





# Diamond Day

*Four shotgun junkies discover pure perfection  
in the Oregon highlands.*

*by Robert Matthews • Photography by Terry Allen*



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*The author (right) and Glenn Dunaway march up a grassy knoll to where one of Highland Hills' bird dogs has pinned down a chukar. Opposite: The author's vintage Purdey hammer gun.*



I do not know who first famously opined that “some days are diamonds and some days are stones,” but he was surely right. I like to think that the very best of our days are like an old friend whose memory rests gently within the depths of the heart, never to die, never to be forgotten.

One day on the dry side of Oregon, we left the lodge in the brief, slanting rays of a winter morning and climbed steadily upward for the better part of an hour. Four-wheeling, tires spinning, engine straining, we clawed our way to a place where the earth fell away in all directions and all that remained was rock and yellow cheatgrass and the ice-blue seam between the earth and the sky. Along the distant horizon the highlands rose and fell, tumbling into living convolutions surely wrought from the mind of God. Far below, the brown, dun and burnt-orange patchwork grainfields of Highland Hills Ranch were a distant dream. It seemed that we had found the top of the world, a place inhabited only by grass and sky and the unceasing wind. And chukars. And the crazy people who hunt them.

Gene Adams had brought us to this place. Gene, who is as affable and competent a guide as walks the face of this earth, had also brought a pair of dogs that were as fine as any that I have ever hunted behind. The female, named

Faith and the male, named Rio, had studied well. They knew their lessons, knew each other and knew how the game is supposed to be played.

The “guns” were not as well trained, but on this singular day, were unusually competent. Our little group consisted of Terry Allen, Glenn Dunaway, Gil Morgan and me. We had elected to go together and shoot in pairs. All were experienced bird hunters as well as shotgun junkies of the highest or lowest order, depending on your perspective. As a result, we shared a grand selection of guns, all side-by-sides. Glenn carried a lovely round-bodied 20-bore with Celtic engraving, recently bespoke from David McKay Brown. Terry was shooting his lissome under-lever Lang. Gil was armed with a splendid single-trigger, droplock Westley Richards. I carried a vintage six-pound, six-ounce Purdey hammer gun.

Gene quickly put the shorthairs down and while we were assembling our guns and gear, Rio was already finding the first birds of the day. As we turned to follow the direction that the dogs had taken, we could see the rigid tip of Rio’s tail just visible over a little rise. When we topped the rise, we could see Faith backing.



*Gil Morgan and the dogs perform a highland pirouette to watch a chukar that had flushed wild. Caught by surprise, Morgan never got off a shot.*



By agreement, Glenn and I were first up, and the little Purdey's hammers snicked into place as we eased past the dogs. After 50 yards of "point and creep," a pair of chukars made the fatal mistake of flying straight away. The two shots sounded like one and the birds folded in unison, scribing twin arcs as momentum carried them over the precipice and out of sight. The two dogs fetched on command, each bringing one bird to hand.

A few minutes later Glenn and Terry walked in behind a double point and scattered chukars across half of eastern Oregon. We spent the next couple of hours chasing the scattered remnants across the highlands. Then we found some more and scattered them, too. We took turns shooting in pairs, promiscuously swapping guns at will. In theory, none of us should have been able to hit anything, but that was not the case on this day. It seemed that we could do no wrong. No matter how fast. No matter how far. It seemed that every shot resulted in a cloud of feathers riding the wind.

Faith and Rio, meanwhile, conducted a seminar on how to handle chukars. They were the "dream team," quartering, finding, backing and retrieving to perfection. These dogs knew all there was to know about chukars. Occasionally, when so commanded, one dog stiff-legged a moving point, while the other circled and blocked the running birds. The birds flew like only chukars in a gale can fly, leaping to catch the wind and curling away at something approximating light-speed. The wind never ceased and we never saw anything that even resembled an easy bird.

During a short break for a gourmet lunch at the lodge, we decided to try for a mixed bag in the afternoon and soon found ourselves on a wide shelf halfway up the mountain, on the long side of the mountain's slant, just above the break where the ground falls sharply to the valley of Rock Creek. Above, we could hear the gale still raging in the highlands; from below came the distant sound of water stumbling over stones.

We hunted waist-high stands of prairie grass interspersed with patches of milo where the pheasants skulked and ran and, in the way of pheasants everywhere, flew only when given no other choice. The "dream team" made sure that plenty of them found themselves in exactly that predicament. There were Huns and valley quail mixed in to keep us on our toes. Every point was a mystery waiting to unfold. We never knew what was going to happen next.

Toward the short end of evening, just as the lowering sun gilded the canyon rim and the thin cirrus clouds began to pinken with the dusk, we found Faith and Rio head to head, separated by a ten-foot-wide clump of brush along the lower edge of a milo field. Glenn gave the heap a stiff kick and a pair of roosters piled out, to meet the same fate as the pair of chukars that started the day. We thought that it was the perfect finale, and stood in place with guns open, congratulating ourselves when another rooster lost





his nerve and flushed about 15 yards to our right. The bird rose about two feet, but then dipped and powered straight away, barely clearing the tops of the milo.

I was standing with a single shell in my hand and, moving as fast as an old man's reflexes would allow, dropped it into an empty chamber and slammed the Purdey shut. The right hammer found its way beneath my thumb and came to full cock just as the gun touched my shoulder. When the rooster dropped like a stone, we knew that it was time to quit.


As we made our way back to the truck in the darkening light, a gigantic covey of valley quail lifted from somewhere above us and, hugging the contours of the land, flowed like water down the hillside and across the valley to the base of

the cliff beyond. Soon a lone rooster followed suit. We didn't hear him flush. He simply materialized from the darkness, set his wings and sailed silently across the valley.

This was not our first day at Highland Hills Ranch. It will not be our last. As we sat before the fire at its end, we could find no fault, no way to improve upon it. In the amber glow of firelight and a nip of The Famous Grouse, it was perfect. And it will, like an old friend, rest gently within the depths of the heart of an old bird hunter, never to die, never to be forgotten. ✖

### IF YOU WANT TO GO

Bird-hunting at Highland Hills Ranch runs from September 15 to March 31st. For more information call 866-478-4868 or visit [www.highlandhillsranch.com](http://www.highlandhillsranch.com).



*Gil Morgan swings on a hard-flying chukar. • Rio turned in a stellar performance during his tour of duty on the hills. • Glenn Dunaway's round-body McKay-Brown 20-bore (opposite page) features Celtic-style engraving.*





