

HUNTING HIGHLAND HILLS

A fine combination of hunting and
hospitality for wingshooters in Oregon.

STORY BY ANDREW BOGAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HAFNER



It's refreshing that I can still miss a shot that easy. I had been shooting pheasants, chukar, Hungarian partridge, and quail over two German shorthaired pointers and an English cocker spaniel for two days at Highland Hills Ranch in Oregon's high desert, and *everything* was going perfectly. Then a single chukar flushed off Belle, our little, black-coated cocker, in plain sight not 20 feet in front of me—close enough to see its red beak and eyelids. Dixie, our lead shorthair, had held it tightly on a staunch point for several minutes with her partner honoring her point while we made our way across the sagebrush and cheatgrass-covered hilltops all the way to an ideal shooting position. Our guide had sent in the flushing dog only after we were ready. The bird just barely avoided the little spaniel's approach as it took wing on a graceful arc with an evident trajectory—the kind of flush one always hopes for when attempting to shoot a double since it's such an easy, close-in presentation for a wingshooter. But this time, inexplicably, I not only missed it, I missed it twice.

Thank goodness it was a single and I didn't give away multiple birds to my ineptitude. But there's something about a clean, bad miss that leaves the bird unscathed and my ego a little bruised that I genuinely enjoy. It is that refreshing feeling that when hunting the uplands, the birds always have a fair

chance, no matter the quality of the dog work or the experience of the shooter.

Highland Hills Ranch spans a breathtakingly beautiful stretch of Rock Creek in Oregon's high desert, about two and a half hours east of Portland and 20 miles from the nearest community of Condon, the seat of rural Gilliam County in north-central Oregon. In autumn, the valley fans out in an explosion of color: sunlit ridgelines of golden grass flecked with dull bluish-green sagebrush; deep brown rocky outcroppings contrasting a backdrop of soft-yellow hillsides, subtle rose and tan tones of milo grain fields on the valley floor, and bright orange and scarlet of the cherry orchards with the leaves at their peak fall colors. The main windows of the impressive Highland Hills lodge frame this sublime scene like a massive Impressionist landscape painting of rural Oregon.

Walking with guns behind dogs within that "painting," through one and then another of these varied color layers, the real beauty of this landscape springs to life. From the milo fields of the valley floor flush cackling roosters with their own palette of iridescent feathers in a myriad of colors shimmering in the high-desert sunshine. These magnificent, colorful cockbirds first arrived on our shores right here in Oregon from Shanghai courtesy of a series of shipments organized by an Oregon pioneer and American diplomat to China, Owen

Denny, in the early 1880s by ship across the Pacific. When Oregon's first pheasant-hunting season opened a decade later in 1892, ring-necked pheasants were already so abundant across the state that 50,000 birds were shot on opening day. The frequency of flushing roosters at Highland Hills Ranch today is reminiscent of that earlier time in the Beaver State.

High up on the golden hilltops that rise sharply from each side of the narrow valley, the slate-gray backs and wings, zebra-barred sides, bright red beaks, and bold black eye stripes of the chukar partridge can be seen scurrying amongst the sage. This colorful devil-bird thrives in this dry, rocky, elevated terrain where it scrapes a living from the cheatgrass and lodging from the thickly tangled sagebrush. The chukar partridge was first introduced to Oregon from Central Asia decades after the pheasant but are today the most successful gamebirds in the wild highlands of this desert landscape, a new home to which they have adapted seamlessly.

A little lower down on the steep hills and cliff faces right above the milo and closer to the creek, among the brown rocks dappling the yellow hillsides are large coveys of Hungarian or gray partridge, known locally as Huns since the most successful introductions of these European partridges to the American West in the early 1900s were from Hungary. These birds have subtle dusty-orange and gray plumage, and they

call noisily to one another while preparing for well-coordinated covey rises that flummox the most experienced wingshooters with their overwhelming simultaneous target presentation and rapid departure. Their coloration is softer and more subtle than a chukar, but to my eye its dusty-orange head and gray body accented with rusty brown wings and side barring make it the most beautiful of all the partridges.

Last but not least, in the thickest golden tussocks of tall rye and winter wheat near the creek itself, elusive quail scramble for cover among the thick grass, then explode into the air toward the nearest brush in a blur that only the fastest gun can catch. Oregon's native valley quail have flushed from these coverts for thousands of years. Today, their habitats are shared with bobwhite quail, too, a more recent introduction from the American South.

Almost nowhere else can a sportsman find this diversity of upland game birds in hunttable numbers on a single property: pheasants, chukar, Huns, and quail. Altogether they compose the *grand slam* of wingshooting at Highland Hills Ranch.

GOLDEN OCEAN

Oregon's high desert is a golden ocean of arid grasslands teeming with chukar.



But this upland paradise wasn't entirely nature's creation. When Dennis and Mindi Macnab bought this ranch in 1996, it was a run-down cattle station with primitive lodging. But they were raised in Oregon farming families descended from pioneers, so a combination of vision and hard work came naturally. First, they transitioned the old creekside cattle pastures and alfalfa farm into pivot-irrigated milo fields to establish low, thick cover that would provide abundant grain and protection for their gamebirds throughout the fall and winter. The margins in the corners went to rye and wheat for taller cover and additional nutrition for their upland birds. Then, they planted the more gently sloping hillsides with orchards of cherry trees. The sweet cherries were a cash crop that provided the ranch with a steady farm income that could be invested in further improvements.

Once the land had been returned to health and productivity, with the irrigation wells restored and grain and fruit crops established, their vision was to build a luxurious log-cabin-style hunting lodge out of hand-peeled pine logs that could host family, friends, and hunting guests at the pinnacle of hospitality. Every aspect of the lodge reflects thoughtful

architecture and attention to detail. One enters into the great room, which is anchored with a massive, yet somehow more inviting than imposing, stone fireplace and lovely views over the creek, valley, and hills framed by a wall of windows.

The great room flows naturally into the comfortable dining room and its adjacent open kitchen, where Chef Doug exhibits his mastery of the culinary arts—honed at culinary school in Portland—with elegantly plated, multicourse meals three times a day delivered to the table individually by Shelly, who makes everyone feel at home. Crème brûlée blueberry French toast for second breakfast, chukar enchiladas at lunchtime, and partridge piccata with a perfect balance of lemon, butter, and capers as dinner's third course makes for wonderfully decadent dining. A house-made dessert of key lime pie—but was that the *lunch dessert* or the *dinner dessert*? I cannot recall.

These lavish meals are central to the Highland Hills experience; not only are they delectable, but they also provide an opportunity for an almost choreographed table conversation led by Dennis in which all the guests introduce themselves to each other every evening. It initiates a natural flow of conversation that continues from the dining table to the downstairs bar for a cocktail and out onto the patio around the firepit where a blazing bonfire of wood logs coarsely cut from the cherry orchards warms the desert night and perfumes it with fruitwood smoke. Fireside tales of hunts from as close as the previous afternoon's shoot or as far as Southern Africa are

DAY AND NIGHT

By day, Highland Hills is an upland hunter's paradise. By night, the grand lodge glows with the warmth of its fabled hospitality.



blended with the characteristic mixture of humor and politics that makes all hunting camps so familiar and enjoyable.

The result is a magical camaraderie that builds durable friendships among the sportsmen of Highland Hills Ranch in an instant. The North Carolina contingent that shared our visit and our campfire had just arrived from a stay in the Willamette Valley wine country hosted by a fellow guest from a previous visit to Highland Hills Ranch who was now a good friend on the opposite coast. Paying it forward, they eagerly extended us an invitation to join them to shoot at Drake Landing and Brays Island in the Carolinas, a generous offer to explore the deep-rooted upland traditions of the South that I genuinely appreciate and look forward to accepting someday.

The quality of the people—and their dogs—is what truly differentiates a hunting destination for me. Highland Hills's clientele largely reflects the refined character of the owners Dennis and Mindi—and their cocker spaniel, Max, a gun dog of the gentlemen's tradition. They are successful, well-educated professionals who turned to running a hunting lodge on their family ranch mid-career to get back to their farming roots in Oregon and create an opportunity to share their love of landscapes, dogs (especially cocker spaniels), guns, gamebirds, and field-to-table dining with like-minded guests.

As my own hunt was ending, I had one last morning to pursue the elusive Highland Hills *grand slam*. The previous day we had shot pheasants and chukar in good numbers, shot at a

huge covey of Huns without success, and seen a few quail too, so I knew that shooting all four on a single hunt was possible. But, unexpectedly for the high desert, my last morning started with driving rain. So much rain that I worried if birds accustomed to this dry windswept landscape would flush at all.

As we got out of the truck up on the top of the ridge and Rich, our guide, released his dogs, the eponymous alarm call *chuk-chuk-chukARRR* rang out as the sudden arrival of hunting dogs onto their landscape alarmed a covey of a dozen or more chukar and they scattered—some running, some flying—in every direction. What might have been an easy pair of shots on two birds flushed from a tight covey rise had we parked the truck just 100 yards away, was suddenly rather more complicated with the covey broken and singles or pairs now scattered out in every direction at unknown distances. Following a quick collective chuckle over our poor parking decision, Mindi and I loaded up and Rich sent the dogs into the wind. Fortunately, the early morning rain was rapidly exhausting itself down to just a drizzle and a light

A TALE OF TWO PARTRIDGES

Two species of partridge populate these hills. Huns prefer the tangled sagebrush of the steep rocky slopes (above left), while chukar (above right and right) prefer the rolling ridge-tops of the high country.



breeze improved the scenting conditions. We lucked out and Dixie only had to run about 250 yards before she locked up on two of our scattered covey mates hiding together under a small tangle of sagebrush.

After the previous day afield together, our team was a well-oiled machine. Our second shorthair turned back into the wind, saw Dixie locked up and froze to honor her point. Rich called, “Hup!” And our little hyperkinetic cocker spaniel screeched to a halt and sat still awaiting her next orders. Mindi and I both approached quietly. As she closed her Beretta 20, I eased my Browning 28 shut as well. Confirming his two guns were ready to shoot and with the panache of a soft-spoken and well-experienced guide, our flushing dog was released to, “Belle, put ‘em up.”

Our little cocker spun into a decreasing radius spiral around the small bush of sage sheltering the birds and just before she got to the center, two chukar flushed, two guns fired, two chukar fell, and two good dogs retrieved two birds.

With our chukar achieved, we headed back toward the truck to plan our attack on our next quarry: Huns. Then our pointers both suddenly stopped in front of us halfway

covey off the steep hillside as Mindi and I approached, but we somehow managed to hit three of them between us! Now we had chukar and Huns on the strap, both of our species of partridge. Two down, two to go. We knew from yesterday’s hunt that shooting a pheasant down in the milo should not prove too difficult, but we had seen precious few quail in the past couple days.

Lunchtime was fast approaching, and the rules of the Highland Hills *grand slam* don’t allow mixing and matching bags across hunts nor swapping birds between hunters. Time was running out. As I hurried along through the tall grass, two more birds got up. I watched as one Hun flew off behind me and I had expected to let the other go, too, when I noticed it had flushed lower and faster from the same cover but in the opposite direction and that its flight pattern was different, with much faster wingbeats. I wheeled around as fast as I could swing and took a snap shot just before it ducked below the top of the tall grass tufts below me. I could only hope that I had connected my shot and that my suspicions were correct. After an anxious pause, Belle, our spaniel, came proudly out of the thicket below with a little quail in her mouth!

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back to the truck. This time, seeing the two dogs on point again seemed more of a distraction to our next mission than the usual excitement of a point. So, I quickly approached to flush another chukar and move on, but I discovered that I had underestimated the dogs’ cleverness. They were pointing Huns!

Usually, Hungarian partridges stay lower on the hillsides in the safety of big coveys closer to water, but this pair had strayed up top this morning onto the ridge, probably to dry off in the wind after the rains eased. They flushed wild on my foolish, hasty approach. One was quickly out of range away from me while the other flew right at my muzzle so close that a shot would have spoiled the bird, so I waited and watched as it turned just shy of my face and flew off low, right over the others and the dogs, leaving me startled and with no safe shot. Ahhh, Huns! Foiled again, despite our apparent good fortune of finding a couple of Huns up in chukar country. We resolved to move to lower elevations and look for more in their preferred hillside habitats.

Our next point was in thick, 5-foot-tall dry yellow grasses just above the rosy milo that carpeted the bottomlands along the creek. Five Huns flushed wild and hard from a small

On the way back to the lodge, a quick foray into a narrow draw choked with sagebrush next to the milo fields readily produced a rooster flushing from cover over a cocker spaniel and my 28-gauge shot pattern folded it. An easy retrieval of a gorgeous long-tailed rooster pheasant was unusually satisfying since it completed my four-species bag.

As we walked back uphill toward the lodge and through the orchards, enjoying their autumn display, I stopped to rest and hung my *grand slam* strap of four birds on an old cherry tree. Looking up at the Highland Hills lodge lit up on the hillside above by the midday sun, I thought about how fortunate I was that Dennis and Mindi had built this magnificent ranch and provided me, and countless others, the opportunity to hunt four of my favorite birds in one of upland hunting’s most beautiful and varied landscapes. 🍂

WOMEN WELCOME

Highland Hills owner Mindi McNab reloads, receives, and revels in the dog work on a partridge. With Mindi at the helm, Highland Hills is especially welcoming to women.

