

By BILL GRAHAM - Staff Writer

SMITH CENTER, Kan. — Highway maps mark the geographic center of the United States here in Smith County.

Bill Hawes has a slightly different viewpoint.

To him, it's the center of American upland bird hunting, a place where prairie grass borders crop fields and creates prime quail and pheasant habitat on the rolling high plains. Even wild turkeys and prairie chickens abound.

"For a diverse bag, you're going to be real hard-pressed to find a better place to hunt in the whole United States," Hawes said.

But there's a catch.

The broad fields, brushy ravines and grassy knolls give game birds a chance to outrun and outfox hunters trying to find them.

A chance to solve the mystery drew thousands of hunters afield Saturday for opening day of the Kansas pheasant and quail seasons.

At 5 a.m., cars buzzed down the streets of Smith Center, which is about 250 miles northwest of Kansas City.

"This is the day the whole town comes to life bright and early," he said.

The rural Kansas economy wakes up, too. Hawes, 63, even gets hunting business at the drug store in Smith Center where he's been a pharmacist for 39 years.

A former Kansas fish and game commissioner, he's a veteran Western big game hunter who has taken such trophies as bighorn sheep and grizzly bear.

But sunrise Saturday found him stomping into a dry cattail marsh after small game alongside hunting buddies from Smith Center.

"Pheasants have been roosting in here," said Darren Kelley, 31.

Kelley and others in the group of seven crunched through the tangled cattails.

"Whose idea was this?" someone asked from the head-high cover.

Then the rapid flapping of wings erupted as a hen pheasant flew safely to the stubble of a nearby milo field. Only rooster pheasants can be legally shot, so no one fired when more hens flew.

"Geez, Darren, you brought us to a hen hole," Rick Hileman said.

But moments later a gaudy, green-headed rooster flushed, and the hunters dropped it. Hileman backtracked to pick up the season's first pheasant, the only one taken in the first walk.

"I wouldn't be surprised most of them just stayed put in that thick stuff," Hawes said.

The sun was a red ball shining through low clouds on the horizon when the party headed for the second field.

Other hunters in trucks and four-wheel-drive rigs were moving down the dirt back roads, too.

"By noon, every grass patch in the county will have been walked through once," Hawes said. "It's the first hunting season of fall that everyone gets into. And out-of-town hunters get to know the farmers and come back. It's a reunion type of thing."

Early-season pheasants don't always cooperate though.

They're scattered and wild, often heading out of a field as soon as they hear the hunters walking in. The second walk through milo stubble brought only a few flushes and one bagged rooster.

But in a grassy draw the hunters found their opening-day backup; a covey of 20 quail.

"Let's go get them," Kelley said.

A few minutes later his German short-hair pointer, "Gunner," locked solid on point. A brace of quail flushed, and Kelley dropped them both.

"Nice double," someone said.

The rest of the morning wasn't always so birdy, so the hunters changed tactics after finding more pheasants in grasslands than in the milo fields.

Hawes shot a pheasant and a few quail. By the time the party of six broke for lunch, hunters had four pheasants and eight quail. But Hawes lamented that the dogs were having trouble pinning down the bobwhites.

"I think the quail have been crossbreeding with the pheasants so they can run better," he joked.