

SHOOTING SPORTSMAN

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Highland Wings

Flush with birds at
Highland Hills Ranch

by Wayne van Zwoll





IF YOU CAME OF AGE AFTER THE Truman administration, you might not recall 20-acre fields hemmed in by hedges and echoing with the pop of twin-lung John Deere tractors. When farmers planted corn in 40-inch rows two at a time and stacked hay to the barn roof, upland birds prospered. Fallow fields sheltered wildlife; spilled grain wintered it. Rural urchins with single-shot Iver Johnsons learned wingshooting over weeds. Since then hundred-acre fields furrowed by 100-horse tractors and tidied by herbicides have reduced the wildlife value of many farmscapes.

"We're not the old Midwest," said Dennis Macnab, owner of north-central Oregon's Highland Hills Ranch, "but our slice of Oregon has pheasant hunting that's tough to match." That would be fitting, as the Chinese ringneck was successfully introduced to the US in the 1880s in western Oregon's Willamette Valley.

I am speaking with Dennis in between dusting clays on HHR's sporting clays range. "Pull!" A pair of birds springs across shadows on the sage. I shatter one; Dennis takes the other. Highland Hills runs its sporting clays course as you wish, but my host recommends a team attack. Two shooters with two shells each

try to break a report pair together or backing each other. Firing together, I decide, is best; there's less risk that a missed clay will sail out of range before a follow-up. Sharing also halves the humiliation when a bird escapes.

Dennis maintains a dental practice in The Dalles but concedes that his heart is at Highland Hills. "I bought the 3,000 acres in 1996," he said. "It was a cattle ranch, with irrigated alfalfa on Rock Creek. Having grown up nearby, I wanted a place with the type of hunting I remembered. The raw material was here: water through the property's center, fertile benches on its hem, cover in adjacent draws, hills with chukar." As Dennis and his family worked to enhance the land, its destiny evolved. "It became more than a family retreat. We built a lodge and held two conferences for the dental industry. Then I shifted focus, expanding my habitat-enhancement program and opening HHR to hunters."

Dennis designed the stunning log lodge, completing it for the 2002 season. In 2003 HHR was named Orvis Lodge of the Year, and in 2012 it earned that prestigious award again. A Beretta Trident Lodge, it has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The London Times* and has hosted visitors from all over the world. "Most guests are from the States, of course," Dennis said, "many from Canada.

Highland Hills Ranch offers hunting for a variety of species in well-managed habitat, with enhanced high-country range providing excellent opportunities for chukar and Huns.



The beautiful log lodge sits in a habitat-rich valley surrounded by fertile benches and short-grass hills. It's little wonder that the ranch entertains guests from all over the world.

But we've welcomed people from Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Lebanon, Italy and Iran—more places than I've had time to visit!" He added that HHR is managed to suit hunters who enjoy a hike as well as those with limited mobility. "From mid-September to the end of March, we host hunters with a range of talents and expectations," he said. "Our mission is to give them all an experience they want to repeat."

With an overnight capacity of 23, HHR accommodates roughly 650 hunters a year, some on European-style driven hunts, which Dennis started a few years ago. Shotgunners must reach high, swing hard and reload fast to catch overhead birds pitching from the hills.

Dennis, who like me attended Oregon State University, credits his family's history and his own love of the land for developing HHR. "After getting hounded from Scotland during the Reformation," he said, "my ancestors settled in Canada, then homesteaded in Oregon—their house catching a corner of each of four adjoining sections in Sherman County. That was 136 years ago. Call me a native!"

Plowing up creekside alfalfa, Dennis planted milo and other crops to get forage and taller cover for birds. He improved the water supply and

doubled irrigation coverage from 200 to 400 acres. He broke with tradition to fertilize native grasses on the hills. "Ranchers thought I was nuts," he said. "After all, this was once sheep country. Rails through the Columbia gorge brought lambs and wool to market. Fertilizing native range was then impractical and for years later made no economic sense. But Huns and chukar flourish on range we've enhanced. Mule deer too!"

OK, I'm a sucker for history and

welcomed the chance to hunt again in the hills shadowing Lewis and Clark's route west. What's more, I would have a chance to try out a couple of shotguns new to market.

The 12- and 20-bore repeaters showed up not among the figured walnut and engraved sideplates in HHR's gunroom but in the adjoining lobby where hunters ready themselves for the field. You might think Mossberg an odd brand at a lodge boasting a Beretta pedigree, but while Mossberg can't claim Beretta's tenure, it now has built firearms for nearly a century. In fact, its Model 500 pump is one of the best-selling shotguns ever—outnumbering even Remington's 870.

"This 930 Sporting is the latest version of our flagship autoloader," said Mossberg's Linda Powell as we donned vests the first morning. "It's a gas-driven, three-inch 12-gauge with extended Brileys and a new walnut stock. Like our 500, it has a tang safety." She grabbed a box of shells. "That's enough for now!"

We headed for a piece of cover fringing Rock Creek, which this season had thinned to a trickle after extended drought. The irrigated milo adjoining the creek was thick and tall. Steve Comus and John Parker, from SCI and the NRA, joined me as guide Melissa

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THE GUNS

Mossberg makes working guns for the masses. Its latest repeaters, however, are classy as well, with walnut stocks closely fitted to sleek receivers and vent-rib barrels. The 930 Pro-Series Sporting was designed in collaboration with professional shooting instructors Gil and Vicki Ash and is competition ready. It comes in 12 gauge and has extended Briley chokes and interchangeable HiViz TriComp fiber-optic sights. Its ported 28" barrel complements an alloy receiver Cerakoted gray. The piston, rings, sear, hammer and magazine tube are coated with boron nitride to prevent corrosion, and high polish on the bolt slide, shell stop and elevator reduces friction. The nicely stippled walnut stock has five shim-set drop positions. At 7¾ pounds, the gun swings smoothly and tames recoil. The 930 Sporting lists for \$1,029, which includes a 60-day introduction to the Ash's OSP (Optimum Shotgun Performance) Shooting School.

Mossberg International's SA-20 All Purpose Field model is imported from Turkey in 20 gauge and lists for \$654. It is a trimmer shotgun, with a steeper grip. The walnut stock on the 26"-barreled version is checkered, not stippled, and wears a thinner butt pad than that on the 930. The gun also comes with five chokes and a bead front sight. Weighing 1½ pounds less than the 930, the SA-20 is quicker to the shoulder and a pleasure to carry.

For more information, contact Mossberg, 203-230-5300; mossberg.com. —W.V.Z.



Herz collared four Small Munsterlanders and loosed the eager dogs. They immediately went to work, rippling leaves evidence of their progress. With so many actors, I missed the first point, but I did see the rooster that rocketed skyward fall hard to Steve's shot.

"No hens," Melissa reminded us. "Or you'll have to sing at supper." Of course, no such restrictions applied to the chukar, Huns, native California quail and introduced bobwhites. When a chukar burst from weeds beside me, the Mossberg sent it cartwheeling. As a dog lunged to retrieve, another rooster jumped well in front of John . . . and escaped.

An hour and plenty of shooting later, we swung back toward the pickup, vests full. Then: "Point!" Melissa steadied the dogs as my companions approached. A grenade-burst of Huns erupted, and three tumbled to the staccato reports of the 12s.

"Dead bird. Dead." The dogs gamely persevered. Without them, we would have been fortunate to find any birds in

the dense growth. They fetched all three.

We swept more milo and then a stretch of sage, cheatgrass and bunchgrass. The number of birds we saw was as rewarding as the bag itself. Rises came so often I expected one at every step.

Upon our return to the lodge for lunch, hostesses Courtney and Marnie met us with cool, moist towels before ushering us into the dining room for specialty salads and exotic dishes from chef Doug Becker. Throughout our stay, the food spoiled us. Five-star-quality dinners followed evenings on the veranda sampling appetizers and a selection of drinks, including Oregon wines. Each day began with baked eggs, pancakes and fruit plates. Coffee was always available in the finely appointed cabins and guest rooms.

High ground at Highland Hills is archetypal chukar country, and I was itching to get my feet on the steep stuff. That afternoon John and I hopped in Melissa's pickup with Mossberg's marketing director, Dave Miles. Melissa's

Toyota chugged up a dirt track that would have defied travel after rain or snow. It took us through a gap in the basalt rims and then across a great dome that yielded a panoramic view of the lodge and its irrigated cropland. Shadows lanced from surrounding hills into Rock Creek, snaking east toward its source in the Blue Mountains. We stopped in short grass being tickled by a light breeze. The Munsterlanders whined with anticipation. Collared and freed, they raced madly about the truck before fanning out, noses into the wind. Almost immediately one locked up.

I watched as my companions walked to the dog and busted the bird . . . and missed! But in no time chukar were tumbling. Charitably, they rose in singles and pairs, offering plenty of time to reload and pick a bird.

After a few photos, I traded my Nikon for the Mossberg and filled my pockets with No. 6s. Dave and John had collected a half-dozen birds. My turn came on the next point. A single powered away, quartering sharply. At my shot it came unhinged, falling far. But the dog raced after it and lunged



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back up the steep slope, proudly holding the bird in its mouth.

Meanwhile the other two Munsterlanders had vanished. We climbed and found them on point. Dave killed the first bird that rose; the second escaped John's first shot but lost feathers and balance on the second. When it volplaned to earth a hundred yards off, the dogs sped away.

So it went for three glorious days, the action almost nonstop in the bottoms and atop the knobs. Varied terrain and fine dogwork kept our attention. We switched partners and guides, so I was able to hunt with Linda Powell and my longtime

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colleague Jim Casada and watch guide Jonathan Snowden direct his stylish pointers.

Too soon our hunt ended, but I was thankful for the time spent with good friends, fine dogs and hard-flying birds in a setting beyond compare. Lord willing, it won't be my last trip to eastern Oregon's draws and prairies and its bird-rich oasis, Highland Hills Ranch. 🐾

For more information on mixed-bag hunting in Oregon, contact Highland Hills Ranch, 866-478-4868; highlandhillsranch.com.

Wayne van Zwoll has published 16 books and nearly 3,000 magazine articles on firearms and shooting. He earned a doctorate in wildlife policy and lives with his wife, Alice, in north-central Washington.