

Dateline: Nebraska

Huntin' "Chikins" in Prime Habitat

- **Timeline:** Mid-September through October
- **Accommodations:** Nicely converted farmhouse
- **Food:** Homecooked country cuisine
- **Hunt:** Easy to moderate

There are not many places remaining where it is the rule that hunters can bag a limit of greater prairie chickens several days in a row. Once numbering in the millions, large concentrations of prairie chickens are now only found in isolated pockets of the great American prairie — the last frontier for these birds. "Chikins," as **James Brion of Prairie King Outfitters** refers to them, are truly trophy birds and capture the spirit of the Old West like no other game bird. Hunting these indig-

enous prairie grouse offers an adventure that is steeped in history and the mystique of the pioneer days.

Prairie King Outfitters is the new



wing shooting division of the famous Gobble and Grunt Outfitters that have been offering quality Merriam's turkey and white-tailed deer hunts for 17

years. **For his hunting operations, Brion has secured leases on 70,000 private acres in the northcentral portion of Nebraska around the towns of Spencer and O'Neil, an area watered by both the Missouri and Niobrara rivers.** This part of Nebraska is well known for its mixed bag hunting opportunities, and a variety of combination hunts are possible at Prairie King.

Chicken hunting is easy in that most of the walking is over flat ground in light native grass. This ease, combined with the advanced hunting strategies developed by Prairie King Outfitters, makes this a doable hunt even for retired guys. The secret is irrigation in the middle of the sandhills. Where there is irrigation, there is usually a crop like corn or beans with loads

(continued on page 2)

Dateline: Kansas

For Double-Barreled Action, Try a Do-It-Yourself Hunt for Both Pheasant and Waterfowl

- **Timetable:** Pheasants, Nov. 1 to Jan. 31; Waterfowl, Oct. 11 to Feb. 15
- **Accommodations:** One- to four-star small town motels, assorted chains and bed and breakfasts
- **Food:** Chain and private restaurants, assorted small town cafés
- **Hunt:** Pheasants, challenging; waterfowl, moderate to challenging

The 2007 pheasant harvest of about 900,000 cockbirds was the best in Kansas in 20 years. Thanks to a mild winter

and ideal nesting conditions, this year could be even better.

Some farmers and biologists in western Kansas are reporting more birds than in many decades. That's saying something since the state routinely rates in the top three in the nation for rooster production.

And that region with the most birds has hundreds of thousands of acres enrolled in the Kansas Dept. of Wildlife and Park's Walk-In Hunting Program.

With a three-month season and a liberal limit of four roosters per day, there's an amazing amount to offer hunters with good dogs, who'll invest time and leg muscle in hunts for wild birds.

They might also walk their way into

mixed bag hunts that include bobwhite quail and greater or lesser prairie chickens.

The central part of western Kansas

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of grasshoppers. Chickens flock to these areas, and the ranches that Brion leases contain 80 percent chickens and 20 percent sharptails. The reverse is more typically the case in the majority of the greater prairie chicken habitat in the sandhills.

If hunters want to take only chickens, they must develop the knack of quick flight identification. Chickens and sharptails appear similar in flight with intermittent gliding and clucking in between rapid wing beats. It is possible that covey rises can include both species of grouse. The prairie chicken's fantail is the simplest field mark to identify; sharpies have pointed, or "sharp" tails.

When the season opens in mid-September, the birds are still young and less wary. Close flushes are very common. Brion mentioned that before I arrived for the last three days of September, all of his chicken hunters had limited out every day. While the birds are naturally a bit more difficult to approach later in the season, their plumage is more fully developed by the middle of October. He recommends a late visit to hunters looking for mountable birds. Hunters can combine a hunt for chickens with a turkey hunt at that time.

Accommodations are very comfortable. **Prairie King's Redbird Lodge is a very nicely converted farmhouse with enough beds for a small group.** First-rate accommodations include a private room, wireless Internet, a hot shower and a place for dogs to rest. The lodge is filled with local mounts that are very impressive. Brion now has several such converted farm homes for hunting lodges. The dining features down-home, country cooking, just what guests expect at a family farm in the heartland. Since Brion also offers buffalo hunts, another possibility for a combo hunt, the lodge serves buffalo steaks, which were a great treat.

My guide Butch, who manages the Redbird, was the star of my adventure.



Brion learned long ago the importance of hiring guides who are lifetime hunters themselves. Butch knows the area and the habits of the greater prairie chicken like the back of his hand. I learned a ton about chicken hunting from him. Butch customized the hunt to meet both my and my dog's individual needs. At first, I was a bit thrown by a 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. window for the chicken hunt, but this is the best time to hunt, as they are loafing then. Being an early bird, I simply adjusted by exploring the thousand-acre wood around the Redbird and took a few late doves around the lodge. I also found myself imagining a return trip with my longbow, as I was amazed with the number of turkeys around this place.

As a bonus, Prairie King has a preserve license, raises pheasants and has many acres of CRP, allowing the grouse hunter to top off the day chasing released roosters. While the last of the doves remained when I was there at the end of September, readers might want to note that an earlier combination hunt with doves is also possible. Prairie dog shooting can also be added at no additional cost. For a three-day hunt, I took home half a dozen doves and nine chickens.

An annual Nebraska hunting license costs \$81 for a nonresident. Hunters must also purchase a \$16 habitat stamp.

The 2008 cost to hunters at Prairie King is \$500 per person per day. Traveling wing shooters fly into Sioux City, Iowa, rent their cars and drive 120 miles to the various lodges. People who book a hunt with Prairie King become members and can log on the website for driving directions, an equipment list and additional information.

Prairie King, James Brion, 406-363-0801, www.prairieking.net.

For online licenses: **www.ngpc.state.ne.us.**

—Scott Winston



For Bird Shooters & Waterfowlers

Publisher and Editor
Tod Sedgwick

Managing Editor
Tom Carney
tom-bhr@hughes.net

Senior Editor
John Gosselin
john@uplandalmanac.com

Senior Correspondent
Gary Kramer

Consulting Editor
Don Causey

Production/Advertising Manager
Kathy Thorne

Illustrations
Gordon Allen

Circulation 301-528-0011

Contributors
Steve Carpenteri Nick Sisley
Tom Huggler Patricia Stockdill
Gary Lewis Mel Toponce
Greg Morton Scott Winston

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Kansas ... (from page 1)

should be tops. The state's western tier or two of counties had drought and poor hatching. Northcentral Kansas will be spotty with fair to excellent populations.

Western Kansas holds much of the state's roughly one million acres of walk-in hunting lands. Leased from private landowners, it's paid for by license sales and federal excise taxes on hunting equipment. Nonresidents can hunt enrolled lands for free.

Most of the walk-in lands are blanketed in Conservation Reserve Program grasses from knee to waist high. Most are thick and beloved by pheasants looking for cover. **Wildlife and Parks provides an atlas of the lands that includes maps and GPS coordinates.**

The fields mostly range from 20 to 640 acres. Common sense says those away from major highways and towns, and along poor roads, get the least amount of hunting pressure.

Thick grass that borders grain stubble or is dotted with wild sunflowers holds more promise than an oasis of CRP surrounded by plowed ground for miles.

The best tactic is for a hunter or two to wade into the grass and follow good, close-working pointing or flushing dogs whose noses will lead to action.

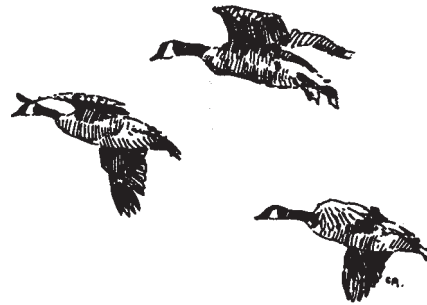
Stealth will help. That means parking out-of-sight, no slammed doors, yelling at dogs or shots taken at birds flushing out of range. Leave the 28-gauge at home and shoot a 12- or 20-gauge with magnum loads. These birds are tough.

This isn't a hunt for those with weak walking skills and stamina, or for out-of-control dogs that can get lost in the seas of tall grass.

And remember these 100-percent wild birds are totally unpredictable. One field might hold no birds and in the next, 200 might flush out of range. You might walk into another field and fill your entire limit from rock-solid points or on birds pushed up by a lab or springer. Fields in one township might hold scores of birds when fields in the next one might have few pheasants because of a localized hailstorm.

Be prepared for anything when the dogs get birdy. Western Kansas is about the only place in America where bobwhite quail numbers are steady or

improving. CRP fields aren't always their preferred habitat, but it's common to run into several coveys a day. The



scattered singles often hold tight and provide good dog work. Quail season runs Nov. 8 to Jan. 31.

Prairie chickens sometimes roost in the thick grass, though they often flush wild. **The further south and west you go in the state, the higher your chances the birds are lesser prairie chickens. Kansas is the only state where there's a season, and the birds are thriving.** The seasons are Nov. 15 to Jan.31 north of I-70 and Nov. 15 to Dec. 31 south of the highway.

Different times of the Kansas seasons hold different challenges and advantages. Early November holds naïve birds, but they might be spending their time in uncut corn and milo fields. December and January can offer a dog owner's best hunting if snow's on the ground. Good luck predicting the Kansas weather. If you're schedule's flexible, watch the extended forecasts.

Between Nov. 15 and Christmas is probably prime time. And just so you know, firearms deer season is Dec. 3-14. Many bird hunters like it because most local hunters are in tree stands rather than bird coverts. Others don't feel comfortable going afield knowing other hunters are out there with high-powered rifles. Most serious bird hunters I know hunt like nothing's going on.

Most small towns have a motel or two, but never expect anything fancy. Most allow dogs in the rooms and offer bird-cleaning facilities, but be sure to check. Bed and breakfasts keep popping up but quality varies.

Most cafés and restaurants offer down-home cooking with Midwestern themes. Check with a few locals to see if there's a special steak house around. Kansas has great beef.

Visitors who prefer to enlist the services of a quality guide on wild birds might consider Rick Tomlinson of Kansas Wildlife Adventures. His leases are in the heart of the places with the best pheasant populations. He also offers good waterfowling for those who want to mix things up.

Tomlinson caters to experienced hunters and guides all hunts himself. Groups aren't mixed. He has a clean and comfortable bunkhouse near his rural Great Bend home.

• • •

Though best known for its pheasant and quail, Kansas often also produces great waterfowling. **In fact, about 30 to 50 miles east of some prime pheasant country, waterfowl populations and water conditions point to some excellent potential at two legendary public wetlands.**

The Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira wetland systems have been officially deemed "Wetlands of International Importance" by biologists. Hunters have known of their importance since the days when market hunters shipped ducks and geese eastward by the trainload.

Both offer opportunities, either for do-it-yourself hunters or those with a reputable waterfowl guide.

The Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area is state-owned and covers about 20,000 central Kansas acres a few miles from Great Bend. It's in a unit whose duck seasons run Oct. 11 to Dec. 7 and Dec. 20 to Jan. 4.

The wetlands are in one large area that's divided into separate pools by dikes, with a sizable refuge area. Road access to the edge of the pools is pretty good. Most of the pools are big, but are usually kept about knee-deep.

Most of the pools are ringed with bulrushes or cattails, with clumps of vegetation scattered throughout the center of the pools. This year, there's plenty of food and water, so concealment is going to be a challenge for hunters. Those with warm chest waders might just kneel in the water.

Boats are allowed on most pools, though motors are not allowed on some. Outboard motors will work in some places.

Some hunters walk in pulling camouflaged canoes full of equipment so they can rig a quick blind from camo netting and a few poles. The wetland's bottom has a bit of silt but it's not terrible walking if you have decent balance.

Individual pools are usually closed to hunting when whooping cranes are in the immediate area. **White-fronted, Canada and snow geese utilize Cheyenne Bottoms in big numbers, along with a few flocks of sandhill cranes.**

The Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, located about 30 miles southeast of Great Bend, is operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It's more of a natural wetland system, with scattered shallow wetlands and a huge refuge in the center. The habitat this year appears excellent in many parts of the refuge. There is plenty of waterfowl food and plenty of cover for hiding hunters.

Boats are not allowed and you might have to hike a bit to access wetlands off the beaten path, where waterfowl feel comfortable.

Quivira is in a zone with duck seasons of Oct. 25 to Dec. 28, and Jan. 17-25.

Sandhill cranes are not legal to shoot at Quivira. The entire refuge is closed to hunting when whooping cranes are present.

Statewide goose seasons are Oct. 25-26 and Nov. 5 to Feb. 15 for Canada geese and snow geese. For white fronts it's Oct. 25-26 and Nov. 5 to Jan. 4 and Feb. 7-15. For hunters holding the special permits, sandhill cranes are fair game from Nov. 5 to Jan. 1 in most areas.

October through mid-November usually offers good mixed-bag shooting on puddle ducks at Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira. That may include gadwall, wigeon, green-winged teal, pintail, shovellers and a few mallards. With the first cold front in mid-November, mallards will begin making up more of the bag.

Goose populations usually start building around Nov. 1, with white fronts arriving first. Most of the Canadas are small and tough to hunt because they travel in huge flocks.

Quivira usually holds the most geese, with around a million not uncommon at the refuge. Cheyenne

Bottoms probably gets the nod for ducks but can offer some good hunting for decoying geese over water.

Both places take some scouting from the road with binoculars and some wading and walking to locate hot spots. Expect icing-up to be hit and miss beginning sometime in December.

Great Bend is an oil and ag-based mid-sized town with quite a few motels and restaurants. For local flavor, take in the



Sunday noon all-you-can-eat fried chicken and ham buffet on Main Street in tiny Hudson. After a hunt, Mo's, a delightful microbrewery and grill in Beaver, is affordable and good. And you can't miss Mo's, for it's the only business in town. It's closed Sunday through Tuesday. Mom's is a good bar and grill in Seward with a lot of local flavor. Four Legs Up, in Great Bend, has good barbeque.

Those wanting to go with good waterfowling guides have two quality options. Pheasant guide Rick Tomlinson also specializes in boat-based hunts on Cheyenne Bottoms. He lives a few miles from the area and scouts it daily. He's a likable, very good hunter/guide with success rates very high on ducks and he's quite successful at guiding for geese over water. Rick's not the best caller in the world, so bring your own calls if you're confident.

Also, Patternmaster Guide Service offers some of the best sandhill crane and goose hunts in the Midwest, largely in leased grain fields that are very well scouted. Good ducks hunts are also available.

In Kansas, annual nonresident permits are \$72.50, or a 24-hour waterfowl-only permit is \$27.50. A state waterfowl stamp is \$6.65. Of course, federal duck stamps are required for waterfowl hunting. Sandhill crane permit tests may be taken online.

Usually licenses valid for the remainder of 2008 and all of 2009 go on sale around Dec. 20. All hunters born on

or after July 1, 1957, must possess a hunter education card.

For info on bird hunting, population reports, the crane hunting permit test and to purchase licenses online: www.kdwp.state.ks.us.

For information about exemptions to and nonresident crash courses for the hunter education card as well as maps of CRP and walk-in lands: **Wildlife and Parks headquarters, 620-672-5911; Hays regional office, 785-628-8614; Dodge City regional office, 620-227-8609.**

For information on public wetlands: **Cheyenne Bottoms, 620-793-3066, www.cheyennebottoms.net; Quivira, 620-486-2393, www.fws.gov/quivira.** Before making the trip, be sure to call a day or two in advance to check on waterfowl populations and to make sure of which areas are open to hunting and ice-free.

For area guide services: **Kansas Wildlife Adventures, Rick Tomlinson, 620-617-4432; Patternmaster Guide Service, 620-872-3032.**

For lodging and other tourist information at Great Bend: www.visitgreatbend.com/.

—Hank Bailey

BHR Field Staff

The *Bird Hunting Report* is always looking for people to join its Field Staff, subscribers who go above and beyond the call by filing extensive reports on great places to hunt (or to avoid). These subscribers who file the reports found in our "Field Notes" section remain "on staff" for a year and receive a special *BHR* cap.

For this issue, **Curt Frisbie** returns to the team where he joins current members **Azam Khan, Wayne Latta, Tom Sweeny, Michael Tancredi, Robert L. Bean, David Rhoads and Kenneth Raessler.**

Reports need to be honest and balanced, indicating the bad as well as the good. So instead of just filing the usual "Hunt Report Form," why not join our Field Staff by submitting a complete account for "Field Notes" at *The Bird Hunting Report*, PO Box 328, Boyds, MD 20841; 240-599-7679 (fax); support@pnmsi.com.

Dateline: Eastern Ohio/Western Pennsylvania

Do-It-Yourself Grouse Possibilities

- **Timetable:** Ohio — Oct. 15 to Feb. 28; Pennsylvania — Dec. 15-23 and Dec. 26 to Jan. 24
- **Accommodations:** Local and chain hotels; private bed and breakfasts
- **Food:** Standard fast food or chain restaurants, local diners
- **Hunt:** Sometimes difficult walking

Don't misread Ohio's Midwest location — the Buckeye State is far more than flat farm country. The seemingly featureless countryside around Cincinnati and points north and west along the Interstate 71 corridor are not indicative of the great grouse country that awaits sportsmen in the southeastern two-thirds of the state.

Take state Route 32 east out of Cincinnati and watch as tabletop cornfields gradually give way to rolling hills and then serious mountains. From Zanesville south it's pretty much all up and down, and the "up" part is where hunters will find most of Ohio's best grouse hunting.

For starters, try **Shawnee State Forest** near Portsmouth. U.S. Route 52 from Cincinnati or Portsmouth provides access via state Route 125. Shawnee SF contains over 60,000 acres of wild lands on gated forestry roads. Most access is on foot, but the forest's well-maintained trails are easily traversed.

There are two good reasons (one natural, one not) that grouse hunting is excellent at Shawnee SF. Ongoing timber cutting creates new clear-cut areas annually, and cutover areas that are five to seven years old offer great bird hunting along the forest edges. Strips of inferior, mature trees left by loggers create more edge cover within the clear-cuts, and grouse will take advantage of it.

No less important is the fact that a major ice storm in 2003 leveled many portions of the state forest, another good thing for grouse. Nearly half of the forest (32,000 acres) was affected, along with an estimated 500,000 trees. The fallen trees and broken limbs opened vast areas of the southern half of the forest, and long-dormant seeds sprang to life, creating huge areas of low brush and

sapling cover that are now well supplied with grouse. Much of the damage occurred between forest Road 1 and forest Road 14, the area south of Route 125 and forest Road 2.

Hiking trails and forestry roads pro-



vide a way in to the interior of the forest, but most grouse will be found in the higher elevations and where dense cover falls away from the roads. Mackletree Road is a good place to start, or try the winding, twisting forestry roads above the old CCC camps on Route 125.

A good strategy is to walk the spines of ridges and hunt down to the next road or trail. (This is steep country and unique in that the forest detritus is a slippery mix of small, round rocks, leaves and sticks. Stout hiking shoes are a must here!) Check out any dense cover that borders the climax forest, and watch the trail ahead for birds seeking grit in the afternoon.

Hunters may access the forest off 65 miles of trails connected to Route 125. There are some private lots here and there, but the majority of the land on either side of the two-lane road is public.

Gas and supplies may be found in Portsmouth. Typical fast food dining and chain lodging may be found in Portsmouth, or **try the Shawnee State Park lodge for something a bit fancier (740-858-6621, www.xanterra.com)**. Cabins and motel-type rentals are available. More adventurous hunters may also camp in designated sites throughout the forest.

For maps and more info: **Shawnee State Forest office, 740-858-6685, www.ohiodnr.com/DNN/forests/Shawnee**.

Another great state forest that contains good grouse cover is **Cooper Hollow Wildlife Area** in Jackson County. The area has a good mix of low, brushy cover and mature forest.

This area covers over 5,000 acres Off U. S. Route 35 and county Road 2. The area office is on Joe Evans Road (Township Road 122). For more information: **Cooper Hollow Wildlife Area office, 740-682-7524; or try the Ohio Division of Wildlife's District Four office, 740-589-9930.**

Zaleski State Forest and the **Waterloo Wildlife Area** provide hunters with some 30,000 acres of forested habitat that includes some great grouse gunning. The forest is on state routes 56 and 278 in Vinton and Athens counties about an hour southeast of Columbus off state Route 33.

Zaleski features steep ridge-and-valley country with plenty of thick cover in various stages of succession. Expect to do some walking, but the birds are there!

For maps and more information: **state forest office, 740-596-5781 or the ODOV's Wildlife District Four office.**

Wayne National Forest covers some 160,000 acres and dominates most of the southeast corner of Ohio. A heady mix of old farms, clear-cuts, timber and prescribed burns makes this **one of the best places to go for grouse in the state.**

The forest is divided into three districts (the Athens, Ironton and Marietta districts) and all of them provide great fall and winter grouse hunting. Hiking trails abound throughout the forest, making access to the interior easy for hunters who are in shape for the trek.

The simplest approach is to pick a drainage and start walking — up or down, the grouse don't care. Good areas to consider are along state Route 595 in the Athens District; off state routes 260 and 821 in the Marietta District; and off state routes 78 and 555 in the Ironton Unit.

For more information: **Wayne National Forest office, 740-753-0101, www.fs.fed.us/r9/wayne/**.

All of the large and small towns within these state and national forests offer supplies, gas, food and lodging. The basic gas, water, snacks, etc. may be

found at any typical rural corner store. Motels, chain restaurants and mall-type stores (Wal-Mart, Kmart) may be found in the larger towns and cities.

I'd recommend stocking up with necessities in Columbus, Chillicothe, Jackson, Portsmouth or Zanesville because the best grouse hunting is likely to be far away from the nearest store.

An Ohio nonresident hunting license is \$125 for the season or \$40 for a three-day permit.

For more details, information, complete regulations, downloadable maps: **Ohio Division of Wildlife, www.ohiodnr.com or www.dnr.state.oh.us/wildlife.**

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Naturally, Ohio's great southeast region grouse hunting spills over into nearby southwestern Pennsylvania. In this state, where statistics are king, biologists reported a flush rate of 1.36 birds per hour in this region, slightly above the statewide average of 1.07 birds per hour.

A good place to go in this region is **Laurel Hill**, a long, high ridge that runs from Route 22 at the Indiana and Cambria county lines through Westmoreland and Somerset counties toward the West Virginia line.

Laurel Hill boasts a number of public

lands that include state parks and forests as well as state game lands, Pennsylvania's equivalent to a wildlife management area.

There are thousands of acres of public land open to hunting on the basic small game or standard hunting license. Hunters with an eye for grouse cover will have no problem finding a place to hunt. It would take several lifetimes to hit every possible grouse hideout, so there's no need to rush. Some hunters prefer to bull their way through the thick cover, but just as many hunters have equally good luck walking the many trails and paths that wind through these areas.

For starters, try **Gallitzin State Forest (814-472-1862)** between routes 403 and 22 in the northeast corner of Laurel Hill on the north side of the Conemaugh River. The forest's steep walls and riverside thickets provide great habitat for grouse. This is hand-over-hand country in some places with lots of laurel, vines and other dense, clinging cover, so be prepared to earn every bird!

Laurel Ridge State Park (412-455-3744) offers good hunting south of Seward and northeast of Morrelville. Try the area off Route 653 near Scullton.

State Game Lands No. 42 covers 15,000 acres south of Route 711 near

New Florence. Access to the upper end is off Route 1003 and T-962 and from Route 271 from Waterford. A number of roads and dirt lanes off routes 711 and 271 provide access to the public property.

Route 30 is the way to go when targeting the mid-section of Laurel Ridge. Laurel Ridge State Park and **Forbes State Forest (412-238-9533)** are also in this area, which may be accessed via Route 76 east of Route 381.

The southern sections of the forest may be accessed via Route 31 between Myersbrook and Bakersville.

As usual, the best grouse country is miles from civilization, so hunters are advised to pick up licenses, water, food and other necessities when passing through such towns as Pittsburgh, Kittanning, McKeesport, Greensburg or Connelville.

An adult season hunting license is \$101. A seven-day small game hunting license is \$31.

For more complete hunting info: **Pennsylvania Game Commission, www.pgc.state.pa.us.**

For additional travel information: **Pennsylvania Office of Tourism, 800-VISIT-PA.**

—Stephen D. Carpenteri

Subscriber Field Notes

It Rains Dove, Pigeons and Perdiz in Uruguay

Doves were falling out of the sky like raindrops. Nine of us were shooting that day, all in a line with our backs to a fence and tall trees. We were out in the open, clearly exposed, without any blinds or cover of any sort — each with just a stool to sit on and two cases of no. 8 shells at his feet.

A group of 50 doves flew right at us from right to left, most within range. Multiple shots rang out up and down the line. Birds fell everywhere. Feathers drifted on every breeze. Another group of 20 rockets zipped in, and behind them was another group of 40, and behind them as far as you could see were huge groups of doves and more doves, all headed back to the roost and many in

our general direction. The shooting was constant, and I was glad I had earplugs, given the deafening noise coming from



the shooters on my right and left.

We were in the Oriental Republic of Uruguay, guests of Los Gauchos Outfitters run by George Criddle, and

Black River Wing Shooting, a partnership of George and Jose Ignacio (Nacho) Portela, a Uruguayan from Montevideo.

We got to the field about 2:40 p.m., and the birds were already flying fairly consistently when we arrived. But as time wore on, the number of birds leaving the fields and water sources and heading to the roosts increased almost exponentially, and the gunfire intensified at the same rate. There were so many birds that when a hunter was not shooting, he was just reloading.

After shooting for what seemed like hours, I stopped to look at my watch since I knew we were scheduled to leave at 5 p.m. I was shocked to see that it was only 4:05. We had only been shooting one hour and 25 minutes and already I was

thinking — perhaps slightly hoping — it was time to leave. Shooters were stopping to take rests. Others were ordering more shells to be sent to their stools. All had big grins on their faces since we all knew it could not get any better than this.

This was a great first day for our four and one-half day hunt.

We arrived the previous evening at Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, and were driven to the historic Estancia La Paz where we were to stay.

La Paz is a treat in and of itself.

Richard Hughes from Liverpool, England, bought the property in 1857 and raised Durham cattle and farmed the property. A Belgian, Pierre Wyaux, bought the property several years ago and refurbished the original homestead and chapel, and he brought in Charolais cattle from France to raise while growing wheat. The property now boasts three sets of living quarters with multiple bedrooms and bathrooms; the 19th century Buen Pastor Chapel that is more like a small church; a country spa with a Jacuzzi, sauna and massage room; a landing strip for private planes; a pool and tennis court; a barn for farm equipment and a room with a capacity for 200 people to meet or party. La Paz offers horseback rides, canoeing on the Uruguay River, bird watching and even flights in ultralight aircraft. **One could not help but enjoy a stay here.**

On our first full day, the group of 11 hunters was split into a group of six to leave at 6:45 a.m. for pigeon shooting and a group of five to leave at 8:45 to go hunt perdiz. Perdiz was my bird of choice so I looked forward to it, even knowing that one does not get a lot of shooting. I told my hunting companion — my lovely wife, Gena — that we would be walking and hunting for about two hours and we should not expect to get more than about four birds apiece. When the five of us got to the field, we separated into two groups with Nacho being our guide and Luna our English setter. The wind was at our backs, so we walked to the other end of a flat field keeping Luna with us on a short chain. Upon reaching the other end of the field, Luna was let go so she could hunt into the wind. Luna was a great dog. She hunted short, obeyed whistle and hand signals and obviously loved her work. It was not long before she was on a

hard point. Gena and I picked up our pace, walking through and past Luna, keeping our eyes wide open for the flush. Perdiz have a bad habit of not standing still when a dog goes on point: they keep moving, running right or left or straight. There is no way to predict where they will flush, but you can often predict correctly that they will take off into the wind.



Suddenly, the perdiz took to the sky, getting to maximum speed in about two wing beats and flying low. My gun automatically went up to my cheek and fired without my even thinking about it. One perdiz hit the ground, and Luna was on it in seconds, making a perfect retrieve back to Nacho. Luna then started checking over the same area again since we all knew that perdiz usually travel in pairs. Within less than a minute, she pointed, and again we doubled our pace to walk through her and flush the bird. As usual, the flush came unexpectedly, and once again the perdiz was unable to outrun our no. 8 shot.

The field we were in contained very little cover. There was green vegetation in spots up to eight inches high, a lot of short weeds, but a lot of open spaces. It was amazing how a perdiz could hide in a field that I would normally describe as practically without cover. But on the two mornings we hunted perdiz, only once did I see a perdiz on the ground before it flushed.

The perdiz shoot was a real treat. Nice, cool winter weather caused us to wear light windbreakers or sweaters. Nice easy walks back and forth in flat fields. Watching excellent dog work makes the day special by itself.

What about those four birds each that I predicted? Not a chance. This was Uruguay and probably the best perdiz hunting in the world. Luna led us to 16 flushes and we put 13 birds on the ground. A really terrific day. The other group joined us, and those hunters had 14 perdiz in their bags making it an

excellent day for them as well.

The dove shooting and dove “raining” later that same day made our first hunting day one of the most memorable that I have ever had. The eight guys and two gals with us could really shoot. Even my bride, who admittedly would rather be playing golf, finally went through an entire case of shells teaching those dove that they ought not venture too close to her.

We always left the fields at 5 p.m. to give us time to get loaded in the vans for the 40-minute ride back to La Paz for a shower, libations and snacks before dinner. Dinner was at 8:15 with two waiters serving us water, wine and whatever else we needed or asked for. The food was good every night, but our favorite dish was the perdiz fresh from the morning’s hunt.

The pigeon shooters and perdiz shooters traded places the next morning, and it was my turn to get mad at the pigeons. We were up early and in our blind very shortly after daybreak. It seems that the pigeons are not very reliable when it comes to predicting where they will be each day. The only certainty was that we were more likely to find them early in the mornings than later. When we drove in to our spot, our camo blind was already set up, and there were two Mojo Doves in operation with wings flapping, and large pigeon decoys were spread around. Gena and I occupied one blind and our partners occupied a blind 50 yards to our right where we could each see all the action at the other location. The decoys worked well. We could see pigeons flying high to our left, and they would turn behind us and come straight in to the decoys. Others came in head-on and tried to alight on the ground right in front of us. Interspersed with the pigeons would be doves coming in singles, pairs or 10 at a time. But those birds coming close to us made two mistakes: they did not realize that there were four good shots in our bunch, and second, they were pigeons! While I have to admit that some did get away from us, there were not many that escaped if we still had shells in our guns.

I still have a mental picture of about 10 doves coming in right over the other blind, and those two hunters standing up and shooting, and five birds neatly collapsing and falling, all of this hap-

pening almost instantaneously, with all five in the air at once in various stages of coming to meet the ground. Another example of birds raining from the sky. It was a good morning with 31 pigeons and 78 doves in the bag.

After a good lunch and a short siesta, it was time to get back to the dove fields. Another repetition of day one except — although it is hard to believe — it was even better: more doves were flying, although they appeared to be higher and moving faster. Again, birds were raining down constantly. It was hard to look down the line of shooters and not see at least one dove folded up and headed toward

earth. Doves fell at our feet all afternoon.

Even before the 5 p.m. bell rang, we were ready to stop, all of us having shot probably twice as many shells as on the first day. This actual non-stop shooting takes a toll on your shoulder and neck, even with a 20-gauge gun. At some point, eyes glaze over and you know that you have done enough.

The next day was to be our last. We had time for a one-half day hunt. I elected to chase the perdiz again. Nacho again guided us and Luna again took the point. I think I was still feeling the effects of shooting so many shells the night before as I missed the first two birds. I picked up the

pace a little and then started hitting the little birds again, but after that a crash occurred. I did not like this and knew I was not at the top of my game, so I suggested we call it a day and head back to the estancia, a good ending to another great day with Black River Wing Shooting.

This is a trip you should put on your list of “must-dos.” The Uruguayan countryside is quite beautiful, staying at La Paz is a treat, the perdiz shooting is world class and the doves just won’t quit coming. Contact **Los Gauchos Outfitters, George Criddle, www.losgauchos.com for details.**

—Curt Frisbie

Briefly Noted

Last fall, the North Dakota wildlife agency hit its benchmark of enrolling 1 million acres into the PLOTS program, which pays landowners a small fee to open their land to hunters. Kreil said the state has lost about 30,000 acres of PLOTS since last year, but the number appears far larger than that. Of the 1 million acres in PLOTS, about 400,000 acres



were enrolled in the federal CRP program, which in North Dakota is being gutted by high commodity prices and low federal rental rates for landowners. Many of the highest quality PLOTS land for bird hunting were also CRP acres. Last year, North Dakota lost more than 400,000 acres of CRP.

CRP losses so far “are just the beginning,” Kreil said. Before last year, North Dakota had 3.2 million acres of CRP, but the current forecast calls for the state to lose another 1 million acres by 2012. “Last year’s losses don’t seem so bad, compared to what the dramatic changes you see coming down the road,” Kreil said.

Anyone who has hunted North Dakota in recent years knows how valuable the PLOTS program is.

Granted, not all PLOTS acres provided the best hunting habitat, in my experience, but these areas provided access to private lands and alleviated hunting pressure on state and federal lands. The PLOTS guide booklet, available at retail outlets throughout the state, is an invaluable resource to finding these lands, but this year’s guide warns hunters to do more “preseason homework than in previous years” because PLOTS lands are disappearing.

Don’t expect this year’s booklet to accurately reflect the changes, either. Kreil said many landowners were dropping out of the program as the booklet was being printed.

You’ll find other changes as well. Because of a drought in North Dakota, many landowners hayed their PLOTS and CRP lands, resulting in a poor habitat for fall hunting.

Drought conditions also are plaguing many wetlands in North Dakota. Some shallow potholes are dry, while deeper ones have pulled far away from the shoreline.

Kreil said North Dakota has been attracting far fewer waterfowl hunters than in past years, and with the drought, loss of PLOTS lands and high gas prices, he predicts even fewer nonresidents will be hunting North Dakota this year.

• • •

Texas — Two-fer Trips Along the Coast

Things to Do, Places to Go, New Developments

Illinois — New Developments for Waterfowlers

By Kathy Etling, *stltoday.com*:

—**Union County State Fish and Wildlife Area and Horseshoe Lake SFWA are now permit duck hunting areas.** The daily fee has been reduced to \$10 per person; hunters under the age of 16 hunt for free. Hunters may still take geese in addition to ducks.

—**Initial applications for Illinois public duck and goose hunting area permits must be made via the Internet,** free of charge, at www.dnr.state.il.us/duckgoose. The phone-in procedure remains the same. Paper applications no longer are available.

—**The maximum size for non-toxic shot in Illinois is now BBB.**

—**A 1,118-acre addition has been made to the original 227-acre Horton Bottoms Natural Area at Missouri’s Four Rivers CA in Vernon County.**

• • •

North Dakota — Hunting Lands Are Disappearing

By Chris Niskanen, *twincities.com*:

Nonresident hunters visiting North Dakota might find a lot of their favorite hunting areas are AWOL this year.

“It’s been a race by landowners to get the Private Lands Open To Sportsmen program (PLOTS) signs down,” said Randy Kreil, wildlife division chief for the North Dakota Game and Fish Dept. In other words, some landowners are bailing on the PLOTS program as soon as they can.

By David Sikes, *caller.com Corpus Christi Outdoors*:

Hunt or fish? There is no need to choose one activity over another.

The savvy and determined outdoors enthusiast can enjoy a double helping of Coastal Bend bounty during a single day from September through hunting season. **Most cast and blast opportunities begin with the start of dove season and run until the end of duck season in January.**

It's good fun to take advantage of these packages, which sometimes come at a bargain price. Each section of the Coastal Bend provides a different flavor to the experience.

During dove season, several outfitters couple a morning of fishing with an evening at a nearby dove patch. Some even offer turkey or quail hunts and fishing. **These packages seem to be more popular around the Laguna Madre, Baffin Bay, Premont and Falfurrias areas.**

The more established cast and blast package involves ducks and redfish. **David Nesloney, Jr., offers combination charters out of Rockport.** These might or might not include a night's stay in his lodge on the Lamar Peninsula. Either way, you'll launch from Goose Island State Park and take an airboat ride through the marshes and remote sloughs on the backside of San Jose Island or Matagorda Island.

The mix of waterfowl here usually includes wigeons, teal, mottled ducks, gadwalls and pintails along with several other varieties of ducks.

After a few hours of wing shooting, Rockport's cast and blast guides demonstrate the other advantage of airboats. **Nesloney brought us to a place where redfish are rarely bothered by anglers.** These tidal flats are so remote that on sunny winter mornings, fish feed in depths that cannot conceal their dorsal fins. This is the behavior of a fish that doesn't feel threatened.

The fishing part of these charters can be a wading and sight casting adventure with a fly rod or conventional gear. But if you'd prefer staying in the boat, most Rockport cast and blast guides can do that, too. Discuss the available options with them.

The concentration of outfits that

offer cast and blast charters is heaviest in and around Rockport. But fishing and hunting near Aransas Pass also makes for a quality experience. The Spears family's South Bay Charters is well established in this area. And often, the traveling distance required to reach birds and fish is not quite as great below Rockport.



South of the JFK Causeway, a handful of Laguna Madre/Baffin Bay guides offer combination packages. These outings promise better odds of catching big speckled trout. Aubrey Black, out of Riviera, has just begun taking advantage of the abundant duck population in his area.

I joined him and a group of Houston fellows who were down for a cast and blast outing. The days were unusually windy, which can be good for duck hunting and not so good for fishing Baffin Bay. Still, they caught trout up to 25 inches long while wading a waist-deep tide.

And the following morning we enjoyed a duck hunt that should bring them back. Out of a comfortable and spacious blind, we spotted numerous species and bagged seven varieties: a mottled duck, redheads, pintails, teal, canvasback, scaup and a bufflehead drake for somebody's wall.

By Barry St. Clair, *Athens Daily Review online*:

Matagorda is a sleepy little town still lacking the hustle and bustle of most tourist destinations on the Texas coast. Winter is one of the best times of the year to explore this small, quaint community and sample the local attractions. If excellent places to eat, sleep, hunt and fish sound attractive, the Matagorda area is the place to be for mid-winter, mid-coast fun.

Bed and breakfast establishments offer the down-home service unavailable in less inclusive hostels. **One I can**

recommend is the Stanley-Fisher House B & B and Lodge. Rik and Peggy Stanley do an excellent job of providing a quality experience for their guests. Their B & B is one of the most historic homes in Texas and was built by Samuel Fisher. Fisher was one of Stephen F. Austin's original 300 colonists and a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence from Mexico.

The refurbished house is just a short walk from downtown Matagorda and the beach. Rik and Peggy are well versed in the local attractions and history of the area and provide a quality experience with superior service.

Stanley-Fisher House, Rik and Peggy Stanley, 979-863-2920, www.stanley-fisher.com.

My friends and I spent a couple of nights with the Stanleys in mid-December. We were in Matagorda to take advantage of the duck, goose and bay fishing opportunities available nearby in this land of many outdoor resources. **Our itinerary called for a morning of duck hunting on Matagorda Bay, an afternoon of fishing for speckled trout and a pre-dawn excursion for geese in the surrounding rice fields.**

As with most outdoor plans there are two possibilities: what is planned and what happens. Our duck hunting guide called in sick the evening we arrived. We did our best to take our mind off the busted duck adventure by having an **excellent dinner at the Waterfront Restaurant (979-863-2520) located at Matagorda Harbor.**

In lieu of the duck hunt the following morning, one friend and I opted to fish the Matagorda Harbor from the shoreline. **The harbor offers good relief from the seemingly ever-present coastal breeze, and the marina and boat slips provide good cover for game fish that move in from the adjacent Inter-coastal canal.**

Our fishing excursion in the afternoon took us up the Colorado River, which empties into Matagorda Bay. We caught a variety of speckled trout, red fish and other non-game fish species. The wind was too strong to fish the bay so it was nice to have a protected area to explore and catch a few fish.

Our final adventure the next

morning was with **Randy Triplett and his Third Coast Outfitters Guide Service**. Randy is an expert waterfowl guide and outfitter for the Matagorda area.

There is nothing quite like lying in a cutover rice field while thousands of geese fly clamoring overhead. Despite the lack of wind and low clouds, which make geese more vulnerable to decoying and calling, our group managed a respectable harvest of eight speckled-

belly geese. Randy and Nick, his young assistant, lured them in with their knowledge of how to arrange a decoy spread and their expert calling techniques. Goose hunting is exciting business, and having an experienced local guide is the key to successful waterfowl hunting in unfamiliar territory. **Randy and Nick did an excellent job and we had geese to eat for the holidays.**

The mid-coast area of Texas is the

perfect spot to visit for a mid-winter getaway. There is much more to do than eat and sleep well, catch fish and hunt geese, but if all that is good, who needs anything else?

For more info: **Bay City Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-806-8333.**

Third Coast Outfitters Guide Service, Randy Triplett, 888-TX-GEESE, www.thirdcoastoutfitters.com.

Outfitter Critiques: the Good, the Bad, the Ugly

This section of The Bird Hunting Report is based entirely on subscriber-written Bird Hunting Report forms received by our offices. It is designed to provide first-hand opinions on what is happening in the field. Our policy at The Bird Hunting Report is as follows: We publish excerpts in the newsletter of Bird Hunting Reports as received, except in cases when booking agents or outfitters submit reports on hunts in which they have a financial stake or when we have reason to question whether there are ulterior financial or personal motives on the part of the person submitting the report. It goes without saying that a single report in this section should not be taken as the final word on an outfitter's competence. Many elements of a hunt are subjective. What is wrong for one hunter may be right for another. Moreover, personality conflicts often occur on hunts. It is obvious that hunters, as well as outfitters, can be the cause of a ruined hunt. We think all seasoned hunters can sort this out and make proper use of our Bird Hunting Report Program. Our pages are open for a rebuttal of equal length by any affected party.

Subscriber Gregory Callimanopulos sends the following report:

"My wife and I recently went on a game viewing and bird shooting safari with **Under the African Sky Safaris in South Africa**.

"The game viewing was conducted by way of open-air vehicles and on foot with an armed ranger, and we saw close up the 'big five' as well as ample plain game.

"The bird shooting took place on and about farmland for francolin over

German shorthaired pointers.

"The birds were ample and explosive on flush. Both pointers worked fine ground patterns, were stylish and staunch on point and enthusiastic retrievers.



"Francolin over pointers in this instance was as challenging as shooting red grouse over pointers in Scotland with the added bonus of firmer footing — sandy versus slippery, boggy ground — and great, sunny rather than wet weather.

"The birds flushed in coveys or in doubles and singles and in some instances were hard to pin to point, having a tendency to run.

"Throughout the safari, **the owners of Under the African Sky Safaris, Stephan and Ansie Van Der Walt, accompanied us and tried to make our stay, game viewing and bird shooting as comfortable, pleasant and safe as possible.** Additionally, Stephan proved a fine dog handler and Ansie proved to be an excellent photographer in addition to being a very knowledgeable naturalist.

"For the bird shooting, we stayed very comfortably and safe in a modernized wing of an old farmhouse, hosted very warmly by Wessel and Leonie Hattingh.

"We would start at dawn, break at midday, and resume in the afternoon. The cuisine was ample and delicious.

"Under the African Sky Safaris also offers driven guinea fowl shoots, high volume pigeon and dove shoots, waterfowling and sandgrouse shoots.

"There was no problem with clearing our guns in South Africa.

"In all, a super game viewing and bird shooting experience for us."

• • •

We recently received the following from **subscriber George I. Bridges, D.D.S.:**

"After reading the quail forecast in last month's issue, I felt the following information might be helpful.

"For nine years in a row, about a dozen of us have traveled to **Mexico to hunt with outfitter Galo Munoz.**

"Galo picks up and returns hunters to Cancun, easily accessible from most large cities non-stop. He has a wide selection of Benelli and Beretta shotguns, so don't bring one; no rental charge, either.

"The hunting is for the black-throated bobwhite (Yucatan quail) and takes place about a 3 1/2-hour drive west and north of Cancun near Rio Largartes and San Filipe on the north coast. Most rides to the field average 20–30 minutes.

"The food is delicious, quail most nights, seafood at lunch, whole snapper, etc.

"Accommodations are at a new hotel one block from the ocean or at the

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San Filipe Hotel right on the water.

"Morning hunts start about 6:15, lasting till 9:45 when the dew goes away and the heat comes up. Evening hunts are from 3:30 till dark when the moisture again rises. All of our group is over 60, so those hours fit us well. Galo has an excellent string of English pointers that point and find dead birds well in the knee- to ankle-high grass. The ground is flat but rocky so good boots are important.

"Generally, we take 10 to 12 hunters and shoot 100 to 120 birds in the morning, 80-plus in the afternoon for an aggregate limit of 20 per man.

"The great thing about Mexico is that it has been a consistent producer. These numbers are steady for the last nine years. No herbicides or pesticides and regular rains make for quality hunting year after year.

"We live in southwest Oklahoma. Our populations are up and down with

the lows getting lower. Try Mexico. You'll love it.

"Cost was \$2,595 for three days, all inclusive from Cancun. Shells were about \$100 for the three days plus appropriate tips.

"We do not use Trek International for this hunt but go direct to Galo."

Galo Munoz, 011-52-199-99470510; Trek International Safaris, 800-654-9915.

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Hunt Report Form

Outfitted or Guided Hunt
(please see other side for self-guided hunt)

Dear Subscriber: The Bird Hunting Report gets the word out on both good and bad hunts. Please share your recent experiences in the field by filling out this form. Your report is invaluable to fellow subscribers; it will help them decide where to hunt and with whom. If you want to order other subscribers' reports to plan your hunts, see the Hunt Report Service Box in your newsletter. Thank you!

Date of trip _____ to _____ 20__

Outfitter or Lodge/Preserve Operator _____

Address (please fill out completely, or give name/telephone number of booking agent – see below)

Street or box number _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ Telephone _____

Web site _____

Personal guide (if different from above) _____

Booking agent (if any) _____ Telephone _____

Place you hunted (State/Province/Country) _____

Specific area(s) _____ Abundant Average Scarce

Species sought _____ Abundant Average Scarce

_____ Abundant Average Scarce

_____ Abundant Average Scarce

Type of hunt (walk up, pit blind, etc.) _____

RATINGS

	<i>Outfitter/Operator</i>					<i>Personal Guide</i>			
Equipment condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	Knowledge of hunt area	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor
Accommodations	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	Hunting ability	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor
Cuisine	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	Communications	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor
Dog work	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	Personality/Attitude	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor

Airline _____ Please rate overall service, 1 to 10 (10 is highest) _____

YOUR SUMMARY REMARKS

Hunt highlights/special features _____

Problems (if any) _____

Would you recommend this trip to a friend? _____ Why or why not? _____

Cost of trip excluding air fare _____ Air fare _____

Cost of shells _____

PERSONAL DATA

Your name _____ Date of report _____

Your address _____

Telephone (optional) _____ E-mail _____

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Hunt Report Form

Self-Guided Hunt

(please see other side for outfitted hunt)

Dear Subscriber: The Bird Hunting Report gets the word out on both good and bad hunts. Please share your recent experiences in the field by filling out this form. Your report is invaluable to fellow subscribers; it will help them decide where to hunt and with whom. If you want to order other subscribers' reports to plan your hunts, see the Hunt Report Service Box in your newsletter. Thank you!

Date of trip _____ to _____ 20____

Place you hunted (State/Province/Country) _____

Specific area(s) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Abundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Scarce
Species sought _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Abundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Scarce
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Abundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Scarce
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Abundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Scarce

Type of hunt (walk up, pit blind, etc.) _____

Permits, licenses, etc., required _____

How obtained _____

Special gear needed (decoys, waders, etc.) _____

Dog requirement (if any) _____

Where you stayed _____

Address (Street or box #) _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ Telephone _____

Transportation in area _____

How and where arranged _____

Airline used (if any) _____ Please rate overall service, 1 to 10 (10 is highest) _____

Comment _____

Whom to contact to set up this hunt and phone number if available) _____

YOUR SUMMARY REMARKS

Hunt highlights/special features _____

Problems (if any) _____

Would you recommend this trip to a friend? _____ Why or why not? _____

Cost of trip excluding air fare _____ Air fare _____

PERSONAL DATA

Your name _____ Date of report _____

Your address _____

Telephone (optional) _____ E-mail _____

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