

PHEASANT HEAVEN ISN'T JUST FOR THE BIRDS

By

Craig Boddington

Whether we're talking farming or hunting—or both—there isn't much you can do about the weather. There are more pheasants this year than the past couple of years, but we all know it's going to take a couple more good years for the numbers to come back. They will. The rains will come at the right time for both the crops and birds...but it isn't the pheasants that make Hugoton "Pheasant Heaven" the evening before opening day. It's Pheasant Heaven Charities and their annual Calf Fry (well, this year it was a lamb fry and some darned good barbecue, but you get the idea), held at Great Plains Gas Compression on November 7.

This wasn't the first Calf Fry I've attended. In fact, I feel a bit guilty I haven't made it for a couple of years. It isn't for the lack of birds, but simply because November is a hectic time, and it's hard to be in all the places I'd like to be. The way it works, I have to pick just one, and this year I got to pick Hugoton again. Although I brought a shotgun, the truth is I never took it out of the truck. My southeast Kansas neighbor, Hugoton native Chuck Herbel, didn't take his out either. Maybe in a better year we'll come for the birds, but we were there for Pheasant Heaven Charities...along with maybe 1500 other folks.

Sure, that's not a peak crowd. In good pheasant years the ranks are swollen by a few hundred out-of-towners...and they swell the auction proceeds as well. But Hugoton isn't a big town, and it isn't surrounded by any big towns. In southwestern Kansas is there another event where you can eat lamb fries and barbecue with 1500 of your friends and neighbors (and a few strangers)? And just maybe do a little good for the community

while you're at it? Despite the name, Pheasant Heaven Charities isn't a conservation organization...unless you figure people also need conserving. Thank goodness we have those, too: Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Wild Sheep Foundation, Safari Club International, and more. I'm not certain any of them can fix a multi-year drought, but they all do great work. So you can pick your cause, but Pheasant Heaven Charities is a whole different kettle of fish. It's purely a local group, dedicated to raising money to help local folks in southwest Kansas and the Oklahoma Panhandle.

And that's exactly what they do. I've been lucky to get to know most of the committee members. The annual Calf Fry is the most visible event—good eats, lots of raffle prizes, great auction—but these folks work hard at this throughout the year...and they don't take a penny for their time. Instead, through fund raisers and partnerships with local businesses and individuals, they raise money and give it away...nearly a million dollars since the event was founded in 2004. The money goes to local charities, individuals in need, scholarships, wounded warrior events, and so much more—right there in the local community. Check them out at www.pheasanteveningcharities.com, or visit them on Facebook.

I'm a native Kansan, but I'm from the faraway eastern side. Like so many good Kansans my Dad and Grand-dad were bird hunters. I suppose we had good years and bad even back then, but selective memory is a wonderful thing, and I remember that we had oceans of birds...except, to us back then, "birds" meant bobwhite quail. But 'way back then pheasant season in western Kansas opened a week before quail season in eastern Kansas. In those days of yore we didn't have deer or turkey seasons in Kansas; the rooster pheasant—even just *one*—was the big-game bird! So, dutifully and eagerly, we'd make the long pilgrimage...in those pre-Interstate days it was the best part of eight hours to Liberal or Hugoton.

Serious bird hunters know that, even in great years, it's usually too warm and there's too much cover in early November...and, even in the worst years, there are plenty of birds when the snow flies and they're concentrated in remaining cover. But opening day is special, an annual rite of passage. I felt the old excitement building all the way from Elk City...but, realistically, I knew I probably wasn't going to take the shotgun out of the truck. I'll save that for a better year. So maybe I was just anticipating having lamb fries and barbecue with a whole lot of good people. And that's exactly what we did.

Craig Boddington, author of 25 books on hunting and shooting, is a retired Marine Colonel and Executive Field Editor of InterMedia Outdoors. Right now he's being completely outwitted by whitetails on his farm in southeastern Kansas.