

HIGH Highland Pheasants

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Driven Days at Highland Hills Ranch



A dozen Guns draw numbers on the steps of a country lodge and then load into hunting cars for the 10-minute drive to the shooting pegs. As they exit the vehicles, they grab their shotguns, shell bags and other accoutrements to carry down the line to their stations. Handlers with panting dogs are waiting behind the pegs. They've driven hours to be here and are as excited as anyone when they hear the command: "Start the drive!"

Several minutes later on they come—big, brassy pheasants surging over the hill with raucous complaint. Some curve off to the side, but most fly straight overhead, their tails like comets. The gunfire erupts, and it's glorious chaos, with pheasants falling and dogs dashing everywhere. The ardent shooter tries to concentrate on the sky in front while at the same time taking in the spectacle of the line and the glorious birds. How can you not look over when a high bird takes shot and seems to fall forever? Driven pheasant shooting is like that: a pageant of people, birds, guns and dogs that seems much too improbable to ever come off. In Britain and Europe they spend a great deal of time and money ensuring that it does. But can it be done well in the States?

I admit that it was with some uncertainty that I traveled to Oregon's Highland Hills Ranch to witness a first: a driven pheasant shoot organized by Chris Batha, world-class English shooting instructor, gunfitter and owner of the Charles Boswell name. There is no doubt that Batha is a force to be reckoned with, but we Americans have a tendency to take shortcuts. I wondered whether the people Batha was working with had been willing to put in the time, effort and money to really do things right.

There *were* good signs. Any lodge situated 30 miles—the last 10 on gravel—from the nearest small-town exit has the location needed to impart a feeling of wildness. Then there was the scenery: lichen-covered cliffs of columnar basalt reflected in

alder-lined Rock Creek, big sage and rabbit brush along the bottoms and sidehills, and thick milo/corn cover on irrigated flats. In fact it was this setting—more specifically its topography—that had sparked Batha's interest in a driven shoot in the first place. In 2005 while doing a television program with Highland Hills owner Dennis Macnab, Batha had watched a rooster fly over the valley to a cornfield on the other side. "It was as good a bird as I've ever seen in England," Batha said. He immediately asked Macnab if he would consider a driven shoot. Batha would bring in Purdey-trained, California-based gunmaker, fitter and NSCA-certified shooting instructor Dale Tate, and together they would spend a day coaching participants on the nuances of tall "driven" clays to prepare clients for birds. After the training day would be a driven day, followed by a more traditional walk-up hunt with pointing and flushing dogs. Besides being an enjoyable outing in its own right, the Highland Hills event would be a great primer for someone planning an overseas shoot.

Needless to say, Macnab agreed.

And so on a brisk morning this past January, the clays day started dramatically with tiny disks hurtling into the void from a 100-foot cliff. The shooters were situated near the base and had no chance to anticipate the targets. It was a reactive response, right overhead, as soon as the clays showed. Batha and Tate divided the Guns into two groups of six and critiqued each person as they tested their mettle on the high ones. Then the instructors rotated groups.

Dr. Mike Kendrick, an Oregon shooter who has traveled extensively, described the session: "It was a great introduction, and getting the immediate feedback really shortened the learning curve. Both Dale and Chris could tell us exactly what our problems were and, more importantly, motivate us to change our ways. Chris watched me as I somewhat nervously missed a crosser four times, when he finally said in his accent tinted with



Then the big morning arrived, and following breakfast we set out for the first drive. After drawing pegs, we headed to where the hills hem Rock Creek down to a quarter-mile valley. The Guns walked out to hay bales marking their positions in the tall wheatgrass where flats of Eley/Orvis Eco ammo (with fiber wads) were set. Then everyone waited, not quite sure how the day would play out. At Dennis Macnab's signal, the first of four approximately 300-bird drives began. As if by magic, pheasants and the occasional chukar appeared, flying hard in the overcast sky 60 yards out front. The birds were coming over at heights of 30 to 35 yards and immediately began falling up and down the line. After five minutes of the exhilarating shooting, everyone knew they were witnessing something special.

For the rest of the drive, the birds flew, the Guns worked furiously and the dogs ran hard. Dale Tate served as loader for one shooter who'd brought a nice pair of Spanish 12s. It was educational to listen as Tate kept a running tally of birds down and barrel placement: "That's 14 now. A little behind on the last one, Sir." It soon would settle into a ballet of sorts, with good manners and sportsmanship overriding the action. If one shooter was open and loading, his neighbor might cover him; otherwise the birds were shared graciously. Calls of "Good shot!" "Nice going!" "Excellent!" were made on many of the falls.

For a half-hour the birds flew hard, a high percentage of them dropping at the line. "We've taught them too well," Batha said. "Look at that cracking shot!" Then the birds began to dwindle, and finally they stopped altogether. The signal was given to unload, and beaters and dogs emerged silhouetted on the skyline.

After the inaugural drive, we were taken streamside, where a table was set with coffee, tea, cocoa and homemade scones. Talk by the fire centered on the quality of the birds and the potential to expand the event. What about blackpowder only, or hammer-guns, or smallbores, or driven partridge, or pairs of guns, or ladies only . . . ? It would seem the potential for driven shoots at Highland Hills is as wide open as the country.

By the time we were ready for the second drive of the day, the sun had come out and the sky turned from

irony, "You have no idea how to hit that crosser, do you?" Well, that broke the ice, and I settled in and started hitting them!"

After the individual instruction, the groups were split into three-man squads, shooting what Batha calls "fits and flurries." These were fast, nonstop, singles, doubles and groups of targets simulating a hot peg. The guides stood behind the squads and tallied the hits, and the best team won bragging rights. For anyone lackadaisical on clays, this type of game really gets the juices flowing. Some of the Guns, like Texan Michael Coleman, didn't need much help. According to Kendrick, "Mike was wielding his beautiful FAMARS Excalibur with great effect—literally smoking them. It was good to have him as a role model; he showed us what was possible with the high clays."

Then the traps were set for crossers, and Batha demonstrated the huge amount of lead required. After working on those mysteries, the day ended with everyone in agreement: The coaching session had been great fun and a good way to prepare for live birds. Now the participants had confidence to accompany their anticipation.

That evening at the lodge, host Batha came into his own. The consummate raconteur, his skills at storytelling, if possible, supersede his mastery of the gun. It was a convivial group that relaxed in the pine-log surroundings swapping yarns and getting to know one another in front of the fire.



pale gray to broken blue. We were in a wider section of the Rock Creek valley framed by bronze cliffs and talus slopes. Indeed, one part of the line was only 60 yards off of a sheer rock face. This drive was truly a "high bird" presentation, with many of the pheasants coming over 45 to 50 yards up.

Dennis Macnab was shooting on this drive, and Batha offered him a little one-on-one coaching for the kite-high birds. "A little more lead, please." As a newcomer to driven game, Macnab did quite well using Batha's Krieghoff. Many others up and down the line did well also, judging by the number of birds that fell from the heights.

For lunch we adjourned to the lodge for a sit-down meal and a short rest, and by the time we'd gathered for the afternoon shoot, snowflakes had begun drifting lazily down. The first drive took place on a flat beside sage-covered hills. As the snow fell, birds seemed to materialize out of nowhere, and the gunshots were strangely muffled. It seemed otherworldly on my post at the end of the line. This drive was a little more to my swing-and-shoot/open-choke taste, and when a favorite presentation came whizzing in like Station 8 high house, I acquired the bird, swung and slapped the trigger. It was gratifying to see the long tail mark in the snow well in front of the line.

The last drive of the day was tight against the stream, with the birds coming from high ground on the far side of the water. Here an orchard deer fence ensured that the pheasants got well up be-



fore coming across. Like the ones before it, this drive was a blur of nonstop action, and I had to work at remembering each shot.

After the satiation of the driven day, the shooting party was more than happy to leave the snowy hills and walk back down the line in the gathering dusk. The warmth and amenity of the lodge, including Batha taking orders and serving warming drinks, was a welcome start to a special evening. With a lodge owner

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The topography and cover at Highland Hills make the ranch a perfect setting for showing the Guns high driven birds and then quality walk-up hunting.

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named Macnab, the highlight should have come as no surprise: a Burns supper complete with piped-in haggis. There were only a few jokes from the Scots that night at the expense of the English.

The last day dawned perfect for walking: sunny and cool, with a breeze of sage-tinted air. By noon it would warm to almost shirtsleeve weather, more typical of the Highland Hills winter. We started out two hunters to a guide spread across the 10,000-acre ranch. My party included Dr. Mike Kendrick and guide Scott Kuhn, who doubles as head of ranch operations. As a professional habitat manager, I enjoyed talking shop with Kuhn, and I came away with the opinion that Highland Hills is managed extremely well. The cover is outstanding, and from what I'd seen, the birds are of very high quality. Dennis Macnab attributes the good bird populations to excellent carry-over and a high rate of natural reproduction. That's one reason shooting hen pheasants is not allowed on the ranch.

We drew the area next to the lodge for our hunt. This covert consists of a sloping, center-pivot-irrigated food plot of thick grain sorghum surrounded by chukar-type uplands. Kuhn started us in the sorghum, working his unusual combination of springer spaniels and a German shorthair. His dogs behaved perfectly, and because the shorthair had no desire to retrieve, the springers were just the ticket to flush and then bring back the shorthair's perfectly pointed birds. The dogs made short work of the heavy cover, and by noon we had moved at least 15 strong-flying pheasants and an equal number of chukar.

Unfortunately, after lunch I had to say goodbye and head home. As I drove down the valley toward the Columbia River, I passed beneath a towering basalt wall. It was the same kind of geography that makes up the Highland Hills property. I realized then that I'd never be able to look at a basalt cliff again without imagining a cackling rooster launching overhead like a V-1 rocket.



Author's Note: The next Highland Hills Ranch driven shoot is slated for January 13 to 18, 2008. For more information, contact 866-478-4868; www.highlandhillsranch.com.

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