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## **DFW budgets, change and the psychology of game birds**

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I remember thinking that The Old Man (my father) had some sort of magic power, the way he could look around and describe changes new decades would bring. Now that I'm him, I see it's just the way the world works — change is the only constant we can count on in our lifetimes.

Cousin Ron and I grew up together. He was in Yakima. I was in East Wenatchee. We were inseparable for months of every year. We often lament that we had, in the 1950s, the best hunting and fishing Washington ever enjoyed. When I remind him of the changes we've seen, his standard response is, "Well, if I was in charge we'd just roll back the game and fish regulations to 1955 and everything would be fine!"

It isn't that simple, of course. In the decades since our youth the state's population has exploded, federal and tribal relationships have become integral parts of wildlife management, cost of that management has steadily risen, less ground is left for wildlife habitat, woodlands have become surrounded by humans and water quality has suffered. Maybe someone has a way to roll us back to "simpler" and cheaper times, but I have yet to meet that person.

Our liveliest discussions, I think, are around the great bird hunting we found across the state. Yes, there are good opportunities today to hunt chukars, quail and pheasants, but they pale in comparison to the days when farmers could spare some cover ground and Fish and Wildlife had hatcheries rearing and releasing birds into

that good habitat. Ron is still cranky about the closing of hatcheries (both bird and fish operations), and with the annual \$30 million-plus deficit our Department of Fish and Wildlife is facing next year, he'll have more to chew on.

In the late 40s and early 50s, there were lots of birds — not because Game and Fish had decreed that there would be lots of birds, but because there were places for the birds to hide and nest and live. Orchards still had brush piles no one got around to clearing, and field fence rows were tangles of brush and weeds perfect for nesting. There were wild berries and roses. A good many, if not most, of those birds were wild-hatched birds.

In the late 50s, The Old Man and I would grab his old J.C. Higgins bolt-action 12-gauge, wander off into the orchards around the East Wenatchee home we had so lovingly built, and within an hour, we'd have a couple roosters and quail for the table. His powers of prognostication still left me wondering a bit. "This will be very different when you're grown up, son..." (Yeah. The house we built is now under Costco and most of the orchards and fields have transmogrified into single-family homes...) Our lives and pleasures change with time; it's as true now as it was then.

As human populations and habitat changed, bird numbers dropped. That "rearing and releasing" stuff became a big activity for states all over the U.S. Today, it simply isn't economically feasible. The rearing of game birds is now handled by a limited number of bird farms.

For decades, the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club raised game birds for release around Paradise, but that stopped at the end of the last Century. For a time, the Club bought and released hundred of birds from select hatcheries. No more.

Still, I enjoyed working the waning years of the Club's rearing efforts, taking my turns feeding pheasants, Huns and chukars at the game farm. I saw much of that time as a course in bird psychology. I miss feeding and studying those birds. Interesting critters. Some, I thought, were fully capable of stacking the deck against predators or hunters.

Here, then, are my thoughts on the psychology of the birds I fed, and the little California quail outside the pens.

The quail, I thought, were little snots. They would stand just outside the pens, daring any bird inside to fight them. They would pick up loose feed, staying just out of reach of a peck through the fence. As I moved up, they would melt into the weeds with that patented smooth hustle.

Before I even touched the entry gate, the Huns were at the far end of the run, and nervous. This caution, I figured, would help them make more Huns over the years.

As I entered the pens, the chukars would scoot away, in an ant-like single file. At a safe distance, they would calmly stand until I left. They were almost imperturbable, but always alert to my movements. I sensed that they had decided, before I even drove up, which way they would go if I got too close. These guys had my number; they were hatched with it.

The pheasants, on the other hand, were mostly goofballs — and nervous wrecks. I always moved slowly and cautiously, but it did not matter. (They are, after all, just long-tailed chickens.) Any false move and they'd be off and flying in any direction. They never seemed to think about where they were going, they just went. Consequently, there were numerous fence-jousts. And, maybe, that pheasants-going-any-which-way thing is why we enjoy hunting them.

As chair of the Reecer Creek Rod, Gun, Working Dog & Outdoor Think Tank Benevolent Association's Bird Psychology Subcommittee, I'm required to share those observations. I leave it to you to assign value, although it seems beneficial to have a handle on the psychology of wild things — even if it just game bird pop-psycho-babble.

Oh, yes. That "change" business. DFW is facing a big hole and we are going to have to help fill it. We'll discuss how that might happen next week. Happy summer.

*Jim Huckabay is retired from the Department of Geography at Central. His "WILD WINDS and Other Tales of Growing Up in the Outdoor West," is available online and at bookstores. Contact Jim and join in discussions at [www.insidetheoutdoors.com](http://www.insidetheoutdoors.com).*