Korea hunting a dangerous game

Currently Outdoors

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In 1953 I was in the Army, assigned to the Eighth Army Headquarters Public Information Office in Yongsan, Korea, a suburb of the ruined capitol city of Seoul.

My job got me out and about the Korean countryside quite a bit, and, being the hunter I am, I couldn't help noticing the hordes of ringneck pheasants infesting the rice paddies.

A buddy from the Kansas farm country, Red Kahler, and I decided to go hunting. The only shotgun we could get our hands on was a 12-gauge stockade-guard gun. Hardly the classic upland game gun, it was a well-worn old Winchester Model 97 exposed-hammer pump with a 20-inch, cylinder-bore barrel, perforated-metal upper handguard, sling swivels, and a bayonet lug. Still, it shot where it looked … and all around that point, too.

The big pattern made it hard to miss a pheasant on close flushes, which they all were since the birds had never been hunted. Surprisingly, hunting was permitted, with a six-month open season and a daily bag limit of 10 birds, either sex. A Korean hunting license was required but was free to military personnel.

There were millions of pheasants, identical to stateside ringnecks, whose ancestral brood stock had been imported from China.

The only 12-gauge ammo available was government-issue buckshot loads of uncertain vintage in full-length brass cases. Miraculously, while on R&R leave in Tokyo, we stumbled onto a few boxes of U.S.-made shotshells loaded with #6 shot – perfect for pheasants — in a department store in Tokyo. Since private ownership of firearms was prohibited in Japan at the time, there's no rational explanation for why that ammunition was for sale in that store. Maybe God just decided that the Korean pheasant population needed thinning. If so, we could regard ourselves as agents of The Lord, carrying out His divine will.

A bird dog, of course, was too much to hope for, but we recruited a couple of Korean teenagers with promises of some fresh meat for their families. They proved steady to wing and shot and enthusiastic retrievers but lacked keen noses — not surprising, we decided, in a people whose national dish was kimchi, a reeking concoction of fermented cabbage and who knows what else.

Our first hunt went well. We took turns with the shotgun and collected a near-limit of birds. Since the shots were so easy we were puzzled that our Korean kids were so amazed at our skill on flying birds, until we realized that every shoulder-fired gun they'd ever seen had been a military rifle, and they thought we were knocking those birds down with bullets instead of shot patterns.

We flushed a few Asian hares in the paddies, and rolled them over, too. The boys were speechless with gratitude when we gave them the big rabbits. The wartime Korean diet was severely lacking in protein, and the meat of the hares was a godsend to their families.

Back in the Headquarters compound, we propositioned the mess sergeant of the officer's mess: we'd keep him in delicious pheasant meat if he'd cook our birds and serve them with appropriate side dishes, salads, desserts, etc – all leftovers from the officers' meals. Commissioned officers ate better than enlisted men, and Red and I were both buck sergeants. We had to wait for our supper until the officers' mess closed, but it was worth the wait. Those rice-fed pheasants were just as delectable as any from the American corn belt.

On subsequent hunts, however, we learned that Korean pheasant hunting could be more dangerous than hunting lions or Cape buffalo. Practically the whole Korean peninsula had been converted to one giant minefield by both armies. The UN forces (mostly American) marked their minefields with a 12-inch-high, one-strand barbed-wire fence, on which hung little triangular wooden minefield markers which showed on which side of the fence the mines lay. But the Korean farmers, desperately short of fuel for heating and cooking fires, often removed the markers and burned them.

Believe me, it was a tense experience to walk up to a minefield fence with no markers and wonder whether you'd just walked through the mines and gotten lucky or would enter the field if you stepped over the fence.

The North Korean and Chinese armies didn't bother to mark their mined areas. Many of the so-called Chinese "shoebox" mines were made of wood to make them hard to find with a metal detector. Most – but not all — of these had deteriorated from exposure and become inert. I noticed one partly exposed in a muddy rice paddy one day and, stepping back to what seemed a safe distance, I laid a charge of #6 shot on it. The resulting explosion deposited me on the seat of my pants in the mud but left me unharmed, since wooden splinters at 40 yards make poor shrapnel. Not all enemy mines were so shoddy, however, and Eighth Army did suffer a few pheasant-hunting casualties every season.

Any way you went at it, Korean pheasant hunting was exciting.

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.