

Fins and Feathers

Saturday

After having such a good trip to the hard ice the previous weekend, my wife decided that she wanted to give ice fishing a go. She had been last year and had really enjoyed herself. We made it to the lake around 7:30 am., strapped on the snowshoes and with Darko in tow, proceeded to hike out to the same location of the week before. As a lot of critics say, the sequel is never as good as the first go around and they were correct this time, as far as the catching goes.



After the 45 minute hike out on the ice, I finally dropped my pack to the ground and declared to my wife that this was the "honey hole" location. I quickly drilled 3 holes in the ice, dropped down the transducer to the fish finder and was quickly rewarded with fish on the screen. I got out my wife's pole and lowered the bait through the ice. Before I could even get the bait to the bottom it was fish on! I quickly reeled a nice 18" cutt through the hole to a jealous wifey. I un-hooked the fish and gave her the rod to figure her own self out, there was fish to be caught.



For the next 30 minutes it was quick catching including a nice 20" cutt that earned my wife the big fish of the day. I'll have to give her lessons on how to hold a fish for a picture. It was pretty funny watching my wife's rod as she would jig. A lot of the fish catch the jig at the top before it settles back down and you never feel the bite, you have to watch for slack line when it should be taught. There was more than one time that she had a fish on, but never knew it until I told her! Having Darko along was

also interesting, he would spend minutes on end just staring down the ice hole waiting for the next fish to magically appear. After a fish was on the ice, he considered it his duty to

assist me with unhooking the fish. We only ended up icing 12 fish this time, but it was a great day to spend with the wife.

Sunday

The next morning I was bound and determined to renew my rivalry with the devil bird, the chukar. They had schooled me good two weeks prior, hence my hiatus ice fishing. Being that I had worked hard the previous day ice fishing, I got a late start and made it out to the hills at 10:00 am. I had Darko, Jax and my brother's 6 month old drahthaar Ace in tow. Jax had proven himself worthy of hunting along side Darko from a previous hunt and it was time to put my long awaited duo together again. I had hunted them separate since Jax's meltdown as a young pup in Montana.



It took just over an hour hike to get to where the birds like to hang out. It wasn't long before we came along our first fresh chukar tracks in the snow. Darko was birdy and busy tracking the devils as Jax worked the cliff below me. It wasn't long before I saw Darko up ahead on a solid point. When I arrived on the scene there were no birds to be found. Their tracks led to an escape route to the rim rock above us. They had escaped, but only momentarily.

I rounded up the troops and we quickly found our own route to the top of the cliffs. On the nice plateau above us Darko and Jax picked up the trail and followed along. It wasn't long before I could see about 30 chukar running through the cheat grass and rocks ahead of the dogs. The way the little devils were acting I knew they were going to flush before the dogs could pin them or I could get in shooting range. Darko pointed, but Jax pressured them a little too much and they flushed well out of range.

I have hunted the birds here before and knew that they were headed for some pretty rough terrain. Their desired escape location is a large series of rim rock with multiple levels, just the type of terrain I like to chase them in. I have been flamed by other dog handlers for taking too many risks with my dogs in tough terrain, but I have found if you get them used to high places while their young they seem to handle the cliffs like an old pro in no time. The other key is always making sure you take a shot where the bird can be retrieved. Nothing is worse than dumping a bird over a cliff and having to make a 2 hour hike to retrieve it.



I managed to pick up a couple birds along the cliffs and was feeling pretty good about my shooting when it all went down hill from there. I missed an easy double on a beautiful point by Darko and back by Jax (Ace is still figuring things out, but was a real gamer). It was an easy left to right crosser and I whiffed with 3 shells at 15 yards. It was a shame not to reward the dogs for their hard work.

I had one more ridge line in mind before making the trek back out to the truck. We made our way over trudging through thigh deep snow in some of the shady places. Ace looked at me a couple times like I had lost my mind, Darko led the way knowing there was a method to my madness.

After an hour hike due to the deep snow, we set about hunting a south facing slope that had held a covey or two in the past. Darko and Jax quickly got out 200+ yards ahead of me and disappeared over a rise. Once I got close to where I had last seen the dogs, I barely saw Darko disappear around a ledge. Once I arrived at the ledge I was rewarded with a beautiful point by Jax that Darko had apparently stolen. I was very pleased to see that Jax was still holding a solid point. I went in for the flush, but the two chukar got up while I was still 40 yards out. I made a couple of desperate shots at one as they split in opposite directions.



Once again I had been schooled in the devil's playground by the chukars. They write the rules but hardly ever follow them and have taken a liking to giving me a beat down of late. At least my game bag was a little heavier than the last time for the hike out.

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