



## Sluice Your Birds – by Karl DeHart



It is inevitable, at least once a year I am asked if I harvest birds that are perched on a tree limb, on the ground or floating in the water; a method I refer to as Sluicing. It is a particularly important question at the beginning of Idaho's upland game bird season since our State opens with forest grouse and Mourning doves. Why is that relevant? Because, two of the four season opener species of game birds are commonly referred to as Fool's Hens: Spruce and Blue grouse.



Spruce and Blue grouse have a well-known behavior of not being shy around humans. So much so, that our state law allows hunters to take these birds by virtually any method. Sticks and stones can break some bones. The reasoning being, why ruin a perfectly good deer or elk hunt by shooting one of these birds for the camp dinner pot when you can just reach out and smack these seemingly unaware birds with a stick!

I was unaware of how the term sluice, meaning a waterway or drainage canal, came to be used to describe a hunter harvesting a bird that has not taken flight. I asked around. I think my favorite definition was from a hunting buddy Greg Burak, to whom sluicing is, "The taking of a bird that has not taken flight due to frustration and exhaustion, stemming from a day of too many birdless miles". My friend Patrick Sullivan came up with the correct history concerning its use with game birds. It appears that Sluices were used as drainage canals in the South and Caribbean to drain swampland for farming, public health to get rid of mosquitoes, and provide water reservoirs. Many of these sluices on private estates became hunting reserves for the wealthy since they attracted water fowl. So sluicing a bird is shooting a bird sitting on the water in a sluice. Patrick also insists that Arkansas is the proper term to use when you take a bird that has not taken flight off the ground or tree limb, but I use Sluice universally.

Historically, it has been viewed as unsportsmanlike to shoot a bird that has not taken wing. I say historically, but the view persists today. The funny thing is that most people, when pressed, will admit to the occasional Sluice or Arkansas. Maybe I'm asked this question so they will not feel alone, not feel like they have done a terrible deed. I'm here to say, "Hold your head high fellow Sluicers".

When given the chance I will always choose to safely harvest a bird by the cleanest and quickest method. This means I sluice when it is safe to do so. I do the same for big game animals too. I've never heard of anyone making his or her deer or elk run to give it more of a sporting chance. In fact, with mammal hunting it was drilled into my head to take the animal in the cleanest and quickest way you can and it would be unethical to flush your big game before shooting because you may just wound the animal. Maybe this was because my dad didn't want to have to track one of my wounded animals.

Ethics and the behaviors described by some individuals in the name of sportsmanship are not always the same. Here is my dilemma – to me the most difficult aspect of bird hunting is the number of wounded birds that can be left unfound even with a good dog. Ok, fine, call me a softy. Since there is no catch and release for upland game bird hunting doesn't mean we should not concern ourselves with the plight of the birds we revere, chase with a fever and that grace our tables. I believe that we have a moral obligation to minimize the suffering of the animals we hunt.

I do enjoy the excitement of flushing a blue grouse over a point or the sudden eruption of a covey of Hungarian partridge at the head of a flushing dog. And yes, taking a bird on the wing is my preferred way to harvest a bird. Not because I see it as giving the bird more of a chance but because the rushing of air through the cupped wings when a bird takes off creates this sound that it is exhilarating and burned into the core of who I am.

Why should birds be different? I'd suggest that only shooting flushed birds is elitist in its origin and the difference is that pen raised birds on many hunting preserves could all be taken from the ground unless you practically kick the bird into the air. These "dumb" birds offer no sport at all and by sport I mean difficulty or testing of the hunter's stamina, skills, or knowledge of the game animal. Therefore with a long history in Europe and Gentleman's Hunting Clubs of chasing pen raised birds you had to flush the bird to get any sport out of the hunt. If you have hiked to the top of the Idaho-side of Brownlee Reservoir without taking a bird and a safe clean shot on the ground at a wild chukar is presented, most people quickly take the shot.

This brings up the safety issue. It is not always a safe practice to sluice a bird. Depending on where the bird is it could put your dog, hunting partners and yourself in danger. Some general rules to follow are the same as general hunting safety rules. You should never sluice a bird on the ground if you do not know where your fellow hunters or dogs are located. Sluicing birds on the ground is the most restrictive place for the bird to be. Sluicing a partridge perched amongst a group of boulders will result in ricochets and danger for all around and sometimes those rocks are hidden by grass or a thin layer of dirt. Birds in trees are easier to safely sluice since the elevated position in itself provides a level of safety. Use your common sense and apply all the rules for shooting at anything and you can safely sluice your game. A quick kill is the right thing to do when you can do it safely and within the laws, so happy sluicing.

