

# June's First Pheasant

by Emma Ellsworth

I had not hunted before that day. It was October, chilly, but not yet freezing. The air was damp and the leaves gave off the soft, almost sweet, smell of decay. My puppy was full of vigor and curiosity. Her paws were too big to control; her ears refused to lie down in an organized fashion. We piled out of the truck, my husband Tom and I donning orange, and June wearing her bird hunting beep collar, set to screech in the unlikely event of a point.

I did not yet have my firearms license, never having felt the need nor desire to obtain one in the past. "Why would I set aside two perfectly fine weekend days for firearms training to get a license to shoot a poor, innocent animal?" I had thought. Even the concept seemed ludicrous. But there I was, hunting. I had been raised with a loyal, smart, protective Australian Shepherd named Bandit, who was also barely trained and totally wild. In the wee hours, I often took my nightmare-wracked little body out to his homemade doghouse. Preferring to curl up with dog on the straw floor than face the dark, foreboding corners of my empty bedroom. I smushed my face in Bandit's thick fur, feeling safe, while he peered watchfully at our lawn and nearby woods.

But now, several decades later, I had shown breed disloyalty, and had this little mischievous shorthaired hunting dog. I was a sucker for any puppy, and she had a soft brown head and a big brown circle on

her back. She swiftly snuck into my heart. Tom had lost his hunting dog during the fall when we first met. She had been silent, domineering, totally graceful, and almost regal in nature. June, at six months old, was anything but regal. A hunting dog? How did one train a real hunting dog? I had no idea, but the books and articles strongly advised, don't teach this dog to sit! Teach it to "whoa" (meaning, stop now). So, we obediently explored this new canine concept. We "whoa'ed" for cookies, for dinner, and before crossing the dirt road on our morning walks. We "whoa'ed" for fun, for torture in the face of squirrels darting across the forest floor. After a while, I couldn't help but to whoa, too, when I called out the command, I would also lurch to a stop, like a child in a competitive game of Red Light, Green Light. My feet would slide to a stop, as would June's. Perhaps my emphatic, exaggerated movement encouraged hers?

Tom held his over and under shotgun in a languid posture; broken open, over his shoulder. Two shells rolled in his hand. He was in no rush. There was no attempt at silence, we chatted as we would in the morning over coffee, slammed the truck doors with indifference, and started down the trail. Five steps around the first bend into the pheasant-stocked wildlife management area and June lurched and locked into a "whoa." Her little white paw lifted, as if to say, "There mom, right there!" And sure enough, directly in the middle of the path,

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Photo © Tom Ellsworth

*Pictured (left to right) are the author and hunting dogs June and Kona after a successful pheasant hunt.*

stood a gorgeous ring-necked pheasant. It seemed as big as little June, though my memory may have exaggerated the grandeur of this first pheasant sighting.

Before my brain had the chance to register the series of actions that followed, the bird bolted upward with feathers whistling and the signature cackle filling the air. The gun, that was resting on my husband's shoulder, snapped shut, was mounted in an instant, and bang! The bird dropped like a rock. June—as though she had been trained and had hunted for years—trotted confidently to the flapping pheasant, now lying in the middle of the path. She sniffed, poked, tested, and carefully picked it up, as if it were a fragile egg. With a level of seriousness and focus uncharacteristic for a puppy, she brought the bird to Tom's outstretched hand. This well-choreographed rhythm, while new to this hunting team, was gen-

erations in the making and, therefore, totally familiar.

I watched, trying to comprehend what had just happened, and then I hooted with exhilaration! What beautiful moment. I was awestruck by the magnificent hunting dance of puppy and husband. I was in love with both, and with this new hunting thing. This is what it means to see a dog do what it was meant to do. She knew her job and she loved it. Pride shined in her little brown eyes, and in ours. I knew right then that I had some catching up to do. I had to learn to hunt. For her. For him.



## About the Author

*Emma Ellsworth is the Executive Director of the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust in Athol.*