

Outdoor Canada

Character: David Bissett

By Bruce Masterman

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Photo caption: David Bissett with Amy, his springer spaniel, after a successful pheasant hunt.

Almost four decades ago, businessman David Bissett would travel each fall from his Toronto home to hunt sharp-tail grouse in the lush native grasslands of southern Saskatchewan.

But the tradition came to an abrupt end one autumn. Bissett eagerly arrived at his favorite hunting grounds only to discover the farmer had ploughed under vast acres of grassland to plant a crop of grain. Rendered homeless, the grouse were gone. The pattern repeated itself after Bissett moved his investments company west to Calgary in the mid-1970's. He began hunting ring-necked pheasants on habitat-rich private land east of the foothills city. That, too, ended when the landowner cleared the willows and cattails for an intensive cattle operation.

Alarmed by his own experiences and similar stories told by other hunters, Bissett became increasingly determined to help counter the spreading loss of prime habitat for upland birds and other wildlife. Some people complain and do nothing about it. Bissett isn't like that. Not by a long shot.

He opted to put a good chunk of his own money – a cool one million bucks to be exact – where his heart is.

Bissett has committed to donating \$200,000 a year for the next five years to an innovative program aimed at restoring wildlife habitat within the farming regions of southern Alberta. "Now is the time we have to pull together, to work with the agricultural community to develop and maintain a viable wildlife population," says the 62-year-old retired investments manager. "Somebody once told me 'either go big or go home.' We decided to go big."

Bissett is honorary chairman of a campaign to raise \$6 million from the private sector to expand the Partners in Habitat Development program throughout southern Alberta's 13 irrigation districts. The program was started in 1998 by the Eastern Irrigation District and the Calgary chapter of Pheasants Forever, a non-profit conservation organization.

In its first four years, the program has convinced 135 farmers and ranchers to modify their day-to-day agricultural operations to benefit wildlife by creating habitat for nesting cover, food sources, shelter and protection from natural predators. More than 90,000 trees were planted and 20 kilometres of fencing installed to protect habitat from livestock. Winter food plots and emergency feeding stations were established, and conservation farm plans developed over more than 24,000 acres. In many cases, landowners themselves benefited through the development of stable supplies of clean water.

Pheasants Forever's Calgary chapter is spearheading a \$6 million fundraising campaign to expand the PHD program throughout southern Alberta's other 12 irrigation districts. The program potentially could encompass 1.3 million acres.

Bissett's generous donation is a powerful kick-start to the campaign.

"David has been an absolute fire starter for us ever since he became involved in Pheasants Forever," says Gregg Norman, the Calgary chapter's project director. "Thanks to him, we've made a quantum leap in a heck of a hurry."

Bissett isn't doing it for the recognition. He downplays his donation, saying his only motivation is to support a cause in which he believes. "I only want to try to make things happen," he notes. "Besides, one million dollars isn't that much money these days."

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