



Coming clean

Elwood Dunsford was not the type of fellow who willingly passed along outdoor lore. This is why everyone at the Full Choke Hunt Club paid close attention as he demonstrated the quick and easy way to breast a grouse by standing on its wings and pulling on its legs. Unfortunately, as he applied even more upwards pressure to my ankles, the sharp pain in my armpits caused me to yelp.

“Look,” he snapped, “they will never learn this technique if you continue with this distracting behaviour. Now just shut up and pretend you’re a dead grouse!”

Call it intuition, but something told me Dunsford might be upset with me. Who knew why? After all, we had just returned from a good grouse hunt. We walked out of the uplands with two birds apiece.

I’m proud to say mine were actually taken in mid-flight, but only because I never saw that cliff edge until it was too late.

Dunsford’s birds, on the other hand, were shot out of the low branches of a yellow birch – which harkens back to the time-honoured way in which grouse used to be taken before outdoor writers sullied it.

This was not at all like Dunsford. As the most serious grouse hunter in the Full Choke Hunt Club, he felt it his solemn duty to deride those of us who shot birds that were not in flight. Whether they were geese in the field, ducks on the water, or grouse on the trail, it was almost as if he had something against easy targets.

“No gentleman would ever ground sluice a bird,” he professed continually. “It’s simply unsporting.”

Still, when he noticed three grouse sitting on the low limbs of a tree some 30 yards across the meadow, there wasn’t a gentleman in sight.

“Shall I flush them?” I asked.

“Not this time,” he suggested sheepishly. “I promised my wife a brace of grouse for dinner. And there they are.”

He took two of those birds before they even raised a wing. The third flew off unharmed.



“Let’s keep this our little secret, shall we?” he said, smiling, as he placed two tail feathers in his cap.

“I will take it to the grave,” I answered, winking.

And I would have, too, if not for the fact that a couple of Dunsford’s grouse-hunting friends happened to come by right at that very moment. Judging by the ruthless methods they used to drag it out of me, I suspect they were either prosecuting attorneys or perhaps even police interrogators when not afield.

“Nice birds,” they began, as we laid them on the tailgate.

Under such withering cross-examination, I had little choice but to come clean.

“Elwood shot his out of a tree,” I blurted. “I bagged mine in mid-flight.”

Dunsford spit out his coffee. “Believe me, I don’t normally do this sort of thing,” he stammered uncomfortably.

“Not true; I’ve seen you spit out coffee on at least three occasions,” I corrected. “Twice through your nose.”

Yet, despite my efforts to make him even more of a regular guy, Dunsford didn’t capitalize on this. Instead, he just turned beet red – blushing, I imagine, from my unwavering support.

“Well,” one of his friends said, “at least you were sporting about it, Steve.”

“But, I was just in need of a couple of birds for dinner,” Elwood moaned. “I usually shoot them on the wing over pointing dogs. Honest.”

“Of course,” the other mumbled.

As they and their fine pointers sauntered off, Dunsford followed, apparently trying in vain to salvage his reputation as an upland gentleman. He hemorrhaged so much dignity in those few minutes that, by the time he returned, no one would ever expect him to shoot a flying bird again. Between us, I think he felt a debt of gratitude to me for lifting that burden from his shoulders.

Which explains, I suppose, why he finally consented to demonstrate his grouse-cleaning method the very minute we returned to the Full Choke Hunt Club.

Let’s be honest: deep down he had to be proud of his shooting. Hey, you don’t have to be a serious grouse hunter to know two out of tree ain’t bad...