



The Naming of Pheasants

By Wordpusher715

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Of Pheasants, Penzance, and Politics

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Indianhead summer begins in the middle of June. That's when the grass along the roadway of our rural Wisconsin town is available to be mowed.

Six years ago the Town approved a resolution to prevent town mowing operations until the second week of June. Tall grass up to the edge of the roadway is the price one pays to protect the habitat of ground-nesting birds. It's acceptable in northern Wisconsin because an unkempt look is natural. No one in the area truly embraces manicured right-of-ways or manicured women. It's the local way.

In the second week of June when grass is tallest along the roadway, the suicide critters play games.

Rabbits, mice, birds, foxes, squirrels, each wait along the edge of the pavement until they detect the rumble of approaching vehicles. Then they dart out, startle you, and run across the road into ditches of tall grass on the other side. You immediately brake. It's reflexive. You're sad every time a critter loses the game. You don't want to kill living things. No one does.

Pheasants play the game differently. The cocks strut on the roadway, outside the tall grass. Having poor eyesight, they're unable to determine what a threat is and where it's coming from until it is on top of them. The cocks have red-faced heads which they stretch out on a green neck that has a white collar. They crane about looking for danger. They bustle stiffly along the roadway with bobbing heads and erect, starched tails. The body is mottled with gold and copper plumage.

When danger is finally upon them, they turn and rapidly flap away to safety. They will fly six to ten feet above the ground and then land in more tall grass. The rush of mighty wings produces an unforgettable sound.

It was four years ago when a ring-necked cock pheasant appeared along my roadway every day at the same time. It became my habit to slow and watch it strut. Sometimes it was on the right, other times on the left. The north side or the south side of the road made no difference. Its particular walk and craning of its neck reminded me of the Victorian era and it was easy to imagine a cock pheasant as a gentleman preening in a copper-colored vest while sporting a monocle and a mustache.

On the third day when I saw the pheasant, I hummed two lines of The Major General's Song from Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. The melody and meaning fit the preening pheasant before me.

I am the very model of a modern major general, Something, something, vegetable, and mineral.

Tail feathers raised high, head bobbing, beak raised high, it had a snooty look about it as it scabbled along the road. The song fit the vision before me. Each day I sang or hummed a little bit more until I gave in and looked up the lyrics.

My Naming of the Pheasants epiphany occurred in the second week. Two cocks along the road, one on each side. In a flash, I knew the one on the left had to be named Gilbert and the one on the right had to be Sullivan. In the same flash, I also knew that regardless of which way I was driving, regardless of the north or south side of the road, I knew the pheasant on the left would always be Gilbert and the right would always be named Sullivan. There was a sophomoric pleasure in imagining Gilbert on the left must, therefore, be liberal and Sullivan to the right must be conservative. It aligned with the political satire they wrote.

My ego is my lifetime cheerleader. I can't help it. It's the way I'm made. At home that evening, I simply had to share my cleverness with the lovely Mrs. L. To my surprise, she thought it amusing and appropriate.

The lovely Mrs. L adopted my naming convention and now it's common for us to say: I saw Gilbert on 7th Avenue or I saw Gilbert and Sullivan at lunchtime. When pheasants are not present for long periods of time, we will ask each other Have you seen Gilbert or Sullivan recently?

Ten days ago, during a break in the winter weather, with sand on the iced-over roadways, there was a flock of eight or nine hen pheasants in the middle of the road. They pecked at the coarse sand. I have seen them three times since.

Hens have drab camouflage markings and, if I see this group again, this group might need a name.

What would I call a group of hens in camo? Still thinking...