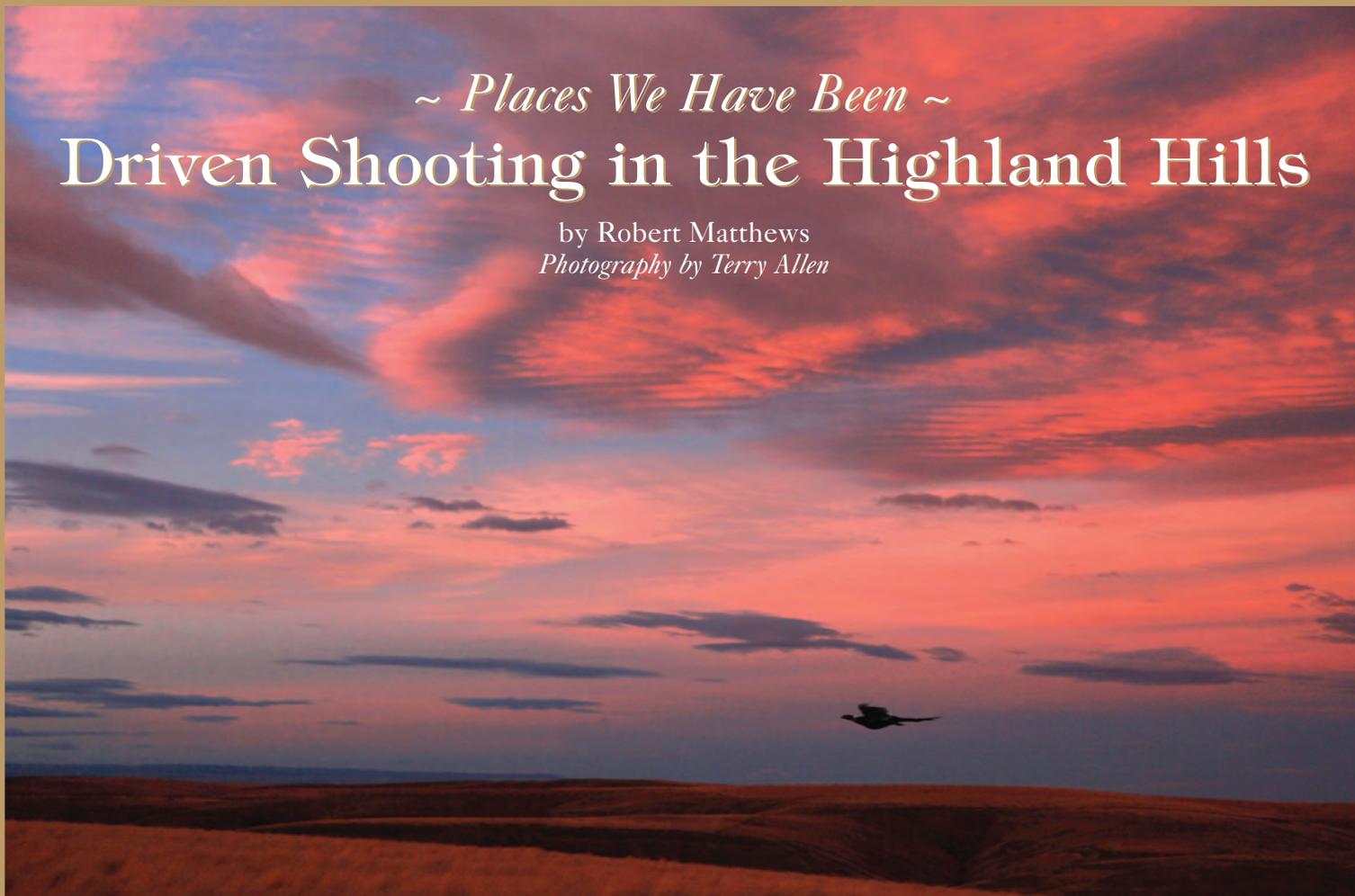


# ~ Places We Have Been ~ Driven Shooting in the Highland Hills

by Robert Matthews  
*Photography by Terry Allen*



In England, Scotland, continental Europe and other places around the world, game is driven to the guns. To many, it is the epitome of shooting.

For some reason, the hunting of driven game has never “caught on” in the United States. Perhaps Americans are simply much too independent. Historically, hunting in this country has been the sport of the individual. Only occasionally is it done in groups. Deer drives are encountered in some of the northeastern states. Folks get together to hunt pheasant in the Midwest and there is the dogging of deer in the South.

With the notable exception of southern dove shooting, hunting in the U. S. has never been what you could call a social affair. Southern dove shooting has in places, developed a certain social tradition, but not the refinement and pageantry of the Old World sport of shooting driven. Until fairly recently, if a Yank wanted to shoot driven birds, he had to go somewhere else.

This may be changing. A couple of years ago, my old friend Dennis McNabb decided to give driven pheasant hunting a try on his famous Highland Hills Ranch in Oregon. The instigator of the whole thing was another friend, Britisher Chris Batha, well-known shooting coach, historian of all things pertaining to guns and shooting, and world-class raconteur. Chris had mused, as have many others, that the terrain was much akin to the Highlands of Scotland, and would make a “jolly good” place for a driven pheasant hunt. One thing led to another, and he proved to be right!



At Highland Hills, the high, rolling ridge tops yield to long gentle slopes that flow down into the valley where they terminate abruptly in high cliffs and ridges along Rock Creek. In this sense, the ranch does indeed resemble parts of Scotland where similar terrain lends itself so well to driven shooting. There, beaters line out across the Highlands and drive the birds down

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until they have nowhere left to run and they explode over the guns in the mad pandemonium that is perhaps the ultimate experience in wing shooting. The tall ridges on the ranch assure not only that the birds will flush over the “guns,” but also that they will be high, sporting birds.

Although I missed their initial event, it was a huge success and the participants concluded that they ought to “give it another go” this year. When the phone rang and Dennis was on the other end with an invitation, Terry and I gathered a small coterie of southern gentlemen and headed west again. Highland Hills Ranch was not new to us. From past



presentations are challenging to say the least! There were those that mimicked flushing chukar and pheasant as well as driven pheasant. I had been in a little bit of a shooting slump, and didn't exactly distinguish myself, but I suppose that is part of the reason for sporting clays, to provide a venue for working through those problems.

That evening we were treated to the usual Highland Hills spectacular. Chef Cheryl Mashos started us out with her famous homemade cheesy bread and a pear, walnut and Gorgonzola salad with marionberry vinaigrette. The main course was filet mignon with caramelized shallot and wild mushroom demi-glace, roasted



*Guns take a break between drives—tea and crumpets on the bank of Rock Creek.*

experience, we knew that the entire hunt would be first-rate and we were not about to pass up another chance to go there. Certainly we were not going to pass up the chance to shoot driven birds in the highlands of central Oregon.

We arrived early, and filled the evening with a go at the sporting clays course. The course is set up to simulate shots that you are likely to encounter at the ranch and target

garlic-infused red potatoes and balsamic asparagus. The coup de grace came in the form of an almond chocolate truffle torte with kalua crème anglaise. Cheryl is a graduate of Western Culinary Institute in Portland and has had twenty years of restaurant and catering experience. Because of her early background in art, every meal is an artistic creation and true adventure.

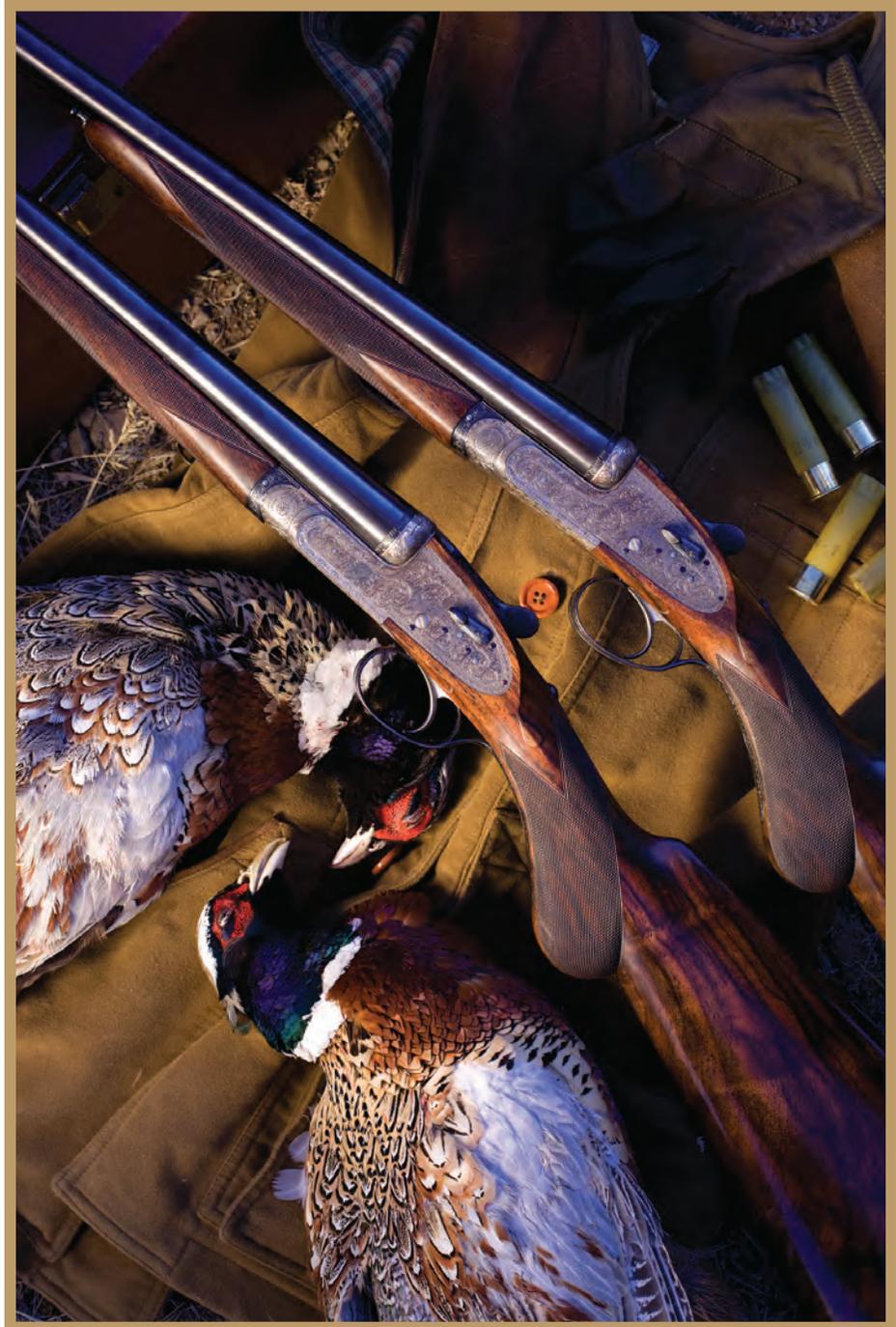
Following dinner, Chris gave a short instructional class on shooting “driven,” including customs and protocol. Using a board, he illustrated the angles involved and showed us the preferred “kill points.” Then he illustrated how to deal with “curl” and “drift,” and talked about safety and the proper etiquette. As usual with Chris, the entire presentation was interspersed with interesting stories and anecdotes about the London gun trade and U. K. lore. This session alone would have been worth the trip for someone not accustomed to driven birds. Or for anyone with an interest in double guns and the gun trade in general.

To make things even better, we all got in-field instruction the next day, with coaching on how to take the various birds presented. With Chris Batha and Gene Adams giving instruction, we shot clays thrown overhead in singles, pairs, and flurries to simulate the real thing. Then Chris explained the nuances of shooting driven pheasants as it compares to shooting clay birds. Again, the point was made that clays and birds are different. Clays travel in an arc, but birds do not. Clays tend to slow down as they travel. Flying birds, on the other hand, tend to accelerate. Despite their imperfect simulation of flying birds, clays are nonetheless useful tools for learning about wing shooting. After each lesson, we shot individually. When we were finished with individual instruction, we shot flurries together.

The group was remarkably diverse for one of such homogeneous mien. All were “like spirits,” bird hunters and shotgunners of the most rabid sort. As you would expect, all were ardent devotees of the craft of shooting flying. Some had much experience with shooting driven. Others had little. The personalities presented would have done justice to an Agatha Christie novel: Chris Batha and his supervisor, Sarah Gump, Glenn the lawyer, and there was the businessman, the veterinarian, the fireman, our old buddy Gil Morgan, Terry and I.

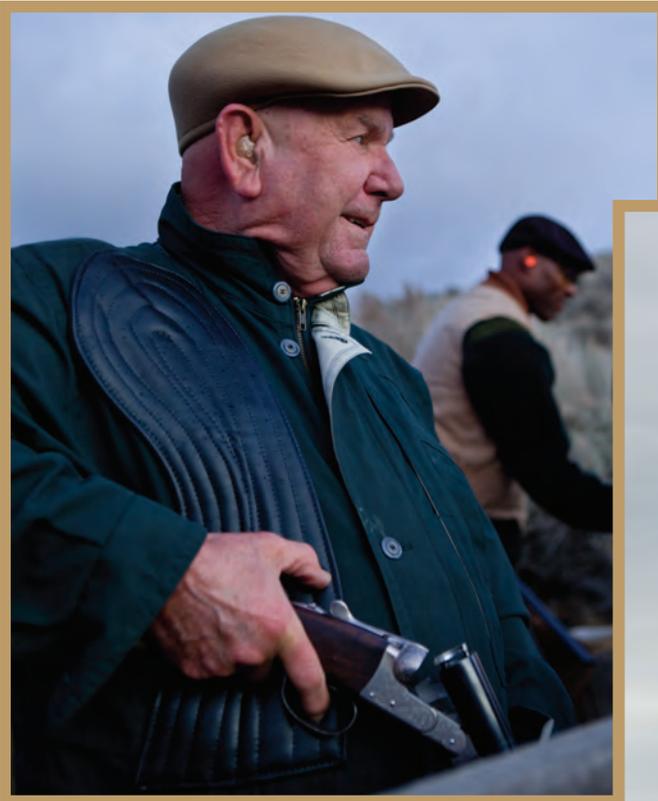
The guns were as diverse as the personalities. I took two of my favorite guns. The first is a twelve-gauge Purdey that was originally built for use in the live pigeon rings. It has two sets of barrels. The thirty-inch set is quite tightly choked in both barrels. The second set is twenty-nine

inches in length and the chokes have been opened to quarter- and half-choke. This gun has two-and-three-quarter-inch chambers, as well as a third grip and side clips. At seven and one-half pounds, it will easily stand up to any



*A fine pair of Holland & Holland 20-bore with a brace of pheasants.*

challenge. I figured that it would handle high-volume pheasants with heavy loads and it did. My other gun for this trip was a recently acquired bar-in-wood hammer Purdey dating from 1879 and having twenty-nine-inch Whitworth steel barrels with 2-1/2 inch chambers. It has very little choke, measuring only five thousandths in both barrels. Dripping wet, it scales barely over six pounds, making it a



*Bill Crosby in the midst of reloading while Scott Hayes draws a bead on a high one.*

*Below: The author's 12-bore bar-in-wood Purdey, built in 1879.*



joy to carry. The plan was to use the “big Purdey” for the high-volume work and use the hammer gun for the walk-up hunting on the last day. Both guns are conservatively engraved with traditional rose and scroll. In addition to my two Purdeys, there was a gorgeous twelve-bore Westley Richards in the group, as well as a vintage twenty-gauge Super Fox, an A. Galazan O/U twenty, an incredible pair of Holland and Hollands in twenty-bore, and a newly bespoke McKay Brown in twenty bore.



The first day of driven shooting was bright and clear as Rock Creek which tumbles down into the valley where we hunted. Light frost brittled the grass and breath hung in the air gleaming with the pale yellowness of new sunshine before sliding away with the breeze. We formed a small procession along the valley of the creek as we walked to our pegs talking softly among ourselves. Our world was small and quaint and personal, lightly filled with the comforting sounds of the pre-early morning hunt: low chattering, birds singing, the “clink” of double guns being assembled. Shooters taking their positions and getting ready. Dogs and dog handlers taking their positions. Distant voices from beyond the high ridge. A cock pheasant flushing unseen in the distance. The clicking of shells falling into pockets. The solid “tunk” of guns closing. The glasslike tinkling of water in the creek behind us.

We were arrayed in a long concave semicircle, facing a low ridge of sage and grass

which rose abruptly about thirty yards in front of the line to form the wide bowl in which we stood. The sun slowly climbed above the ridge while we stood frozen in anticipation of what was to come.

Finally, came the horn signaling the beginning of the drive. A curving line of upturned faces fixed upon the hillside as if we were joined in prayer or meditation. I shivered with excitement and the world went strangely silent as we waited. And then the birds came! High, fast, beautiful birds with their feathers glinting in the morning sun. A distant pop became a crackle, then a rumble as birds filled the

air and shots came as fast as you could lift and shoot and feathers drifted on the breeze like brightly colored snow. It was exciting . . . I felt that I was really shooting in glorious England or Scotland, it was great . . . and then the horn sounded once more and it was over and I stood in the early morning sunshine while the pickers-up and retrievers went about their work amid the haze and scent of burnt gunpowder hanging in the morning air.

We took a break for tea and English crumpets after the first drive and then did it all again. The second drive found us all lined out along a straight stretch of the creek about a mile below the first. There we faced a sheer rocky

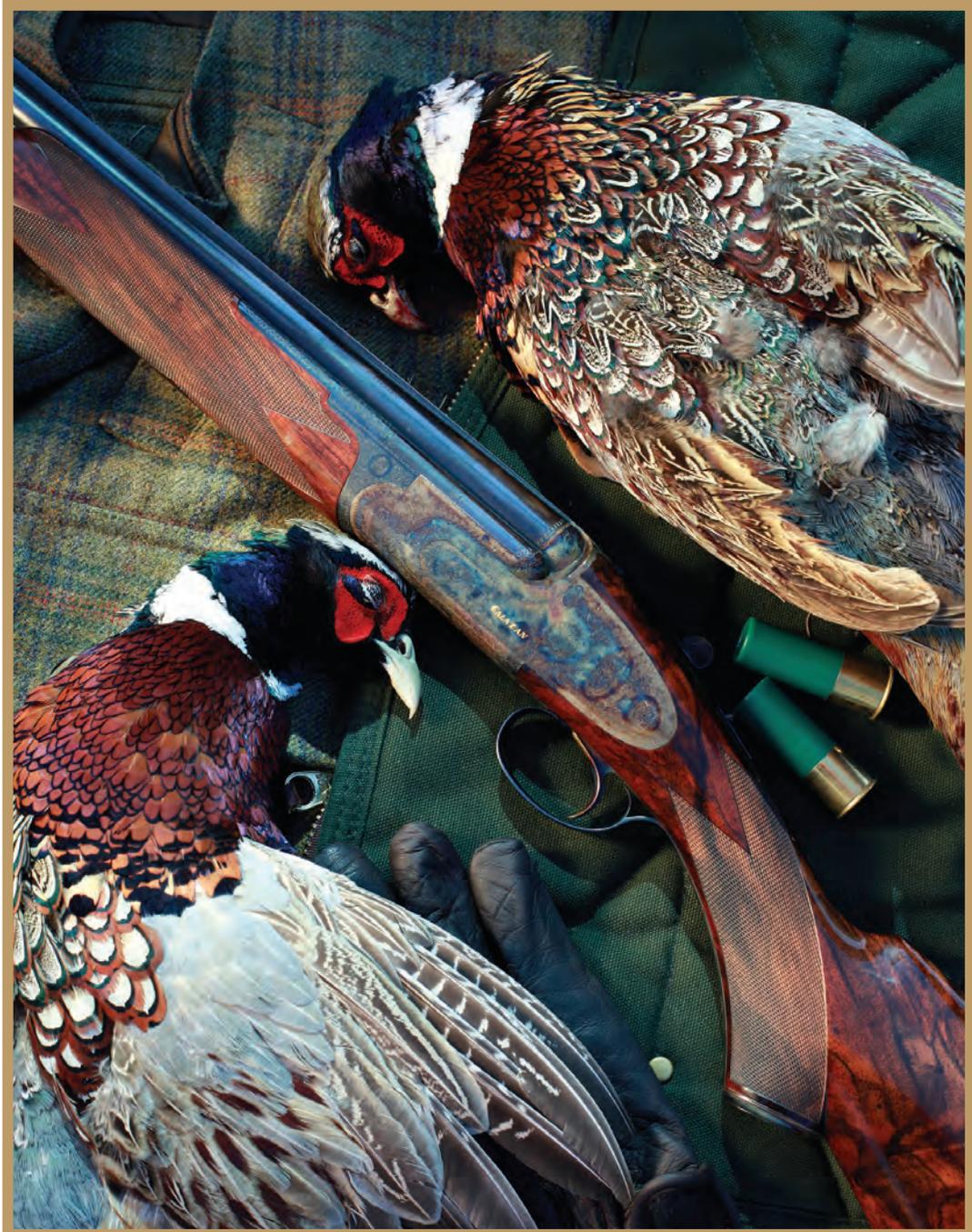
*The contemporary makers were well represented with this Connecticut Shotgun-produced A. Galazan 20-bore.*

cliff where several acres of young cherry trees occupied a wide shelf separating the ridge from the creek. On this drive, many of the birds were reluctant to fly from the cliff and milled around until the beaters got very close. When the birds realized that there was no other way out, they flushed in droves, high, fast and furious. All told, we took about three hundred pheasant on that drive. Afterwards we were treated to a magnificent lunch at the lodge before the last drive of the day.

Later, on our return to the lodge, we were greeted by the plaintive strain of bagpipes echoing from the hills and down the valley. Then we relaxed before a roaring fire. Stuffed with haggis and plied with a wee bit of Scotland's finest product, we were totally satiated. Cheryl put on another spectacular dinner with a "Scottish style" pheasant enhanced with dried cherries,

bacon and caramelized onions, in a white wine and brown sugar sauce and we finished with a marionberry (similar to blackberry) mousse.

We made six drives in all, spread over two days. The



drives averaged about 300 birds, and each was a spectacular re-creation of the first. Of course, we rotated pegs so that each in turn had his go at the "King's seat." Mine came on the second drive of the second day. We faced a small cliff across a shoal at a place where the creek bent sharply to the right forming a horseshoe bend. Glenn Dunaway flanked on the left. The right peg was occupied by none other than the inestimable Mr. Batha and his lovely companion, Sarah Gump. As mentioned, I had

not been shooting particularly well and Chris had been giving me a little coaching as we went along. I was a little apprehensive about shooting beside the “coach,” but fortune smiled on me that day. Pheasant simply poured over the rim above the “horseshoe.” Finally, I was “on” and pheasant rained in a cloudburst of color. The slump was broken. And what better time and place to do it! The shooting was as challenging as you will find anywhere. The birds were consistently strong and fast and high.

We followed the two days of driven shooting with a day of the walk-up shooting for which Highland Hills Ranch is already justly famous. The morning was brilliantly clear and very windy. We took to the high ground above the ranch where the chukar lurk, and found all that we could handle. Gene’s shorthairs were truly superb and the birds could only be described as “wicked.” Luckily, we were all on our game, and had a day for the ages. Evening found us lower down where the escapees from the previous two days were widely scattered in a mix of native grasses and harvested milo fields. The milo stood about a foot high and was as thick and brown as the hairs on a dog’s back.



*Terry Allen’s snap-action Lang had to be put down to capture this line of Guns—all taking high birds.*

*On facing page: In the evening, the best place to find yourself is in the Highland Hills great room, toasting a wonderful day with your fellow Guns.*

This made great cover for the pheasant. They ran and hid and flushed wild. The luck of the morning continued and I finished the day in the soft light of dusk with a shot that I will never forget. The little Purdey hammer gun and I were wed at that moment. I know that guns come and guns go. I know. But this one’s a keeper.

I am inclined to think that there may be something to it, this tradition of “shooting driven.” For one who is immersed in the art and lore of the shotgun, the experience is unparalleled. Good guns, good company, challenging birds, and plenty of them in beautiful surroundings. With his usual flair, Dennis and all the folks at Highland Hills, spared no expense or effort to make the memorable experience the best that it could be.



# HHR

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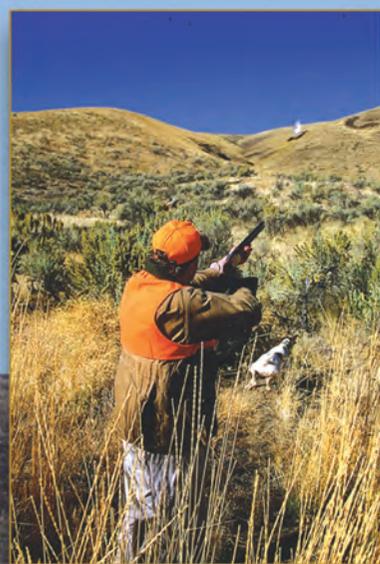


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