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The Traveling Sportsman's



PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY ALLEN

Guide to Outfitters & Lodges

A HIGH OLD TIME AT HIGHLAND HILLS

If your passions embrace fine dog work and wingshooting, nonpareil food and fellowship, then Highland Hills Ranch has all the hallmarks to make it a destination of distinction.

BY JIM CASADA

As someone fortunate enough to have come of age in the latter years of the bobwhite's golden era, not to mention having been blessed by growing up in a family where hunting was an integral and important part of life, flying feathers and staunch dog work have always held a corner of my sporting soul. Accordingly, when Mossberg's Linda Powell extended an invitation to join her and a few others at Oregon's Highland Hills Ranch, I accepted with the same sort of excitement associated with an adolescent's first gun. Moreover, there were other considerations that put me in a sort of "Christmas in September" frame of mind.

One was the fact that our group of hunters would be putting two newly introduced Mossberg scatterguns—the 20-gauge SA-20 All-Purpose Field autoloader and 12-gauge Model 930 Pro-Series Sporting shotgun—through their paces. Similarly, Linda noted that each day we would have the opportunity to pursue a wingshooting grand slam—chukar, pheasant, quail, and Hungarian partridge. Throw in a section of the country where I'd never hunted, an operation that featured superlatives aplenty, including twice being recognized as the Orvis-endorsed "Wingshooting Lodge of the Year," and a much-needed break from a stressful situation in my personal life connected with a family member's health—the picture should begin to emerge with some clarity.

This would prove to be a cross-country pilgrimage bearing every promise of being the cherry atop a bird hunter's sundae. That promise and my expectations were fulfilled in a fashion taking me straight back to a phrase often uttered by adults during my childhood.

Their words came from the "mountain talk" used in the heart of the Appalachians where I grew up. Whenever someone wanted to describe an event, outing, or special occasion that went wonderfully well and produced ample joy, they described it as having had a "high old time."

Based on a bit of background research and knowing from past experience that Linda Powell excelled in arranging outings such as the one that lay before me, I fully anticipated having a high old time at Highland Hills.

Virtually every aspect of my "I can't wait to be there" suspense would be fulfilled in glorious fashion. The sole exception was

something outside of anyone's control: Throughout the trip the area experienced unusually warm weather for the end of September, with afternoon temperatures rising into the low 80s. That presented obvious problems related to scent and potential dehydration for the dogs, not to mention sapping the stamina of a fellow who is a bit long of tooth and rotund of figure.

Wisely, though, Highland Hills had big tubs filled with water scattered strategically across the sprawling 3,000-acre terrain where we hunted. Frequent stops for the dogs to wallow in the water and drink their fill, while humans rested and rehydrated, made things manageable. I certainly needed those breaks, because the 15,000-plus steps my Fitbit recorded each day, with a goodly portion of them being in terrain that was anything but level, far exceeded my normal daily quota of exercise.

An initial half-day of warm-up shooting let us get to know the other hunters (Linda, her Mossberg colleague Dave Miles, Steve Comus from Safari Club publications, freelance writer Wayne van Zwoell, and John Parker from the NRA), become accustomed to the guns, and establish a relationship with the staff.

The early going also gave us a taste of the overall Highland Hills experience. Little touches like cold towels handed to you upon arrival after each session afield to a perfectly chilled beer to accompany the day's-end gun cleaning, meals at a massive table where each guest presented a capsule autobiography to the assembled group, and delectable hors d'oeuvres served alongside an impressively stocked "serve yourself" bar

to chef Doug Booker describing the menu items at the start of each meal. All of these things made our experience truly special.

As a passionate "foodie" with a number of game-related cookbooks to my name, it was gratifying to see harvested birds used to fine advantage in dishes such as curry pheasant, coconut chukar, and chukar picotta; to enjoy eggs over a small ladling of heavy cream and topped with cheese baked to perfection in ramekins; and to have my sweet tooth coddled with the likes of crème brûlée French toast, white chocolate raspberry cheesecake, and flourless chocolate cake.

Our hosts, Mindy and Dennis McNab, made sure conversation and camaraderie at the communal table matched the thrice-daily measure of culinary pleasure. The couple and their ever-attentive staff managed to convey a consistent level of warmth and hospitality, which made everyone feel special. It was almost as if you had become part of a newly found family.

Delightfully welcome though they were, all these touches amounted to, in effect, little more than an impressive assemblage of extras. They would have been more than sufficient to lessen disappointment or somewhat offset vexation with indifferent success afield, but as is the case with any outing of this sort, the essence of the experience must focus on what happens while hunting.

Fortunately, there were no worries whatsoever in that regard. We hunted in groups of three with a guide and stellar canine support in the mixed form of flushing and pointing dogs.

The first half-day saw each of our trio taking at least one bird of all four species in

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY ALLEN





The lodge's handsomely appointed Great Room offers a panoramic view of the property's 3,000 acres. The 10,000-square-foot, all-log lodge was built in 2002. • Below: Linda Powell carried Mossberg's new SA-20 while hunting ringnecks at Highland Hills. • Opposite: Guide Jonathan Snowden and his black Lab catch their breath while hunting chukars on a steep, rock-strewn ridge at the ranch.



the wingshooting slam. Predictably, with my keen interest in the history of sporting literature and given the last name of the ranch owners, to me the mixed game bag immediately became a Highland Hills McNab. For those unfamiliar with the term, it originated in John Buchan's delightful work of fiction, *John Macnab* (1925), which features a challenge between bored dilettantes that involves poaching a salmon, stag, and brace of grouse in a 24-hour period. There was, of course, no poaching involved, and our feat was one of comparative simplicity, but the quest and its accomplishment was nonetheless gratifying in the extreme.

Depending on the venue chosen for the specific half-day afield, hunting at Highland Hills finds one trekking over decidedly mixed terrain. It may involve pushing through lush bottomland fields of milo that abut steep bluffs, marching along steep hillsides, or heading to the top of the hills looming on all sides. Pheasants were most frequently found in or along the grainfields, although you never knew when an almost impenetrable thicket fringing the drainage meandering through the valley might suddenly sprout a cackling rooster desperately fighting for altitude. Every time that happened, even as the Mossberg SA-20 went to my shoulder and its report brought a bird tumbling to

earth, my thoughts meandered back to Robert Ruark's description of his first encounter with a pheasant. It is sufficiently apt and so enduringly definitive of that timeless thrill that I hope you'll indulge me for quoting a few lines from the finest of all his stories, "But Not on Opening Day" from *The Old Man and the Boy*.

The Old Man was dying, and they had gone to visit his longtime friend in Maryland, Mister Howard, for a farewell hunt. The Old Man and Mister Howard had tried to tell the young Ruark just what an impressive sight a flushed cock pheasant presents, but nothing could prepare him for the actual experience.

"There was an outraged squawk inside the brambles, a rapid beating of wings, and something—it might have been a bird or possibly the Graf Zeppelin—erupted. It seemed to be less than a hundred yards long, and I could swear it was not actually breathing fire. Otherwise I never saw such a production in my life."

We were blessed with a lot of those "productions," interspersed with the occasional covey of quail and even the odd chukar or Hungarian partridge. The quail were invariably in thick cover, and they took wing prematurely no matter how careful the dog-work, somehow managing to fly in a direction where a killing shot was a difficult proposition. Although I had hunted both

wild and released chukar and Huns many times before, the birds at Highland Hills were simultaneously a challenge and a delight. They seemed to prefer the ridgetops and steep canyons dropping away from them.

Time and again there were solid points of a sort—every fiber of the dog's body aquiver with adrenaline-laced anxiety and with eyes so intense and nose so seemingly scent-filled that the bird had to be within a foot or two of the dog—that left you mystified. You knew the dog wasn't lying, yet you looked at what was immediately ahead of him—thin grass no more than a couple of inches high, not so much as a hint of a bush or similar cover—and said to yourself: "There's no way a bird could hide there." Three steps later you were proven wrong. Borne by sometimes stiff breezes and often dropping down into steep canyons as they fled, the birds were as plentiful as the shots they presented were demanding.

The overall hunt provided five of these ventures afield, and one of the great things about the upland bird quest is that it involves what an uncle of mine liked to describe as "keeping gentleman's hours." By that he meant there was none of the rigor associated with being in the turkey woods

well before daylight, no flashlight retreats to one's vehicle after sitting in a deer stand until last light gave way to black night.

Instead, we awakened to the sound of distant pheasants greeting another sunrise, enjoyed a leisurely breakfast before setting out for the morning hunt, came back for a lunch filling enough to demand a restorative half-hour's nap, then set out for another three hours or so of afternoon hunting.

Late afternoon would find us deliciously tired, sated with shooting, and ready for a shower. After that would come libations and lively talk, choice hors d'oeuvres and comfortable camaraderie, and a splendid evening repast, all crowned with a nightcap beside a fire pit beneath skies so clear that the stars twinkled like a jetliner frozen in place.

Each evening as I walked or drove the few hundred yards from the main lodge to one of the cottages nestled below it, I would murmur to myself in much the same fashion fabled 17th century diarist Samuel Pepys finished each day's entry: "And so to bed."

My overall experience was, truth be told, a bit of an adventure in hedonism, yet I reckon all sportsmen owe themselves some sensual and sensory pleasure from time to time. If your particular passions

just happen to embrace fine dog-work, wingshooting with chances aplenty to pull the trigger, nonpareil food, and fellowship, then Highland Hills Ranch has all the hallmarks to make it a destination of distinction. Or, to borrow the title from a book of poetry written by a hopeless romantic I knew as a youngster, it qualifies as a bird hunter's "backside of heaven." ■



MOSSBERG'S NEW SHOTGUNS

Mossberg has long been recognized for no-frill, budget-minded shotguns noted for functionality rather than aesthetics. That is changing, as the two guns used at Highland Hills, the SA-20 autoloader (suggested retail: \$654) and the 930 Pro-Series 12 gauge (suggested retail: \$1,029) readily indicate.

To be sure, none of the workhorse predictability has vanished. We shot untold hundreds of rounds through every one of the guns during a half-day warm-up session



without any break whatsoever for cleaning and did not experience even a hint of a problem. This included a clays course where shooters were paired and most of us fired simultaneously at each target, and a flurry finale where each gunner shot nonstop as fast as they could reload and pull the trigger. Even with shooting gloves, the barrels were too hot to touch by the time the clay targets ceased ascending heavenward from a bluff above the shooters.

Although I didn't count, a conservative estimate would place the number of shells chambered and fired in the 400 to 500 range. That's a lot of "work" for a shotgun without so much as a swab of the bore, but they performed admirably. Exactly the same held true when afield, although obviously there was far less shooting and we cleaned the guns at the conclusion of each morning and afternoon outing.

The Mossberg 930, designed with considerable input from noted professional shooting instructor Gil Ash, is produced with the competitive clays shooter primarily in mind, but our trip made it abundantly

obvious that the gun performs perfectly well in the field. Our second day of hunting demonstrated that in sterling fashion when Linda crumpled a cackling pheasant madly scrambling to make an appointment two valleys away at a range that must have been a full 60 yards. For my part, after shooting the 12 gauge at clays (and performing far better than is normal for me), I opted for the lesser weight (6½ pounds compared to the 930's 7¾ pounds) and easier handling of the SA-20 in the field.

The nifty 20 gauge comes with a gloss-finished walnut stock and traditional checkering on both the forend and grip. The 26-inch vent-rib barrel features a front bead sight and a set of five choke tubes that truly makes it an all-purpose gun.

The 930 has a veritable bevy of special features. These include boron-nitride coatings on the gas piston, piston ring, and other parts of the gun's guts to provide top-drawer corrosion resistance and cleaning ease. The stock comes with drop-at-comb adjustment shims that allow suitable fit and

eye alignment for shooters in a wide range of sizes, arm lengths, and body configurations. The receiver has a tungsten finish and Cerakote coating, and the 28-inch vent-rib, ported barrel offers a blue finish nicely complemented by an eye-catching "Pro-Series Sporting" logo engraved in the receiver. The package is completed by an extended Briley choke tube set in skeet, modified, and improved cylinder choices.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Highland Hills' impressive website, www.highlandhillsranch.com, provides ample photo coverage of what to expect, along with details on everything from booking a trip to what to bring, from testimonials to coverage of special types of hunts. Once you have taken a virtual tour of the site and perused the photo gallery, any questions you might have or points you would like some clarification on can be addressed by emailing info@highlandhillsranch.com or calling (866) 478-4868. ■

