birds and Jon and I quickly anchored those 2 birds to the ground with some well placed 71/2s. Now the birds were really starting to flush wild and I commented that the ptarmigan were acting more like chukar, diving of cliff faces and making evasive maneuvers that I hadn't expected. The final total was Jon with 3 birds and myself with 2. We decided we had busted the covey up enough and it was getting late enough that we needed to start heading back.



Day 3

We slept in late this morning because of all the effort expended the previous day hunting. Darko was looking a little sore, but I judged him able to give another go at some



additional ptarmigan. Jon's female GSP, Hades, was finished with her hunting this trip. Scott, Andrew and I left Jon at camp to do some fishing and we headed off to another basin a few miles from camp. The basin looked very promising, but after hunting for a few hours and finding some good sign that the birds were in there, we just could never find them. The only animal in the bag was an unlucky marmot that let Darko get a little too close.

We arrived at camp at 3p.m. with a huge thunderstorm billowing clouds over the peaks and sending thunder rolling down the basin. Even though I had already hiked 6-7 miles I told Jon if he wanted to hit the trail I was all for it. The last thing he and I wanted to do was cram into that little tent to wait out a storm all night. After a hastily packed backpack in the middle of a hail storm, we said good by to Andrew and Scott, who had decided to stay, and set off down the trail with 10+ miles to get done by dark.

It was about 4 hours (8 miles) into the hike when we were given a little booster charge by some unexpected excitement. It was raining, and Jon and I were fairly tired, we were just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other at this point. I looked up and we were staring face to face with a cow moose and her calf. I yelled out to Jon, "moose", and that is when the cow moose decided to charge! It went towards Jon's dog Hades who was closest and Jon and I quickly dove into the trees besides the trail in an every man for himself sprint. It was but a split second before Hades passed me in what was a white blur. Almost simultaneously as we were running away, Darko was headed the other way looking to intercept the moose and giving a deep bark that said he was up for the challenge and all business. After about 30 seconds of cowering in the trees, I headed over to where Darko was barking to asses the situation. A quick peek out of the trees and down the trail showed Darko was holding the moose at bay about 10 yards off the trail. I managed to call him off and we made a hasty retreat into the woods and a wide circle around the moose and calf. The last couple of miles down the trail did not seem so monotonous after that.

What a start to the beginning of the season. I feel fairly confident that this hunt was just the first of many opening season hunts in the Uintas chasing the white-tailed ptarmigan.



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