

Photo courtesy of Wyoming State Archives



Game and Fish actively introduced chukars from 1938 to 1968.

Bishop of the birds

By Jeff Obrecht

Civil engineers have always had a special place in my outdoor heart. I may never have hunted if not mentored by one. Had great memories afield with another — a civil engineer-to-be/baseball teammate from high school and college. This January I met another. Floyd Bishop was Wyoming's State Engineer from 1963 to 1974. But at 94 he might be Wyoming's chukar partridge patriarch. Along with his bird-hunting partners and fellow civil engineers Joel Farber and Pat Tyrrell, we talked about chukar hunting for a couple hours.

I left wishing I could have hunted with Floyd, too. I know he would have been happy to take me, just like he did Joel and Pat and others. Even with clipboard and legal pad in hand, I was accepted as one of the guys. That special spot civil engineers occupy with me got even bigger.

Floyd first got on the challenging trail of the chukar partridge in the late 1950s. He was working as an aspiring young civil engineer in Lander and was introduced to the game bird by Dr. Harry Tipton, a bird-hunting local physician.

“Number of things,” Floyd recalled about chukars impressing him. “We ran into them and shot a few. The public land, the rough country and they tasted good. I was hooked.”

Hooked so deeply, when Floyd moved to Cheyenne in 1963, he would still make it to the Bighorn Basin for around 50 — no kidding, 50 — chukar hunts a year. That dedication creates a legacy of stories.

Had our meeting been just a couple years earlier, Floyd no doubt could have recollected more of those stories, along with entertaining details and anecdotes. But with Joel and Pat’s interaction, talking to Floyd was one of my most memorable interviews in 35 years of writing.

Floyd confirms the old chukar hunting adage that it’s best to hike to the top of the hill to start hunting. The objective is confounding the bird from its preferred escape of sprinting uphill and hoping the coveys will be more likely to sit tighter or at least slow down. “But you’re still hunting on the way up,” he reminded us.

On one of their first hunts together, Joel

wondered about his mentor checking the chukars’ crops and then separating the birds into two groups. Floyd explained the birds eating wild onions tasted so much better, they rated exclusive packaging.

Another trademark was to come back to the truck to find Floyd’s dog crate topped with his chukars of the day — but no Floyd. He was just letting his partners know he was finding birds, things were fine and he was back afield.

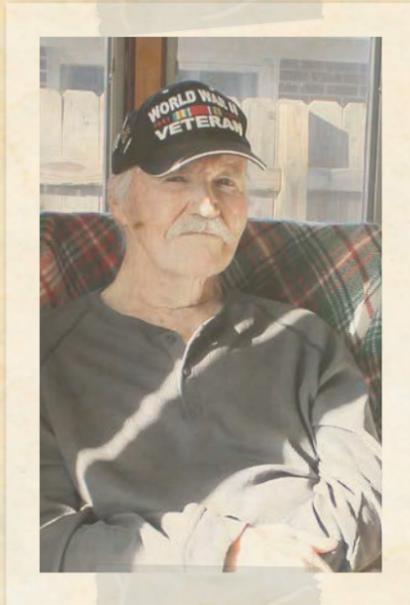
Although Floyd’s been retired from the field for a few years, I got a kick out of the inherent bird hunter caution of protecting coverts. He made it clear that specific spots where he introduced friends to chukar hunting for 50 years were not to be printed.

Floyd always had a bird dog, and as much as it got afield, it couldn’t help but develop into a good chukar hunter, too. But Floyd is no breed snob — goldens, German shorthairs and Labradors have all been his partners. Rusty, a 90-pound golden retriever, seemed to particularly evoke found bird dog memories.

In addition to civil engineers and physicians, a judge had an important role Wyoming chukar history. W.S. Owen, sitting on the Park County bench, gets credit for introducing

the first chukars to Wyoming. He got hold of 23 eggs in 1933 — he didn’t say from where in an April 1941 Wyoming Wildlife article — and fledged the first 15 Wyoming chukars.

“The next year I tried common bantams for brood hens and they made good foster mothers,” he wrote. “I ended up that year with a fine lot of young chukars, and of these I liberated 34 — the first chukar partridges ever released



*Floyd Bishop's hunting dedication created a legacy of chukar stories.
Photo by Jeff Obrecht*



A chukar scouts the snow-blown fields in Fremont County.

Photo by Garhart Stephenson

in Wyoming.” But what prompted the judge to bring chukars to Wyoming? Had he seen or heard about the bird in Idaho, where they were introduced in 1923?

Whatever the connection, the judge was certainly enthusiastic, if not maybe a little delusional, about the future. “There is no reason why Wyoming should not have millions of these birds roaming its plains and mountains because in this state we have abundant chukar food and plenty of natural shelter, such as they enjoyed in their native land,” he said.

That native land is the rocky steppe and mountains from Turkey to Nepal. Owens had a correct prediction, of sorts, about the “abundant food.” Cheatgrass is also native to Asia and a chukar staple. Although its invasion is legitimately reviled in the West, it helped establish and continues to fuel wild chukars.

In 1935, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department got into the chukar propagation business at the Sheridan Bird Farm. The first release was 1938 in the Corral Creek area of Natrona County. Releases continued annually through 1968 and totaled nearly 64,000. There’s a slight contradiction in distribution: One article says all counties got birds; another only 22 of 23,



*Historic Wyoming Wildlife drawing of chukar.
Illustration by Archie Pendergraft*

without naming the exception.

Private stockings also persisted with sporting groups in Greybull and Midwest at least through 1953. None of the birds from private or public releases were direct imports from Asia. The majority of birds were likely of Indian lineage; the others Turkish stock.

1955 was a historic year for Wyoming bird hunters: the first season for turkeys and chukars. The department applied considerable oversight to the inaugural 5-day chukar season and



Photo by Don Getty

reported: "... a bird in the bag cost an average of seven shotgun shells — that hunters felt the ammunition companies had worked out a deal with the chukars and weren't putting enough or any shot in the shells!"

Floyd did his part to up that average over the next 50 years. He didn't specifically worry about the load he was shooting. "Just kind of rounded up whatever I could find," he said about chukar shells. His easy-going nature trumped his engineering preciseness with his shotguns, too. He shot a variety over the years and wasn't an advocate for a particular action or make. The important thing to Floyd wasn't the equipment, but getting out and using it.

Sure Floyd shot some Hungarian (gray) partridge, too, in chukar pursuit. But the other partridge was clearly a consolation prize. "Chukars taste better," he said.

One shotgun did end up being a favorite — a 20-gauge Browning over/under that he carried most of his last 30 years afield. It was a retirement gift from Banner and Associates in 1981, but it took a little while for Floyd to warm up to it. The shotgun was made in Japan and Floyd fought in the Pacific Theater with the Army Air Corps in World War II.

Floyd didn't get injured in the war, but he did qualify for a chukar-hunting purple heart. With the birds' affection for steep, rocky slopes, hunts are challenging and known for and inflicting injury to hunters and their dogs. "Around 1997 and in the middle of nowhere" hunting solo, Floyd slipped while rock hopping. He regained consciousness a couple hours later and in subsequent days looked like a raccoon with his two black eyes. That produced the clear edict from his wife, June, that all future hunts would be with a partner. Joel grinned and said he benefited from the accident by then reaping more trips afield with Floyd.

Floyd also took a couple hunting trips to the famous chukar mountains of Nevada and canyons of Idaho. An engineering convention in San Francisco in the 1970s also had a hunting twist: Floyd and partner got mugged. Floyd wasn't worried about the money he lost, but



Historic Wyoming Wildlife drawing of chukar.
Illustration by Archie Pendergraft

rather the coveted and rarely-drawn bighorn sheep license for the upcoming season in his billfold. Floyd accomplished his sheep hunt with a duplicate license from Game and Fish, but his friends still get a kick out remembering his reaction to the crime.

When Game and Fish folks think about chukars, we think of our late chief game warden, Jay Lawson. He earned a first-name basis with the game bird while patrolling the Lovell and Thermopolis districts from 1978 to 1985. When we had a chukar question we asked Jay. When someone asked him where to hunt he'd draw an "X" on the road map that covered the entire basin. No specific coverts divulged from Jay, either. Such is the brotherhood of hunters. Floyd, Joel and Jay were friends. When hunting, they often stayed at the same motel together in Thermopolis.

Lots of Wyoming Wildlife chukar articles in the 1950s and 60s discuss the upcoming seasons. Jay contributed a comprehensive story about the ecology of the bird in July 1986. The issue you're holding contains the first article to feature the personalities, like Floyd, chukar hunting attracted.

Like the civil engineer that was my hunting mentor, whatever Floyd did, I could tell he did it well. He was inducted into the Wyoming Engineering Hall of Fame in 1995. If there were a Wyoming upland bird hunter hall of fame, he'd have been a member long before that.