



□ *Editor's note: The following story was printed in the Dec. 12, 2012 edition of The Denver Post. Gary Bragg, who is quoted in the story, was a 1981 graduate of Chase County High School. He now resides in Denver and works for the Cherry Creek Public Schools.*

By Scott Willoughby

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HOLYOKE—They say it isn't bragging if it's true. And if your name is Gary Bragg, you're probably singing it.

Contrary to the implications of nomenclature, Bragg can rarely be accused of boasting as he croons of heartache in the heartland like a Nebraskan Neil Young on his as-yet undiscovered CD, "High Plains Storm." Even less so when he explains his love of animals to vegan rocker Chrissie Hynde (and the Pretenders), preferably medium rare, in a catchy little ditty titled "Free Range":

I like fish and I like turkey, I like quail, I love elk jerky;
If my plate don't have some meat, it doesn't feel like a meal;
And when I'm socially conscious, I eat free range veal.

While such lyrical artistry isn't likely to find an audience far outside of The John Boy & Billy Radio Show, it offers a fine soundtrack for a weekend of hunting with the fellas, high harmony to accompany the frigid upland wind whistling across Phillips County, Colo.

With a kinship that reaches well beyond a pair of cousins, the recent weekend gathering on Rupert O'Neal's family farm was heavy on red meat and black powder, if a little light on white-necked roosters.

When they aren't making music, pheasant hunting on the farm is what guys like Bragg and O'Neal do, what they've done their whole lives, and what they've dedicated their futures to, like it's part of their genetic makeup.

That's not bragging. It's reality, and O'Neal's efforts speak for themselves, even under difficult hunting conditions during what's widely recognized as a difficult year for hunting pheasants. As if to add to Bragg's poetic angst, unhuntable hens on the farm numbered in the hundreds.

"When I first started doing all this habitat work around the farm, the locals looked at me like I was nuts. They didn't understand why I'd put in all that effort just for pheasants," said O'Neal, whose prestigious Ballyneal Golf Club just a few miles from the century-old family farm also left several neighbors scratching their heads. "But now they get it. The work we've done benefits pheasant populations in the whole area, and that attracts more people to a place like Holyoke."

O'Neal willingly puts his money where his mouth is when it comes to the future of pheasants and the potential for upland hunting as a resource in rural Colorado communities.

The small town of Holyoke, near the Nebraska border, knows a good thing when it sees it.

Now he'd like to see his home state embrace upland hunting as a business opportunity for its citizens with similar passion.

"I find it unfortunate that the state of Colorado cannot see the potential in upland hunting. States like Kansas and South Dakota are showing that upland hunting can be a game changer in some struggling rural communities," O'Neal said.

“Well, what is happening is Kansas is harvesting Colorado hunting dollars. It doesn't have to be this way, but you can't compete if you don't suit up, and our Colorado team seems lost in the locker room,” he said.

At one point, O'Neal's farm served as a private hunt club, demanding the sort of pheasant habitat improvement projects that a high-end pay-to-play destination requires. It also meant sometimes seeding the property with pheasants, too.

A plot of undisturbed grassy acreage affectionately known as the “Phat 40” served as site of the state pheasant hunting championships for three straight years, and contrary to prevailing small game management philosophy, evidence of 600 pheasants annually planted for the event remains some 10 years after its conclusion.

“The birds that were already there weren't native either,” he said.

Although the property remains private, wild flushing birds regularly disperse to ample plots of Walk-In Access Property that abound in the state's second most successful county for pheasant harvests (13,869 in 2011-2012).

With some fine-tuning and a community effort, O'Neal is confident the pheasant range spanning between Sterling, Holyoke and Burlington could live up to its potential as Colorado's own “Golden Triangle,” capable of drawing hunters for annual events on par with the successful Kansas Governor's Ringneck Classic.

Meanwhile, the spoils are left to friends and family to enjoy between musical duets and burgers downtown at The Skillet.

“We rarely ever hunt for more than two hours,” Bragg crowed in praise of his pal's typically productive habitat. “We had our limit by 10:30 on opening day.”