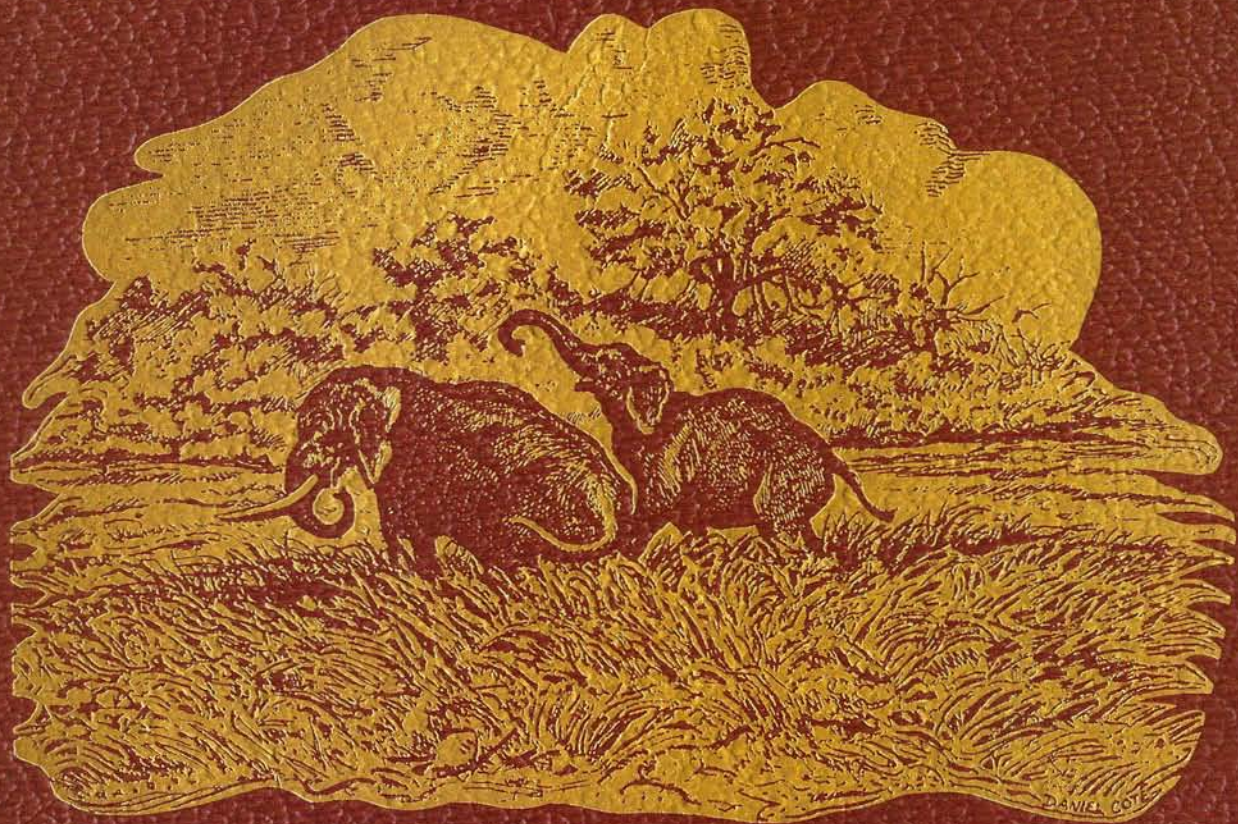


THE
DOUBLE GUN



& Single Shot
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~ *Places We Have Been* ~
HIGHLAND HILLS RANCH

by Robert Matthews
Photography by Terry Allen



There are very few places in this world that are as aptly named as Highland Hills Ranch. At elevation it reminds one of nothing so much as the Highlands of Scotland. There, broad grassy highlands roll in waves to the horizon, fading to sky here, and plunging precipitously there. The land rises and falls, folds and creases, revealing voluptuous, organic cameos of Mother Earth herself. Descending, the sere tan, brown, gray and olive of her shoulders yield to the green and gold of well-watered croplands below, where the lodge reposes on a rise overlooking the valley of Rock Creek. It sprawls across a small promontory, commanding a view of miles upon miles of valley below.

We went there in early November, Terry Allen, Gil Morgan, and I. Three Southerners, "Good Ole Boys," were heading west for wingshooting adventure. Friends who had been there returned bearing tall tales. We had read the reviews. All were profusely complimentary. Some called it the best wingshooting

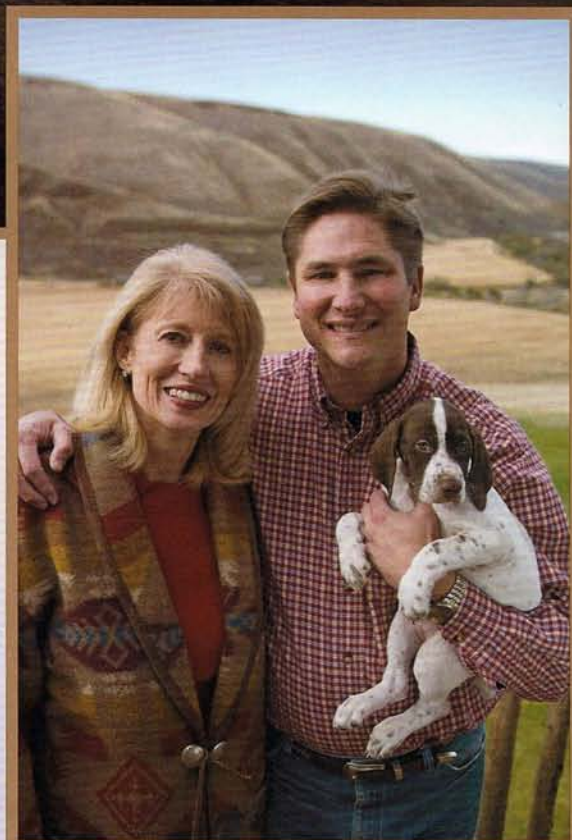
destination in the country. We were determined to find out for ourselves what all the fuss was about.

It was warm in Atlanta when we boarded Delta Flight 818 for the first leg of our trip. Only the first tinge of a late-coming autumn was in the air. It was a bit cooler when we arrived for our first layover in Salt Lake City, and fall had arrived by the time we disembarked in Portland. There, we were met by the chilly, drizzly weather which is stereotypical of the Pacific Northwest. After dinner in Portland, we set out for Condon, Oregon, where we were to spend the night before driving to the ranch. Traveling eastward, I-84 led us up the Columbia River, through the gorge and past the narrows where two hundred years prior, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had camped with their expedition in October of 1805. As we back-tracked the route of the "Corps of Discovery," we passed over to the "dry side," in the rain shadow of the Cascades, where wet turns suddenly to arid. Soon we were



lodged in the Condon Hotel, a quaint, charming, and disarmingly natural picture of rural Americana.

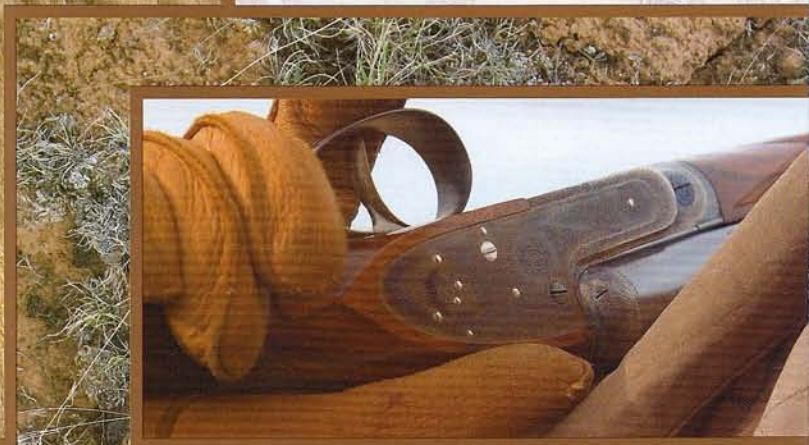
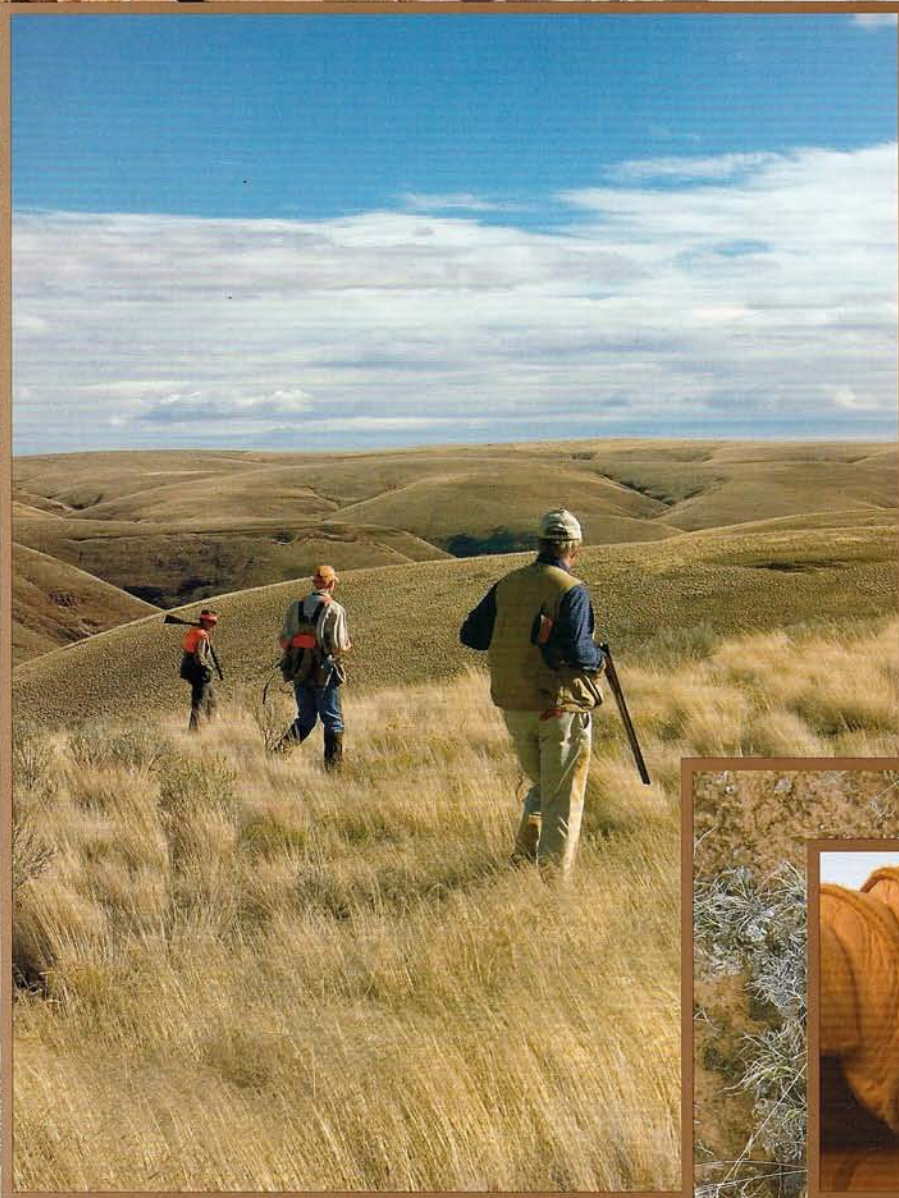
Despite the pleasant rural comfort of Condon, we were ready to see birds, and early the next morning we found a quick breakfast on the road. Had it not been for the rolling landscape and wind-turned generators, we could have imagined ourselves to be anywhere in Middle America. Farm buildings and grain elevators dappled golden horizons, prompting fond reminiscences of Kansas and North Dakota. Pheasants skulked and strutted along



the shoulders of the blacktop as we drove through grain fields and farm lots en route to the ranch. Occasionally one, or a pair, would flush and sail with wings set until it disappeared into the undulations of the landscape. The omens were good.

By mid-morning we were at the ranch. Since we had arrived quite a bit in advance of the other guests, owners Sandy and Dennis Macnab introduced us to the lodge staff and gave us the “grand tour” of the ranch and accommodations. Sandy introduced us to Keith Potter, the chef,

ourselves with some of the chukar that roam the perpetually windy high ground. Also, we wanted to see how our sixteens would handle the tough shooting we were sure to find there. Terry and I had decided to make this a “sixteen-gauge safari” in deference to our Southern heritage, which holds the sixteen-gauge to be the badge of the Southern sporting gentleman. To that end, I had brought along the sixteen-gauge Purdey which I had recently purchased from writer Lloyd Newberry (*DGJ* Summer, 2005) and my beat-up old 0-frame Parker. Terry brought a Scottish P. D. Malloch and the sweetest sixteen-gauge Rigby that one could imagine. It was slim, light and straight gripped, with an underlever snap-action and graceful 30-inch barrels. Terry had brought along some special low-pressure loads to feed the one-hundred-year-old Damascus tubes. For the morning, we selected the Purdey and the Rigby. Gil bucked the trend by carrying a twelve-bore Westley Richards.



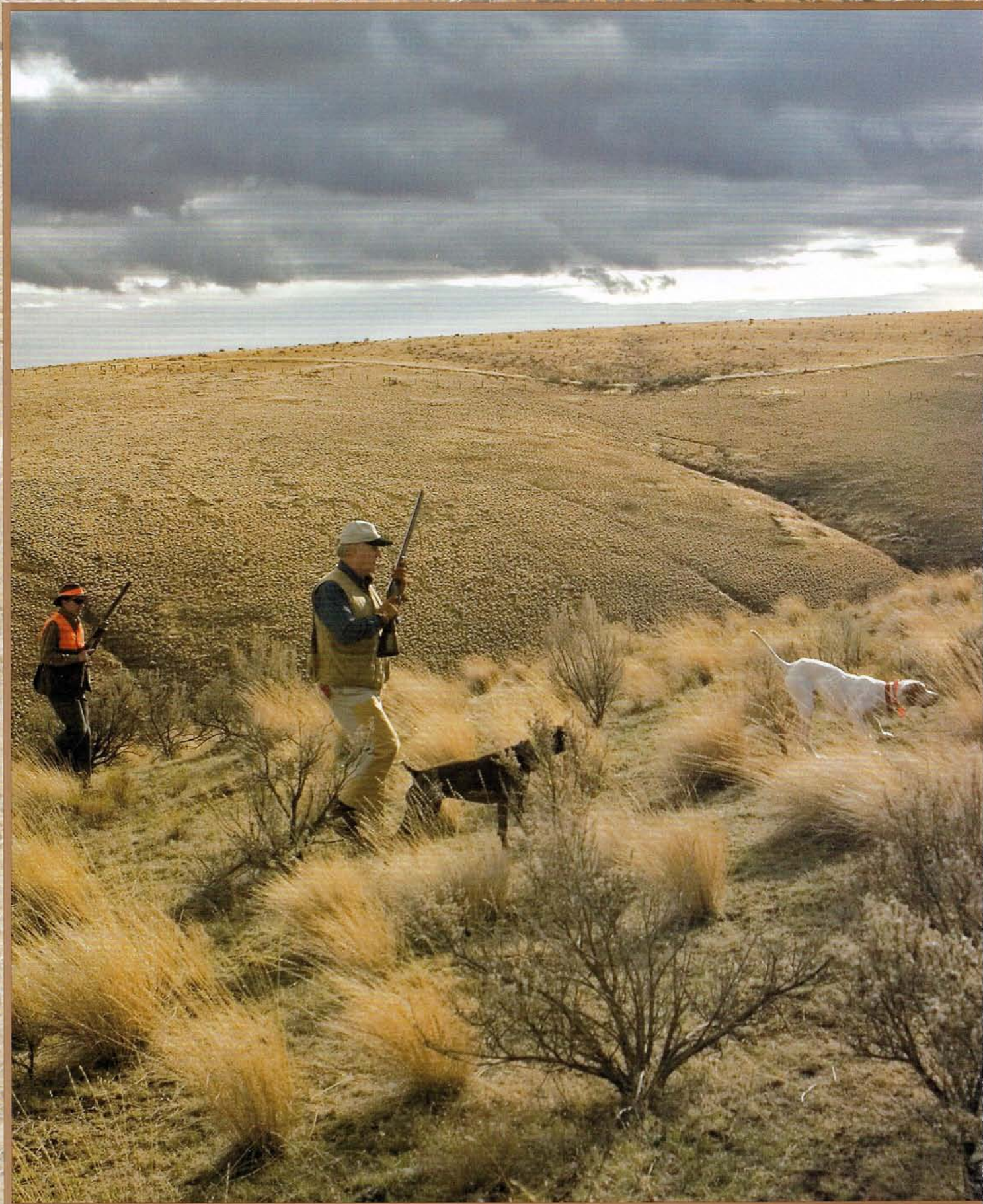
and Cindy Hayes and Dawn Brown, whose jobs were to make all of us feel pampered and happy. The ten-thousand-square-foot lodge combines lodgepole pine logs, stone, artwork memorabilia, antlers and glass into the picture-perfect image of a luxurious western hunting lodge. After the lodge tour, Dennis piled us into one of the ranch trucks, put it into 4-wheel drive and headed for the high ground where the west wind never stops and chukar hide among the rimrock, sage, and cheat grass. While we were getting a bird's-eye view of the ranch, we scattered several small groups of mule deer that trotted, single file, out of sight into folds in the terrain.

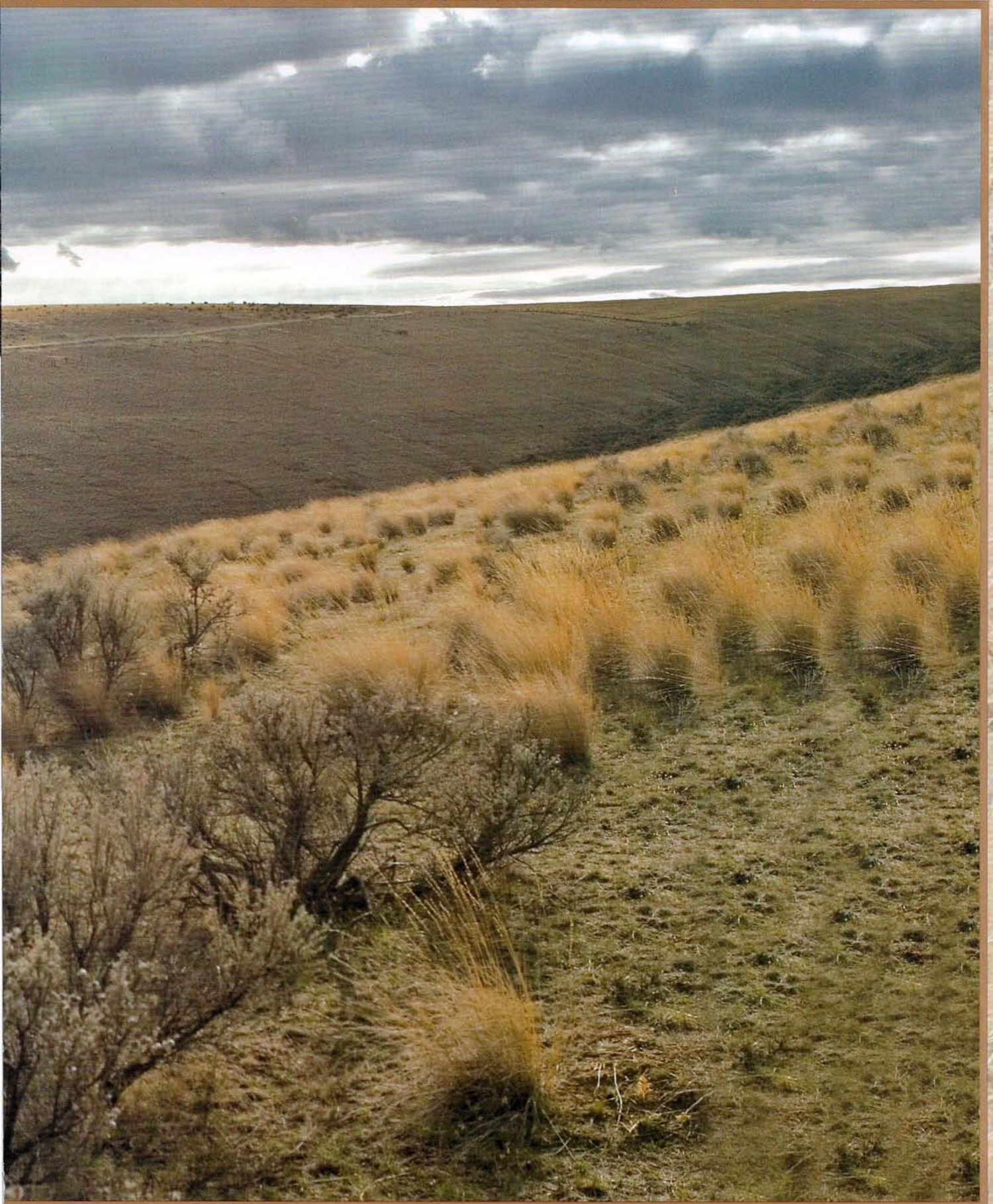
Later, as the rest of the hunting party trickled in, we were amazed at the eclectic character of the group. Some were wealthy “sportsmen.” Some were “ordinary Joes.” There were oilmen and investment bankers. There were developers and farmers, ranch hands, and cowboys. And three “rednecks” from Georgia. The appeal of Highland Hills plainly crossed all socioeconomic strata.

The first morning we hunted the high ground for chukar. We had told Dennis of our preference the day before as we toured the highlands in the ranch truck. We wanted to test



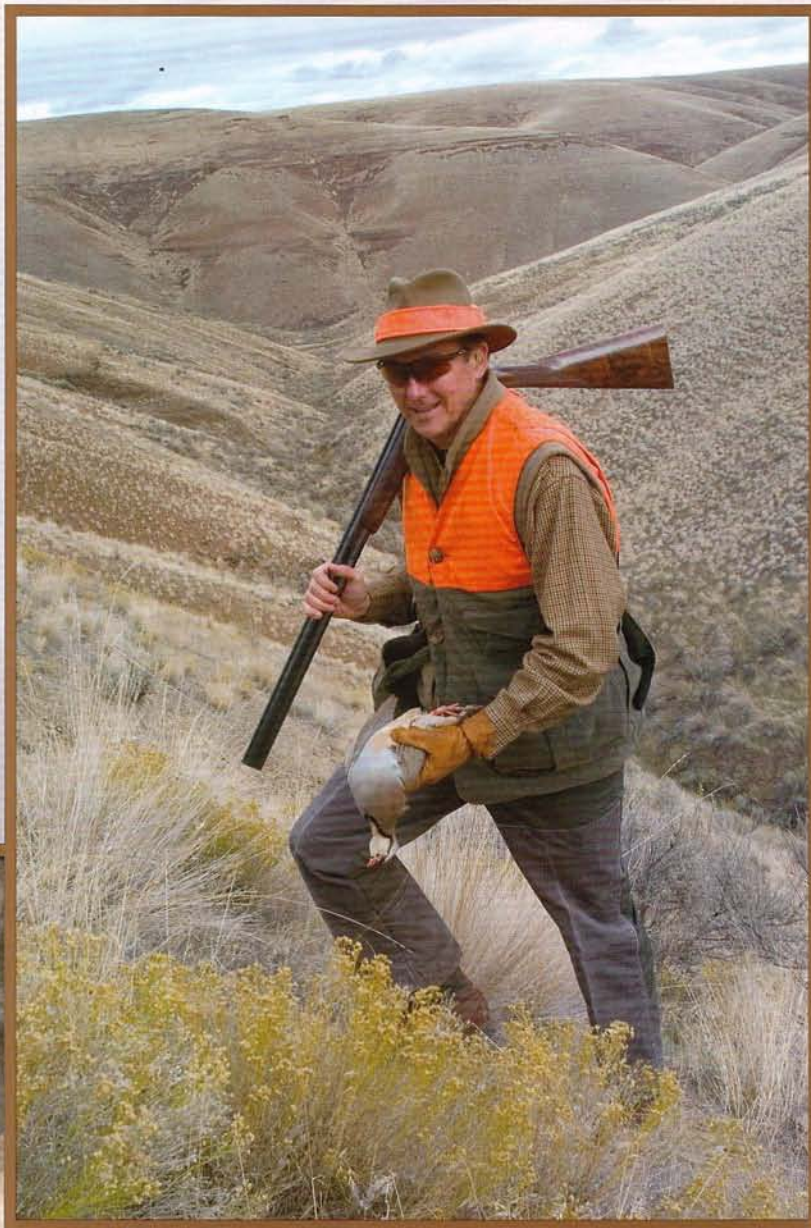






Shortly after first light we made our way to the lodge dining room, stuffed ourselves with blueberry pancakes, brown sugar broiled bacon, and a baked egg ramekin, courtesy of Keith. Afterwards by the time we made it to the rear of the lodge, well sated, guide Scott Kuhn was waiting with Dixie and Jasper, sleek, lean German shorthairs with hearts of fire and impeccable manners. We didn't know at that time that the weatherman had a surprise in store for us. There was a rare rainstorm on the way to eastern Oregon, and by the time we had crawled the truck full of hunters and dogs to the top of the mesa, the wind had reached about twenty knots, and was getting stronger. This was going to be fun!

Despite the wind, Dix and Jazz were up to the task. They quartered, noses into the wind until they caught scent. Then they would alternately wind and trail. Birds ran. Dogs ran. The fat old guy with the Southern accent ran! The drill for the day became stop . . . point . . . creep . . . run; stop . . . point . . . creep . . . run. Then we would do it all again, and the air would suddenly be full of feathered bullets, going in all directions at approximately Mach 6. The birds would catch the wind, then power-dive into the abyss, and sail away with derisive smirks on their little beaked faces. Then we would try to find them among the sagebrush and cheat grass, and do it some more. I still carry a number of little mental snapshots of that particular day. One of my favorites is of racing dogs flushing a

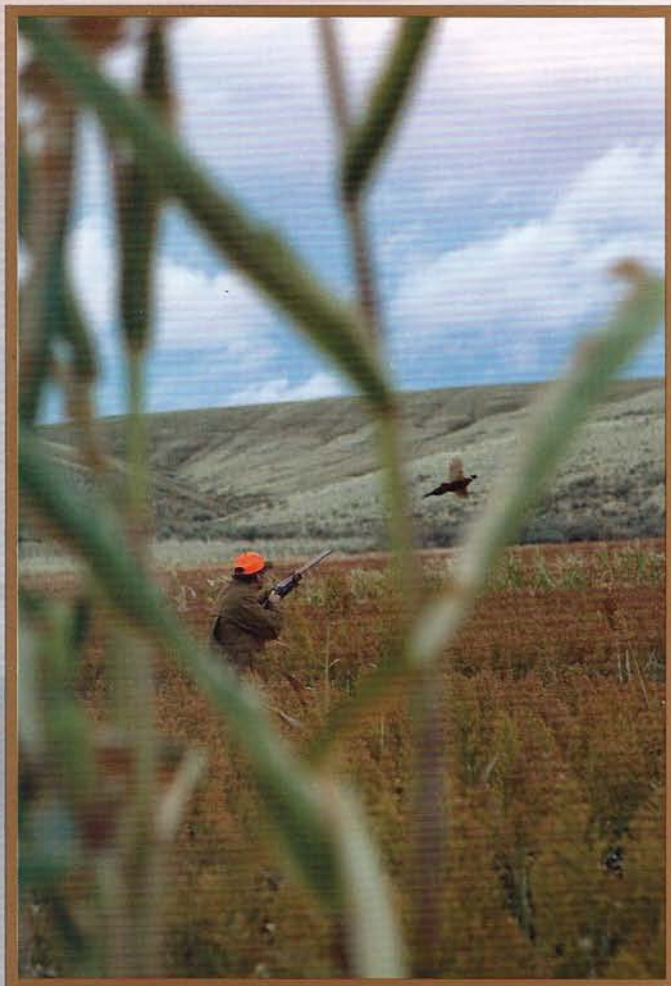


chukar-bullet with Gil standing on the edge of the precipice struggling to catch up to the bird before it was lost to wind, space, and time. Terry caught the moment with his camera and the photo hangs on my wall as I write this. Gil never did catch up to that bird. I think that somewhere near Brunswick, Georgia, he is still trying. At the end of the morning hunt, the dogs had passed the test. The sixteens had passed the test. The guys handling the sixteens didn't "show" quite so well.

That afternoon began with surreal blue storm clouds rolling over the mountain, engulfing the lodge and draping the valley of Rock Creek with an eerie blue light. Ominous, threatening blue clouds. Roiling blue clouds. Hunt? Yes. But not on top. We would hunt a mixed bag in the valley that afternoon. If the rains came, we would be closer to the shelter of the lodge. The Purdey and the Rigby were put away and the Parker and Malloch were hauled out of their cases. Both of them have seen a lot of rain. No harm would be done if they got a little wet.

We packed rain gear along with the guns and shells as we climbed into the truck for a short ride down the valley. After a couple of miles, we parked beside a large field, somewhat longer than





broad, which was lush with standing corn and milo. The lower side of the field dropped sharply to the rocky creek bottom. Above the field, scrub brush gradually faded to sage and grass. The land then climbed steeply to the highlands above.

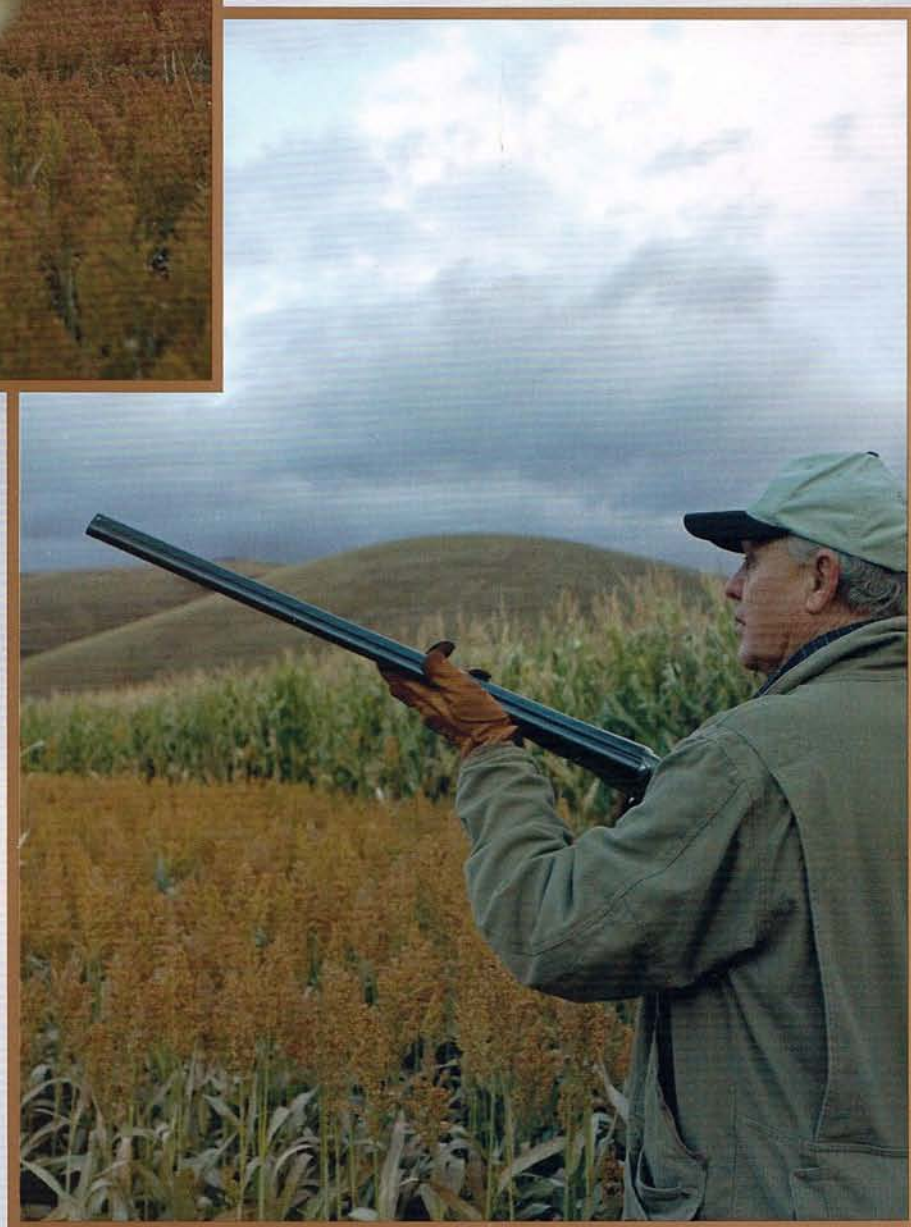
At this point, I was having great fun, but frankly my expectations were not very good. I figured that we would be shooting typical "preserve birds." Presenting good birds probably is the greatest challenge for a commercial hunting operation. Scott must have sensed something in my attitude, because he had a sinister grin on his face as he released a pair of fresh dogs. It didn't take long for me to figure out why he was grinning. Two steps into the lower edge of the field gave me a clear view down one of the rows of milo. About fifty yards down the row was a cock pheasant, running like the hounds of hell were after him! Our new canine friends, Colt and Bailey finally cornered him after about thirty minutes of hide-and-seek in the milo. He came from a row of standing corn. Terry nearly stepped on him as he shot out like a rocket, climbing, right to left, shouting pheasant expletives as he flew. The battered old Parker

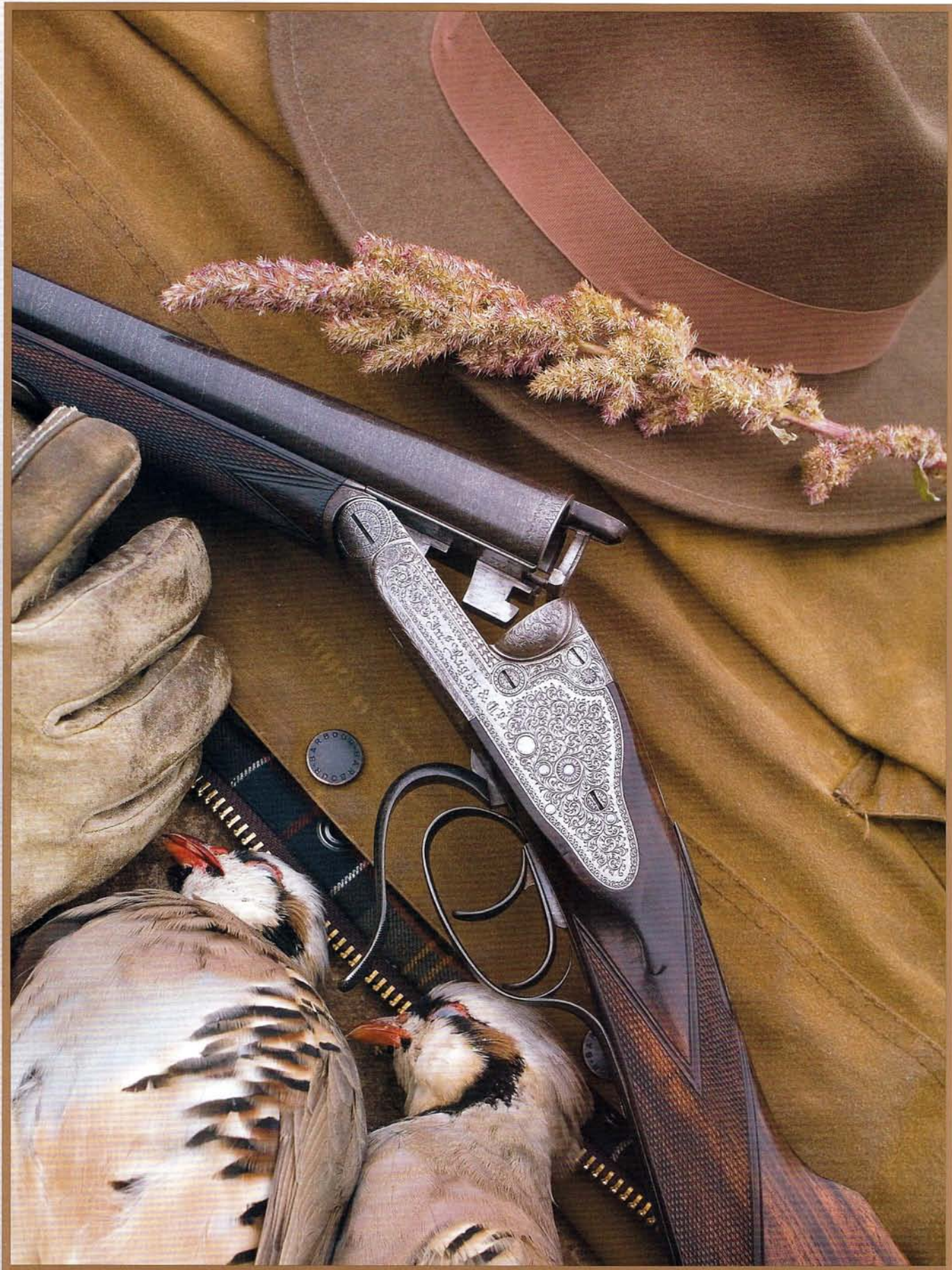
came alive and dumped him with the first barrel, but it wasn't easy. I learned that first afternoon that "soft ball" birds are not part of the program at Highland Hills. Some of the birds are wild. Some are released prior to the season. Some are supplements, released during the season. I frankly couldn't tell which were which, and I would bet a healthy sum that nobody else can either!

As the afternoon progressed, we shot more pheasants which all behaved exactly like the first one. We shot chukar. We shot a few wild valley quail, which ran like racehorses and flushed wildly in flocks of fifty or more. I didn't get many of these. I hate valley quail. I want to shoot some more. Just to prevent the spread of the noxious little beasts, of course.

The rain never came on the first day. We shot to our hearts content, and later dined on Keith's grilled filet mignon with peppercorn sauce. We were also introduced to a substance referred to as "sweet cheddar cornbread." This was served with honey butter, and obviously has Southern origins. Nothing that good could possibly have originated north of Nashville! That night we slept the sleep known only to children, fools, and weary hunters.

The next day was a pleasant repeat of the first with a splash of rain

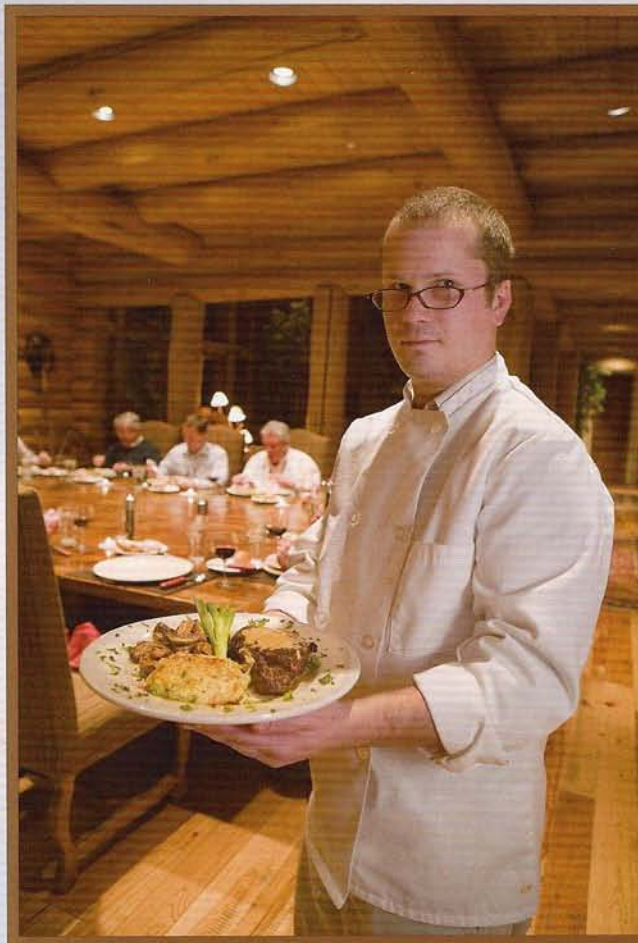






thrown in for spice. We began with *crème brûlée* pancakes, flanked by cheddar and jalapeno sausage patties, and finished the day with Basque-style pheasant. In between, we hunted birds. Lots of birds! Scott returned with Dix and Jazz, and that morning we staged a rematch with the chukars on the high ground. We got lots of exercise, and set off lots of fireworks to little effect. We ate humble pie for lunch. The afternoon was a contrast as we seemed to get our act together and redeemed a portion of our Southern honor. Dix and Jazz yielded to Bailey and Mason for the evening, and those two proved to be fully the equal of their predecessors. The evening hunt concluded when Terry made a clean right-left on two roosters that flushed simultaneously from a row of standing corn. Both birds were “dead in the air” when he snapped the Malloch open and turned to bask in the admiration of his inferiors. Not even the rain could dampen that finale.

Wingshooting is at once simple and complex. Described in basic



terms, it is simplicity itself. At its best, it becomes a nuanced confection, most appreciated by the connoisseur. A young boy, a mongrel dog, and a single barreled gun are sweet simplicity. Give the same boy sixty seasons of birds, dogs, wind and weather, and it will be the nuances that matter most. The balance of a “Best.” The fire in the heart of a dog for whom “bird” and “life” are synonymous. The fire in the hearth after a day in the rain. The companionship of friends who do not wonder why you have lagged behind to watch them hunt. Dennis and Sandy Macnab understand the nuances, and spare no effort to make the experience the best that it can be.

Is Highland Hills Ranch the best wingshooting lodge in the land? The question itself reminds me of the common query of which “Best gun” is best! This I can say without fear of contradiction. As a bird-shooting destination, it is prototypical, the benchmark, that which others aspire to be. There is absolutely nothing about Highland Hills Ranch that is less than first class.





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