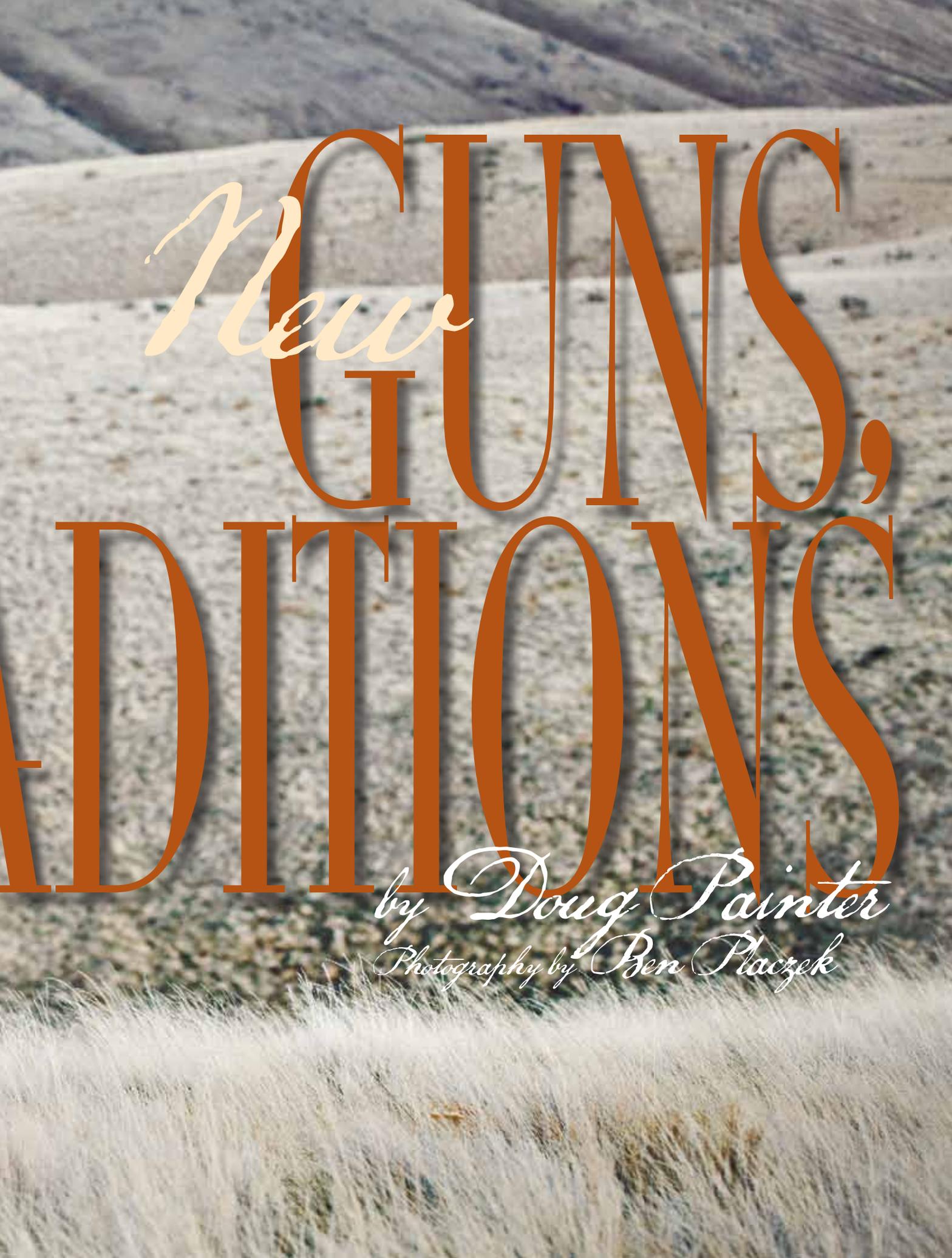


*Shooting Beretta's newest  
shotguns at Oregon's  
Highland Hills Ranch.*

*Old* **TRA**

*"Fancy" holds a namesake point for the author. What explodes from the hillside grasses might be any one of four different kinds of gamebirds at Highland Hills.*



*New*  
GUNS,  
ADDITIONS

*by Doug Painter*  
*Photography by Ben Placzek*

**Y**ou have to wonder about some of the things to which we've become accustomed. For much of his career, a friend of mine hammered out a car-to-train-to-subway commute that took well over two hours each way. During his salad days he thought little about his long daily treks. They were just a part of his workaday routine.

Only after he retired did he have one of those kick-yourself-in-the-butt realizations that he'd spent the equivalent of half his working life doing nothing more than hauling himself back and forth between home and office. Looking back, it now seemed to him that the length of his commute, more so than the sum of his accomplishments, might be the hallmark of his career.

Routines seem to have a way of dulling the mind and the senses. Of course, that to which we become inured is not always onerous. Nonetheless, we should keep an open mind to the fact that a standard we have come to readily accept is not necessarily one we must settle for.

Like most of you, I've long been accustomed to shooting 12-gauge, break-open shotguns both in the field and at the range. From the standpoint of recoil, most of us would agree that shooting these guns is no big deal. With the added heft of a purpose-built sporter and light target loads, gunning a round of sporting clays is hardly unpleasant. Even with stout pheasant loads in a light game gun, the excitement of the hunt and the relatively few shots taken keep recoil from being a perceived annoyance.

Sure, you'll feel the bite if you shoot a 12 over/under or side-by-side for doves in Argentina or hunt waterfowl from a layout blind where your shoulder takes all the recoil, but, other than that, what's there to quibble about?

I had an old boss who used to say to me, "That's fine, but can't we do a little better?" Well, in this case the folks at Beretta have done something better, namely with their SV10 Perennia over/under with its Kick-Off recoil reduction mechanism.

**S**peaking of something better, I recently had the opportunity to hunt with the Perennia in both 12 and 20 gauge and also try out Beretta's latest iteration of their autoloading A400 Xplor line, the A400 Action, at Highland Hills, one of the premiere wingshooting lodges in America.

Located in north-central Oregon, Highland Hills is a member of the Beretta Trident Lodge Program. It's also the winner of the Orvis-endorsed Wingshooting Lodge of the year for 2003 and 2012.

It's nice, of course, to have accommodations that would dazzle the Donald and to provide service that rivals the Ritz. Where I believe the rubber meets the road in this business, however, is how much real "hunt" the lodge has to offer.

Dennis Macnab, Highland Hills' owner, has put a double helping of the best of our sporting traditions into his place. From exceptionally well-trained dogs, and personable and professional guides to strong flying birds and a surprising variety of shooting opportunities, this lodge, to paraphrase the saying, "can hunt."

The rustically elegant lodge sits on a knoll in broad valley intersected by a meandering stream. The soft glow from the lights in the lodge were a welcoming sight as I drove up late in the afternoon, just in time for cocktails. After settling in, I was shown to the lounge where I was greeted by a roaring fire, top-shelf drinks and an array of appetizers, crowned by a plate of coconut-encrusted chukar breasts. *Not a bad beginning*, I thought to myself.

I was at Highland Hills to film an episode for the *World of Beretta* television series, which will be appearing, about the time you read this, on the Sportsman's Channel. My guest on the show was Mountie Mizer, a long-time Beretta executive. I've known Mountie since the early 1980s when we were involved in promoting the then new-to-America game of sporting clays.

Mountie is a wonderfully old-school gun guy. Passionate about hunting and his bird dogs, he knows the technical aspects of Beretta shotguns inside and out, and he's one



helluva wingshot. To boot, he's a great gentleman.

I love the way they do dinner at Highland Hills. All guests are seated at a single grand dining table with Dennis serving as host. It's a wonderful way to bring everyone together, to make everybody feel they're part of a family that's about to share not only a wonderful meal, but a great day afield the next morning.

The main course at our first dinner, I want to mention, was a pork scaloppini over a bed of fettuccine Alfredo. Now, we've all had veal scaloppini, either in the schnitzel style or with red sauce and spaghetti, but this pork version was as delicious as it was unique. It was one of many creative dishes prepared by Chef Keith Potter at the lodge. If you're good at cajoling such information out of folks, try and get the recipe from Keith. While you're at it, ask how he makes his pheasant enchiladas. If you're successful, send the recipes on to me!

The next morning I was hardly famished but still powered through a breakfast of fruit, coddled eggs with three cheeses and pancakes with sausages. Mountie assured me would work it all off with a long, hard day of hunting. I nodded and gave him my sausages.

When I think of the archetypical bird-hunting guide, I envision a fellow named Slim with a toothpick perpetually clenched in the corner of his mouth, a weather-beaten face and a hunting vest that looks like it's been rescued from a wood-chipper. Our guide most certainly did not fit this classic mold.

Tyla Kuhn, though young in age, has a lifetime of outdoor experience under her belt. She began her career as a fisheries researcher with the Oregon Department of Natural Resources but her love of dog training brought her into the guiding business. She guides with a big smile on her face, good-humor every step of the way and works her dogs with style and

finesse. What more could you ask for.

A key aspect that sets Highland Hills Ranch apart from many lodges is that guests have the opportunity to hunt not one, but four species of upland birds: pheasant, valley quail, chukar and Hungarian partridge – all interspersed within the lodge's 3,000 acres of natural habitat and food plots. Bag all four species in one morning or afternoon and you have achieved the Highland Hills Grand Slam.

**W**ith visions of grandeur dancing in our heads, Tyla, Mountie and I headed off for our morning hunt in a section of the river bottomlands. Tyla's English pointer soon locked up and she sent her English cockers in for the flush. A lone chukar flew to Mountie's right and he cleanly dropped the bird . . . right into the middle of swift-flowing Rock Creek. Not to worry: one of the cockers hit the water like a big-boy Lab, judged the drift perfectly and came out shaking off water with the chukar in her mouth. One down, three to go.

Up next was a small covey of valley quail that, again, all flew to Mountie's side. Needless to say, two down, two to go. It quieted down for a while, but as we came around a bend in the creek, a Hun flushed wild between us. I had just started to swing on the bird when it fell from the sky. Mountie stood there grinning. Three down, one to go.

We moved on to one of the food plot fields and in short order the pointer went rigid. When the cockers moved in, a pheasant erupted from the sorghum. I didn't mount my gun this time and was content to just watch Mountie shoot the bird as it flew directly away from us. Four down, none to go.

I was thrilled that Mountie had achieved his Grand Slam and done so with plenty of time left before lunch. I consoled myself



by talking to the camera, telling our viewers how happy I was that my guest had experienced such great shooting on our first morning. Personally, I think it was the extra sausages that gave him the edge, but I was gracious enough not to mention that.

That afternoon we left the bottomland, shifted into 4WD, and headed up to the hills that frame this beautiful valley. Now we were in a dramatically different setting, the kind of steep and rocky landscape that personifies great chukar country. The only downside was the wind had picked up, blowing at a steady 25 to 30 miles-per-hour, with gusts well above that.

Holding on to my hat, I asked Tyla if we could actually hunt in these conditions.

“Don’t worry,” she replied with no sense of concern, “I brought a dog that handles the wind really well.” Indeed, he did.

For the next several hours, Mountie and I enjoyed some of the most challenging bird-shooting we’d ever experienced. Tyla’s pointer did a masterful job holding the chukars, but when they took off it was as if they had been catapulted off the deck of a carrier with full burners on. We hit some, missed some, but also took the time to just stand and watch the clouds scudding overhead, the sun occasionally peeking through and bringing a vibrant glow to the yellow grasses on the hillsides below.

Shooting the SV10 Perennia on my first day at Highland Hills, I hardly noticed the 12-bore’s recoil. With its Kick-Off system – essentially two hydraulic oil dampers built into the stock – felt recoil is substantially decreased, by 60 percent according to Beretta. I was surprised by how much I appreciated the lessened “punch,” and how much it helped me stay in the gun for the second shot.

The sleeper in the Perennia duo may well be the 20-gauge version: an ideal quail gun, and with 3-inch shells, plenty of firepower for even late-season pheasants. And, when you pull the trigger, it’s really more like shooting a popgun than a shotgun.

Admittedly, added-on features, however nifty, don’t “make” a shotgun. It’s what’s in it, not on it, that counts. Beretta has a long history of producing great over/under shotguns that are nicely balanced and lively in the hand. The new SV10 Perennias are no exception to this lineage. I like the graceful sculpting where the stock meets the receiver, and Mountie pointed out to me that this latest generation of over/unders included larger hinge pins and deeper breech shoulders that further reinforce the lock-up between the receiver and barrels.

By the way, on the Perennias you can easily select between automatic ejection or manual extraction. It’s a nice feature that allows you to pluck out your hulls and place them in your vest instead of searching for empties in the corn stubble.

**H**ighland Hills Ranch typically gets less than ten inches of rainfall per year, so it surprised all of us to wake up the next morning and see a fresh blanket of snow covering the valley. It was light stuff, however; nothing that would keep us from heading back out to the fields with Tyla and her great dogs.

On this second day I was shooting a 12-gauge Action shotgun, the latest in Beretta’s A400 Xplor line. Chambered for 2¾- and 3-inch shells, it features a stock with Beretta’s Kick-Off system, but instead of just two dampers in the butt, it has a third behind

the bolt. Together with the inherent soft-shooting characteristics of a gas gun and Beretta’s innovative Micro-Core recoil pad, all these elements combine to create the most “recoil reduced” autoloader I’ve had the pleasure of shooting.

Beretta’s new Blink gas system is claimed to operate 36 percent faster than on any other autoloader. While I’ve not thought of other modern gas guns as “slow shooting,” with the Action you can go *bang, bang, bang* as fast as you can. Equally important, with its self-cleaning piston, the Action is highly reliable, even when not cleaned on a regular basis.

Arguably, the most high-tech piece of wizardry on this gun is the Gun Pod. Located where a grip cap is typically affixed, the Gun Pod offers digital read-outs that include ambient air pressure, cartridge pressure of the round fired and the overall number of rounds fired through the gun.

I remember a gun-writer once describing a new autoloading shotgun as “effective, but clunky.” That’s not the case with the Xplor Action. The gun is well-balanced and has that hard to describe but easy to feel swing to it. Highly versatile, reliable and with a weather-resistant finish, the Action can easily handle all the bird-hunting action you want to throw at it, from doves to ducks.

**T**he light snow didn’t slow our hunting down. While the quail had hunkered down in heavy cover, the snowflakes didn’t bother the pheasants one bit. Sooner than I expected, it was time for lunch and we headed back to the lodge, a bit wet but a lot happy.

The snow picked up again after lunch and I spent a moment by the fire and wrote down a few thoughts:

☼ Upland bird hunters tend to be a traditional lot. That’s why Grandpa’s smoothbore is often carried in the field and not just hung over the mantelpiece. Shooting the Perennia and the Action reminded me that new technology can still marry well with old traditions.

☼ Locals will be quick to remind you their state is pronounced, Ore “gun,” not Ore “gone.”

☼ Life is good at Highland Hills Ranch. Up in the morning and off to a great breakfast. Then there’s plenty of time to lace up your boots before heading out with your guide for the morning hunt. Back at noon for perhaps pheasant enchiladas or a delicious thick soup. Stretch out for awhile and then get ready to head out again. After the hunt it’s time for a cocktail and then a three-course dinner. Perhaps a cigar and a brandy by the fire pit before you retire. Wake up the next morning and repeat the above.

Some routines, it turns out, aren’t so bad after all. 

## IF YOU WANT TO GO

Highland Hills Ranch also offers a true British driven pheasant shoot with all the right trimmings in addition to walk-up hunting. The driven hunt is a two-affair with three drives each day, with 300 plus birds per drive. Call me if you are left with an open peg. For more, visit [highlandhillsranch.com](http://highlandhillsranch.com) or call (866) 478-4868

*The author (left), guide Tyla Kuhn and Beretta executive Mountie Mizer head to nearby patch of cover where they’ll hunt valley quail.*

