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## Phantom Ringnecks

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## PHANTOM RINGNECKS

On the early morning of November 1, 1930, the uninformed observer might have thought the people of Blackhawk and a few other counties of northern Iowa to be the most energetic and industrious people in the world. For on that particular morning, from three-thirty on, lights gleamed in nearly every house of village and farm; the restaurants of the little towns were crowded with booted, drab-coated, coffee-drinking men; while the sun was yet two hours under, the roads fairly streamed with cars, the dancing beams from their jolting headlights cutting the darkness and intersecting each other at every crossroads.

Half an hour before sun-up, the same observer might have thought a battle was in progress, for a perfect barrage of shots came from every cornfield, meadow, swamp, or weed-patch. It was a battle, in fact, although a rather lopsided one—a battle of the citizenry of the several counties against the ring-necked pheasants which, for the time being, had been placed outside the law. But it was no little battle at that. Blackhawk County alone, approximately five hundred square miles in area, issued more than ten thousand hunting licenses, and it is a pretty safe bet that each license holder was in the field that morning. This means one hunter to each thirty acres, or thereabouts, and from actual observation they appeared more numerous than that to me who was one of the hunters. On one quarter section that morning, eleven of us started across the field, and I confess a sense of shame as I noted that there were nine pump-guns or automatics, one double, and one single trap gun in the outfit. Pity the poor ring-necks? Yet the fun of the matter was that when the 'eleven' got together at noon, and compared game and notes, although each man was allowed three pheasants, male or female, one hundred fifty shots were admitted to have been fired, and only twenty-one birds were there to show for the whole crowd. From what I could gather of the conversation, the majority of these birds had been killed by four or five men; the rest had killed almost nothing;

what birds they had having been given to them by the more fortunate marksmen. What was true of our group, was apparently true pretty generally over the county, judging from what different members of other parties told me. One man shamefacedly confessed to me that he had fired a whole box of shells without getting a single bird that morning, but, undaunted, he was going forth to risk another box that afternoon.

Now the ring-necked pheasant is a big bird; he is about the size of a well-fledged leghorn rooster, weighs perhaps three and one-half to four pounds, and, including his long tail feathers, stretches easily two feet or more in length. Moreover, Nature fairly outdid herself in beautifying the ringneck; he is a perfectly amazing combination of green and red, of white and gold and bronze. His mate, on the other hand, is about the color of a prairie chicken, severely plain, modest and retiring. But there is nothing modest or retiring about him; he is good looking and knows it. He sports a long pair of keen spurs, fights his rivals to the last ditch, and likes nothing better than to stand at full height along roadside or railroad right of way and watch in glittering arrogance as the cars go by. When first flushed, he gets up with a great flurry of wings, and, if young and not gunshy, usually cackles loudly and disdainfully, as he departs. His size, color, noise, and marvelous streaming tail make him look as easy to hit as a captive balloon, but he has convinced many that such is not the case. I recall well the chagrin of a fellow trap-shooter when we first opened the season upon these birds five or six years ago. "Humph!" said he scornfully, "as well shoot at a barn door. I shall take just three shells with me on the opening day." He did, and came back with one bird and considerable respect for his excellency, the ringneck.

For if he is hit, it is no sign that he is in one's game pocket; a crippled ringneck and a dead one are two quite different creatures. A 'tipped' wing will bring him down just like any other bird, but he alights a-running, and no man has a chance with him in a stern chase; he

does pretty well even on one leg, and a broken wing doesn't slow him up at all. He can stand a deal of hammering, too; time and time again, I have seemingly centered him with the charge, and have watched him fall like a sack of wheat, only to find that he had somehow managed to get away before I got there.

In spite of the numbers of these birds I have hunted and killed, I never got over my astonishment at seeing a big, red cackling rascal go roaring up almost beneath my feet from a seemingly impossible bit of cover. How he manages to hide all that bulk, and color, and length of tail feathers under a little of nothing is a complete mystery to me; he is a veritable phantom!

He is best hunted in these parts by five or six men working together. The hunters spread out several rods apart, and go across the field in a straight line driving the birds before them. Now and then one rises in mid-field, but more commonly not until the end of the field is reached. Repeatedly, I have crossed an eighty rod field without seeing a sign of a pheasant, only to have half-a-dozen spring up like bursting hand grenades at the end, and often from the last wisps of grass near the fence. They have a knack, too, of freezing until one has passed, then away they go bursting out from behind with a rattle and whirr of wings that often spoils one's good intentions.

Every year, before the pheasant season opens, there is always a great deal of discussion and pow-wow and pother as to whether we shall have an open season or not. The usual petitions are brought out and signed by the same land-owners, and strenuously objected to by the same perennial objectors. To the ones who favor an open season, the birds are so numerous as to be a positive nuisance; an open season, they say, will put the pheasant population back where it belongs. To the objectors, an open season means extermination; the dry summer this year has been particularly hard on the young birds. Hence, they at once proceed to prevent such 'extermination,' post their lands carefully, and no amount of soft-spoken pleadings can induce some of them to allow you to violate the sanctity of their premises.

We had a five-day open season the past year. Thousands of birds were killed, and I confess, frankly, that when the season closed, I felt that the ringnecks had received a pretty hard blow, but I am beginning to wonder if I was not mistaken. I have been walking over a great deal of the pheasant country in recent months, and I see plenty of birds; there will be a big crop again next year. And I am saying this not as a hunter, but as a lover and conservator of wild life. The quail is just about holding his own even under a closed season; the prairie chicken is nearly out of the picture, in Iowa, hence the ringneck holds the center of the stage as our finest game bird. I want him to stay, and this is true of farmers pretty generally, although some complain bitterly of his corn-eating propensities. What is more, I believe he is going to stay, for he is a bird that can live with man, and if need be, pretty much in spite of him, a thing that the quail and prairie chicken can not do. The ringneck gets gun-wise about as fast as any bird I know of, and apparently passes this knowledge on to his children. Begin shooting at him and he gets under cover in a hurry and remains there; declare an armistice, and he is out in plain sight again in a few days, jaunty and bold as ever. But he faces one grave danger: no bird can stand the continual attrition of all-year-round killing, and that is what the ringneck faces constantly. As a college teacher, I have a great many Iowa farm boys in my classes and I often discuss the pheasant problem with them. Following the Christmas vacation, three different ones told me of shooting pheasants while at home, and all openly speak of it being the common practice to shoot "stubble ducks," as they call them, at any time they choose. I gather the same information from many other sources, and not long ago, I heard a man remark that he and some friends had taken thirty pheasants in one night by the simple expedient of turning automobile headlights upon a meadow and catching the dazed and blinded birds by hand. It is my sober belief that more ringnecks are killed out of season than in season. If we can once educate our people to let the ringneck alone while under the law,

no short, yearly open-season will ever greatly harm this most gorgeous and plentiful of Iowa's game birds.

Roy L. Abbott.

### THE TOLL OF THE AUTOMOBILE

When the telegraph first came into general use in this country thousands of birds, particularly prairie chickens, were killed annually as a result of flying against the tightly stretched wires. On account of its great height, many birds collide with the Washington Monument, and are thus fatally injured; every lighthouse along the coast takes a great toll of birds during the year. The railroads destroy many animals also, but the automobile murders more wild animals than all the above-mentioned things combined. In the destruction of our wild fauna, it is next in importance to the rifle and shotgun. The Isaac Walton League and game conservationists in general might well give attention to the fearful depredations of this modern "killer" of the highways.

It is said that in ancient times, the Roman roads were fairly lined with the crosses of crucified men. We have something suggestive of this in Pennsylvania and some other states in the many crosses which there along the roadsides in like manner mark the spots where modern men died of "auto-intoxication." But to me there is something more significant and sinister in the countless carcasses of the wild animals which dot every mile of our white paths of speed. We have no particular data on the matter, but any one who drives may read the facts and—if not careful—may contribute to the toll of the automobile!

Ignoring the domestic fowls—for there will always be a plenty of them—the bird that is most often killed is the red-headed woodpecker. He is our only woodpecker who captures insects on the wing, and since he spends a great deal of his time on telephone poles or roadside trees, frequently follows his prey down to the highway. Once on the road, he is slow on the take-off and so falls easily before an onrushing car. One can hardly pass a farm or

grove of trees without seeing from one to a dozen smashed "red-heads."

Some birds, such as the English sparrow and blackbird, are rarely killed, but I have picked up and examined nearly every other common species, including many quails and pheasants.

But although it destroys them by the tens of thousands, it is not from our birds that the automobile collects its chief toll of life. It is the mammals—the children of the soil, the relatively slow-movers—that perish in greatest numbers. First among these I would place the humble cottontail, and next, perhaps the fox squirrel. The cottontail, foolish fellow, has always disported himself upon the highways and cannot seem to learn that the automobile moves faster than he does. The fox squirrel is usually killed while crossing the road. He doesn't play in the road like a cottontail; his road crossing is legitimate business.

I believe I would place the little spotted skunk next in order; I have seen scores of his kind dead in every state, from Iowa to Maine to Louisiana. Only recently I counted twenty dead ones on just a few miles of highway in Rhode Island. This little skunk is a traveller. He is much like a weasel in habit, eternally on the move, and thus is more often killed than his big, arrogant cousin, the common skunk. Next in line come the various ground squirrels, chipmunks, flagtails, and grey squirrels. I have found also ground hogs, weasels, jack rabbits, and an occasional mink. No animal, in fact, in this country so far as I know, escapes the crushing wheels of the automobile.

The pitiful thing about the whole matter is that this wholesale slaughter is uncalled for. Now and then, of course, the most cautious driver may inadvertently kill some animal or another, but the vast majority of roadside tragedies are perpetrated by those who drive utterly regardless of the rights of any creature other than man.

A slight pressure upon the brakes, a honk of the horn, a lifting of the foot from the accelerator, a quick turn of the wheel, and a life is spared. Is not the humblest creature worth that much?

Roy L. Abbott.