

HIGH

Wings Across the



Max was getting birdy. His increasing excitement was reflected in the muscles shimmering through his sleek German shorthair skin. The single-focused way he powered through the cornstalks, snuffling as he inhaled the powerful scent of a pheasant, transmitted a classic hunting dog message no bird hunter could mistake. “Guns up. Be ready.”

Bob McIntyre and I moved to each side of Max while our guide, Rob Ringsage, stayed just behind. Tracks in the fresh snow showed lots of pheasant activity but now, as Max began to move faster and straighter, it became obvious the bird was running. We picked up our pace as well, our eyes on an opening in the cornstalks. Chances are the pheasant wouldn't want to cross that open space.

Suddenly, Max stiffened into a solid point. Rob looked out at us to be sure we were in good shooting positions, then moved in to flush the bird. Instead of one, two roosters got up; one flying left, the other right. As I tracked my bird, I heard the boom of Bob's shotgun and saw his bird fall.

Just as I was squeezing the trigger, another rooster exploded literally from between my feet. His wings brushed the inside of my legs as he launched, a distraction of the first order. I don't know how far off my first shot was, but I doubt the pheasant was even frightened.

Suddenly and abruptly frazzled, I swung on the leg-beater, only to fire my second barrel while the bird was still within ten yards, probably damaging his high-frequency hearing but nothing else.

I was standing there staring at the sagebrush and rimrocked hills above me and muttering darkly when yet another rooster clattered up between us, surprising me badly for the second time in ten seconds. Luckily, Bob killed it cleanly before I'd even had a chance to berate myself for not reloading my 20-gauge double.

Max collected the birds while Rob and I congratulated Bob on his fine shooting. Then Rob gave me a look that was not quite a smile and asked in a non-judgmental sort of way, “What happened?”

“Well,” I said, “the gun just didn't swing smoothly.”

“Oh,” Rob said, as though I'd actually made sense. I wanted to hear the rest of his response, but I started to

LANDS

These are high times at Highland Hills, where hunters are discovering why the Oregon ranch has been named 'Orvis Wingshooting Lodge of the Year.' By Pat Wray



laugh, softly at first, then uncontrollably. Rob and Bob joined in and spent the next few minutes alternately trying to make me feel better and jabbing me gently with questions about why I hadn't just reached out and grabbed the bird or simply sat on him.

Personally, I found it easy to laugh, knowing I'd already shot ten pheasants that morning and there were more to come.

We were hunting at Highland Hills Ranch, a 3,000-acre preserve featuring pheasants, chukars, Hungarian partridge and California quail, not to mention a beautiful lodge.

The most important thing to know about the Highland Hills isn't really about the ranch at all. It's about the ranch's owners, Dennis and Sandy Macnab. Dennis is a dentist in The Dalles, Oregon, where the Macnab's have built their dentistry business into one of the nation's largest – in a town with just over 12,000 people.

"It comes down to how you take care of and relate to people," Dennis explained. "We run a real efficient dental operation, but you build client numbers by

providing service they can trust in a way that makes them want to come back. That's how we run the lodge as well."

And there you have it, everything you need to know about Highland Hills Ranch. Okay, maybe not everything, but it's one thing you should remember.

I arrived at the ranch in the middle of a snowstorm. Heavy snow, while not unheard of near Condon, Oregon, is not a regular occurrence. Nonetheless, several inches were on the ground already and visibility was bad enough to make 20 miles-per-hour seem like speeding through a marshmallow. As a result, I was only a hundred yards from the main lodge when it finally appeared as a dream-like apparition on the hill above. A big, beautiful, hand-hewn log apparition.

My first step inside the lodge on that cold, snowy day was a welcome change. The slate entryway led into a spacious, hickory-floored great room, with scattered Oriental rugs, leather-upholstered furniture and a massive stone fireplace. The larger-than-life aspect of the lodge was put into down-home perspective when Dennis walked up, stuck out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Dennis. Can I help with your bags?"

As luck would have it, he could, and he showed me downstairs to my room, which like all of the others, is private and beautifully appointed. The downstairs is also home to a well-stocked bar, where the laws of Dennis and Sandy hold sway. Dennis' law shows the mettle of the man: "I'll pour the first drink. After that, you're on your own." Sandy's law reflects her common sense approach to the business. "You're welcome to have a drink for lunch, but you won't be hunting any more that day." Near as I could tell, those were the only two hard and fast laws at Highland Hills. Everything else is flexible.

The Macnabs and their staff bend over backwards to accommodate their customers, and their flexibility was challenged that day, as six other customers experienced various delays in their arrival. Bob and Heather McIntyre got there at 4 p.m., about the same time Dennis learned the remaining four hunters, all dentists from West Virginia, were not going to arrive until the middle of the night.

In the best traditions of serious outdoorsmen, Dennis asked us if we wanted to shoot a round of sporting clays. Their ten-station course is typical afternoon fare on arrival day – a warm-up, if you will, for the next morning's hunt. Bob, a retired anesthesiologist, looked out into the previously described marshmallow and asked, "Don't you have to be able to see to shoot sporting clays?"

At that point the Macnabs ushered us smoothly into Plan B, with a visit to the bar, where we enjoyed their fine collection of spirits and wine as well as the exquisite creations of Barb, their chef. That night our appetizers were pieces of chukar breast meat, tooth-picked together with fresh pear, jalapeno pepper and pepperjack cheese, all wrapped in bacon. The appetizers were superb, and set the stage for all the food served at the ranch. Their meals make it hard for hunters to return home.

Sometime during the night the four dentists from West Virginia arrived, bringing with them a contagious friendliness and good humor. Their good humor became even more pervasive at breakfast when they learned I had graduated decades ago from Virginia Tech. In one of those strange, random anomalies, West Virginia University had contrived to beat Virginia Tech in a football game the week before and the dentists missed no opportunity to rub it in. I tried to fight back with clever little questions about why West Virginia even needed dentists, since the tooth count per resident is so low, but telling West Virginia jokes to West Virginians is like telling firemen about flames and I was badly outmatched.

After breakfast, the West Virginians went out to hunt as a



group, while Bob McIntyre and I took off with Rob and his two German shorthairs, Skosh and Max. Rob, a retired, 25-year veteran of the Oregon State Police, is a solid, steady gent with a quick wit and ready smile. He was gentle with his dogs and both did excellent jobs. Max, especially, is a tough, hard-working goer, a real pleasure to hunt behind.

It's not easy for a guide to maneuver clients who have their own, sometimes-inflated sense of competence and importance, but Rob's good-humored proposals and suggestions invariably put us in position for nice things to happen. The whole day was great fun.

And when Bob, who hadn't hunted for a while, had trouble connecting with birds in the morning, Rob recognized the problem was gun fit, not shooting competency. He offered Bob the use of his personal shotgun, a fine Benelli semi-automatic. The change was immediate and extraordinary, a stark example of how important gun fit is to an upland hunter. Bob missed only one shot the rest of the day, an almost impossible quail that slingshotted back past him. Smiles don't come any bigger than Bob wore that afternoon, and I suspect Benelli sales went up by at least one shortly afterwards.

The land we hunted straddles Rock Creek, a year-round stream that makes Highland Hills Ranch a gold mine in this arid land. Most of the surrounding ownerships are dry-land farms, which depend on rainfall for their crop production. A place like the Highland Hills, which has a source of year-round water and rights for its use, can raise crops with more potential profit, like alfalfa, corn and even the cherry



A tradition of superb dining and accommodations awaits visitors to the 10,000-square-foot lodge at Highland Hills. Awaiting you on the ranch's rolling countryside is superb gunning for ringnecks, chukars and quail.



orchards Dennis has planted. Dennis raises multiple crops, but all except the cherries and grass hay are there for the benefit of gamebirds and hunters. He cuts lanes through the fields to confine birds in areas small enough for the dogs to work effectively.

Rob put Bob and me onto pheasants right off the bat. These strong-flying birds were, for the most part, superior to typical bird preserve releases. The ranch's acreage is so extensive, and contains so much cover and food, that some of the released birds survive and carry over for days, weeks or months. Those birds can approach the savvy and speed of wild pheasants. We both did our parts in allowing several to renew their connection to the wild state, but only during the morning. After Bob switched to the Benelli, there were no more second chances.

A couple hundred vertical feet above the creek, we were out of the flat, benchy areas that support agriculture and into the hills, which are dominated by sagebrush, bunchgrasses and rimrocks. These rugged hills enclose the ranch, and provide good cover and food for chukar partridge, the Middle Eastern immigrants that have become one of the most popular game birds in the western states. Chukars have an affinity for steep, rocky land, but we got into a small covey at the base of the hills, where we took several. We also collected a few Hungarian partridge, another eastern European import. Huns are often found in the same general areas as chukars, but gravitate toward grassy hillsides and away from the rimrocks.

The West Virginia contingent decided to focus on chukars for several hours and although they did well, their foray into the steep ground took a toll. By the time we all reconnected for lunch, two of their number were moving a bit more slowly, though their senses of fun and humor were unaffected. This was not

altogether a good thing, considering their continued obsession with the WVU-Virginia Tech game. After lunch they split up, and the two walking wounded headed for flat ground to gun pheasants and quail, while their pals continued hunting the hills. With less than two hour's notice, Dennis had another guide lined up to accommodate the split group.

Lunch continued in the tradition of outstanding Highland Hills meals. It was served by what may be the only tandem of dental assistant/waitresses in the lodge business. When we asked Dawn and Cindy about the dichotomy of their jobs, Dawn explained.

"Working out here is a great break for us." And then with a smile, "Besides, when the dentist is out of the office, there's not a lot of work for dental assistants."

The pleasant, friendly way Dawn and Cindy do their work makes clients want to return soon, to the Ranch, at least. I'm not sure even they could bring people back to a dentist's office more than is absolutely necessary.

For the afternoon hunt, Rob took Bob and me to a couple more locations, where we each collected several more pheasants and then got into two coveys of California, or valley, quail. California quail are present in large numbers in eastern Oregon bottomlands and are not nearly so tied to agricultural lands as ringnecks. They are often found in brushy swales and seasonal creek bottoms. California quail can be distinguished from mountain quail, which are similar in size and coloration, by the question mark topknot decorating the heads of the males.

If the quail we found were not wild birds, I sure couldn't tell the difference. Their explosiveness and velocity caught me by surprise, and I missed the first two before finally connecting on a couple. Bob shot two in a hurry, then finally missed on a rocket sweeping back past him. He looked shocked, as though unable to understand how he could actually miss.

At that point, Rob stopped the dogs and congratulated both of us on collecting the Highland Hills Grand Slam: pheasant, chukar, Hun and California quail. It's a nice touch and comes complete with a certificate.

Because I was going to meet my son and hunt chukars at another location after leaving the ranch, I had brought my one-year-old female English pointer, Sadie. Although clients are welcome to bring their own dogs, we'd held Sadie out of the hunts so Bob could hunt over Rob's experienced animals. After finishing his Grand Slam, Bob graciously urged me to bring Sadie out. Energetic and highly athletic, Sadie did a fine job, and though she lacked the experience and finish of Rob's dogs, her efforts left me with a smile almost as big as Bob's.

Then it was time to head back. After twenty-nine pheasants, a dozen or so chukars, six or eight quail and three or four Huns, Bob

Continued on 160

HIGHLANDS

Continued from 119

and I had done our share. We met the West Virginia contingent in the bar and shared stories. They were so excited about their experience they even forgot to make comments about the football game.

The next day it was back to the hunt for the four West Virginians, while Bob and Heather McIntyre headed out for a day of steelhead fishing on the John Day River. Dennis Macnab leases access to an exceptional stretch of water not far from the ranch and provides guides and everything else necessary for a day of fishing. The lease also includes a comfortable little cabin where anglers can dry out, rest and change their clothes. The Macnab's "cast and blast" is one of their most popular programs at Highland Hills.

I took my leave that day. Each of the staff went out of their way to say goodbye and wish me well. I was struck again by their friendliness and courtesy. Sandy Macnab met me at the door and gave me several packages of pheasant and chukar, vacuum packed and frozen.

"Dennis and I wanted to build a place that felt like home," she said, "where we could treat our clients like family."

They've succeeded on both counts. ✎

If You Want To Go

Just before this issue went to press, Highland Hills Ranch was named "Orvis-endorsed Wingshooting Lodge of the year for 2003/2004." Located 2 1/2 hours southeast of Portland, the lodge and its five cabins can house twenty-one guests at a time, September 15 to March 31. Contact Highland Hills Ranch, 23050 Wolf Hollow Lane, Condon, OR 97823; 866-478-4868; e-mail: info@highlandhillsranch.com; Web site: www.highlandhillsranch.com.

Pat Wray's new book, *A Chukar Hunter's Companion*, is now available at www.patwray.com or by sending a check or money order for \$21.95 plus \$5 s&h to Outdoor Insights, PO Box 513, Corvallis, OR 97339-0513.

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