



Hilda, the unmuffled grouch

An unusual backyard visitor won this family's heart.

Story by Tony Welch / Illustrations by Kayleigh Oreshack

One bright spring morning 67 years ago, a feisty bundle of feathers walked out of the Wisconsin woods and confronted my Aunt Leone, seated in a backyard lawn chair minding her own business.

Lee knew a ruffed grouse when she saw one, but this scold was something else. For starters, the bird gave her a five-minute tongue lashing before evacuating on the flagstone patio — narrowly missing Lee's left foot. The grouse then suddenly took wing and soared off into the woods. Lee called her family together and described the encounter in detail.

"Fermented berries," declared my grandfather Pete, poking at the scat with the tip of his cane. My Uncle Rip, Lee's husband, observed that whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. Only grandmother Frances showed any sympathy: "Maybe the poor dear is wounded...."

Next day the rogue female returned, this time with a suitor in tow. Goose-stepping stiffly, wings ajar beneath epaulets of ebony hackle, the lovesick cock tried every parade ground maneuver to lure his lady back to the sanctuary of the woods. Eventually tiring, the male thundered off and was never seen again.

That afternoon, Lee paid a visit to check her extensive flower garden. To her dismay, a half-dozen plants were missing some newly forming buds. At least, she consoled herself, the marauding nocturnal rabbits couldn't reach her precious potted geraniums. Glancing in their direction, Lee spotted the female grouse perched on the rim of a three-foot-tall flower pot. The bird's bulging crop sagged like a swollen goiter.

With its beady eyes and drab vestments, the grouse reminded my aunt of a light-fingered cleaning lady who had

worked for her years before.

"Hilda was a thief and so are you," Lee announced. The geranium pots were promptly covered with a webbed netting and Hilda's namesake was put on probation.

As a 14-year-old nephew privileged to spend his summers at Tainter Lake, I was far more interested in what the fish were eating. So much so, that I began leaving baited but unattended fishing poles dangling off the dock overnight — an angling violation. In no time, I caught the attention of the Dunn County game warden, who passed by in his boat early one morning and spotted the poles. We collided halfway down the trail to the lake. His iron grip on my arm foretold a swift and certain punishment as he led me up the hill to inform my relatives I'd broken the law. As we rounded the corner of the cottage, a brown explosion burst from behind a clump of fiddle-head ferns and settled directly in our path.

"Beat it, you dumb cluck," I muttered, depressed by what I knew awaited me. A sudden look of disbelief crossed the warden's face. "Is that grouse...yours?" he asked.

Sensing a golden opportunity, I replied, "Oh, yes sir, that's Hilda. She's...uh...crazy. She's making me crazy, too. Maybe you can tell what's wrong with her."

Unlocking his grip, the warden spun around, ran down

to the lake and returned out of breath, with a long-handled telescopic fishing net. The ensuing chase was punctuated by flapping wings and much vocal coaxing and pleading, until at length the lawman finally got lucky and snared his quarry in the net. Following his instructions, I held the bird firmly pressed to my chest as the warden fastened an engraved metal band around Hilda's left leg and then copied the serial number in a notebook. Gripping the base of each wing, he next examined every square inch of her body.

"Your grouse looks perfectly healthy." With that, the warden suddenly released his catch and Hilda barreled out of sight behind the house.

"Wait'll I tell our game biologist about this," the warden added, grinning. "He won't believe a word of it."

Then back down the hill went my tormentor, pausing long enough to caution me about unattended fish poles. Crazy or not, Hilda now had her own personal wild game protector and I felt deeply in her debt for getting me off the hook — so to speak.

Mid-mornings at the homestead were special. Grandpa Pete, who fully understood my adolescent needs, would bestir himself and mutter, "For pity's sake, would you look at the time." In a twinkling I was seated behind the wooden



*"Did you see that, Gramps?
Hilda wants to race!"*



Suddenly I felt a sharp stinging sensation in my left heel and spun around. Hilda!

steering wheel of his 1928 Pontiac sedan. Sliding in beside me, Pete would light a cigar, lean back and nod solemnly. The half-mile postal run to the cluster of mailboxes at Picnic Point was officially underway.

At 25 mph, the aging Pontiac stirred up a gratifying cloud of dust as it began traveling down the long private road leading to the highway. On this occasion, a casual glance in the rearview mirror caused me to suddenly slam hard on the brakes. Almost instantly, Hilda shot past the stopped car in a half-barrel roll and continued on down the winding road out of sight.

"Did you see that?" I cried, ignoring the damage done to my grandfather's German nose and Cuban cigar after coming in sudden contact with the dashboard.

"Hilda was running behind the car and when it got going too fast she flew after us. She wants to race, Gramps!"

Advised of this latest development, Uncle Rip thought with a little training Hilda could be taught to fetch the mail herself, like a carrier pigeon. Aunt Lee was not amused.

"You two be careful from now on," she admonished. But the occasional Great Mail Race continued; there was no way to prevent it.

In fact, if it moved, Hilda shadowed it. Lee noticed the bird tracking behind Gramps while he mowed the lawn.

"What a clever team," she commented. "Dad stirs up the grasshoppers and Hilda harvests them." After lunch I relieved Pete with the lawn-mowing, minus my shoes. Being much younger and thus bursting with energy, I stepped off

smartly, anxious to return to my favorite fishing holes. Suddenly I felt a sharp stinging sensation in my left heel and spun around. Hilda!

Well...two could play at this game. I lit out after her, gaining speed behind the lawn mower. Keeping well ahead of a tail trimming, the grouse led me clear across the yard and smack into a clump of bleeding heart bushes. From the corner of my eye I saw Aunt Lee rush outside.

"Stop that, you wicked boy!" Pleading that I was only having a little fun, I explained that the goofy bird had attacked me from behind. As long as I plodded along in grandfatherly fashion, Hilda was content to follow. But the moment I picked up the pace she dashed in and hammered at my heels.

"Let that be a lesson!" Lee shouted back. And with that, she tossed my shoes out on the lawn. "Put these on before Hilda makes dessert of your toes."

In early September, Hilda suddenly disappeared. Pete, himself a longtime upland game bird hunter, hung "no trespassing" signs along the public road bordering Rip's 90-acre woodlot. Most upper Tainter Lake residents knew by now of Hilda's presence, but grouse hunters from nearby towns were another matter. That first spring and summer, Hilda paid our place a total of 26 recorded visits; undoubtedly a few more went unseen during the family's occasional absence.

May 16, 1950. "Hilda's back – apparently none the worse"

for wear. We clucked the morning away like two old biddies. Wish I knew what I said."

This arrival notice marked the first of many "H" entries in Lee's diary that summer, and the summer to follow as well.

Hilda's attraction to *Homo sapiens* continued to both amuse and amaze the family. She came tantalizingly close, but never permitted anyone to touch her. Occasionally we noticed her pecking at her "ankle bracelet," attempting to dislodge it. On June 12 Lee wrote:

"Three tubs of laundry, hung out to dry.
H. roosted on clothes pole, supervising. Pest!"

And again, two weeks later:

"Cleaned windows this p.m. H. flew onto porch roof opposite guest room. Talk, talk, talk. Closed the windows in a hurry."

Hilda disliked being rained on and her aversion became apparent one afternoon when Pete turned on the rotating lawn sprinkler. Caught full blast, Hilda dashed to the driveway and skidded to a stop on her belly like a disabled fighter plane. The circular driveway was surfaced with crushed sandstone, and her drumming wings raised a cloud of dust. In a few moments she was dry and dignified again.

This performance helps explain Hilda's first and only indoor visit that took place during a thunderstorm. The upper half of the Dutch door leading outside from the kitchen had been left open and a thoroughly dampened fowl sat perched on the lower half, exposed to an occasional spatter of wind-driven rain drops. From her vantage point Hilda maintained a running criticism of my grandmother's bread-making ability. Harmless enough, Frances opined, as she gathered together the necessary ingredients.

Frances interrupted the start of her chores to visit the bathroom. She had just gotten comfy when a distracting thump-thumping noise faintly reached her ears. Cutting short her visit, Frances hastened to the kitchen where she discovered a pound of white baking flour missing from the bread board and now scattered across the counter and kitchen floor. Lee's diary entry for the day:

"Prest-O, change-O!
H. transformed into a lovely snowy owl."

When the end came in August 1951, it was just as we all feared. Gramps and I left earlier than usual that morning, intending to visit with a distant

neighbor before returning home. Judging from Hilda's position at a sharp curve in the private roadway, it appeared she had taken flight from within the woods, then flown on an intercepting course into the side of the car — all of which went unnoticed by its occupants. As wild creatures sometimes do, she had miscalculated. Her pretty ruffed neck was broken.

We all behaved badly. I kicked the Pontiac until I limped from the pain, vowing never to drive another car again. Pete said it was nobody's fault, and as a distraction he offered me a puff on his cigar, which only brought on more tears. Grandma Frances forgave Hilda for making a mess of the kitchen. And the damnable insects, Lee averred, would have eaten her geraniums anyway.

That evening Rip and I dug a grave in Hilda's favorite hangout, the flower garden. Her casket: an empty shoe box, heavily wrapped in tinfoil to prevent groundwater — Hilda's nemesis — from entering. Carefully tucked under each wing were half-a-dozen airmail postage stamps, deposited by Uncle Rip. Airmail stamps, I pondered...whatever for? Slowly, Rip's puzzling gesture began to sink in and I turned my face away to hide yet another trickle of tears.

Hilda's aluminum ankle bracelet? It still dangles from my key ring.



Tony Welch writes from his woodland nest outside Portland, Oregon.

