

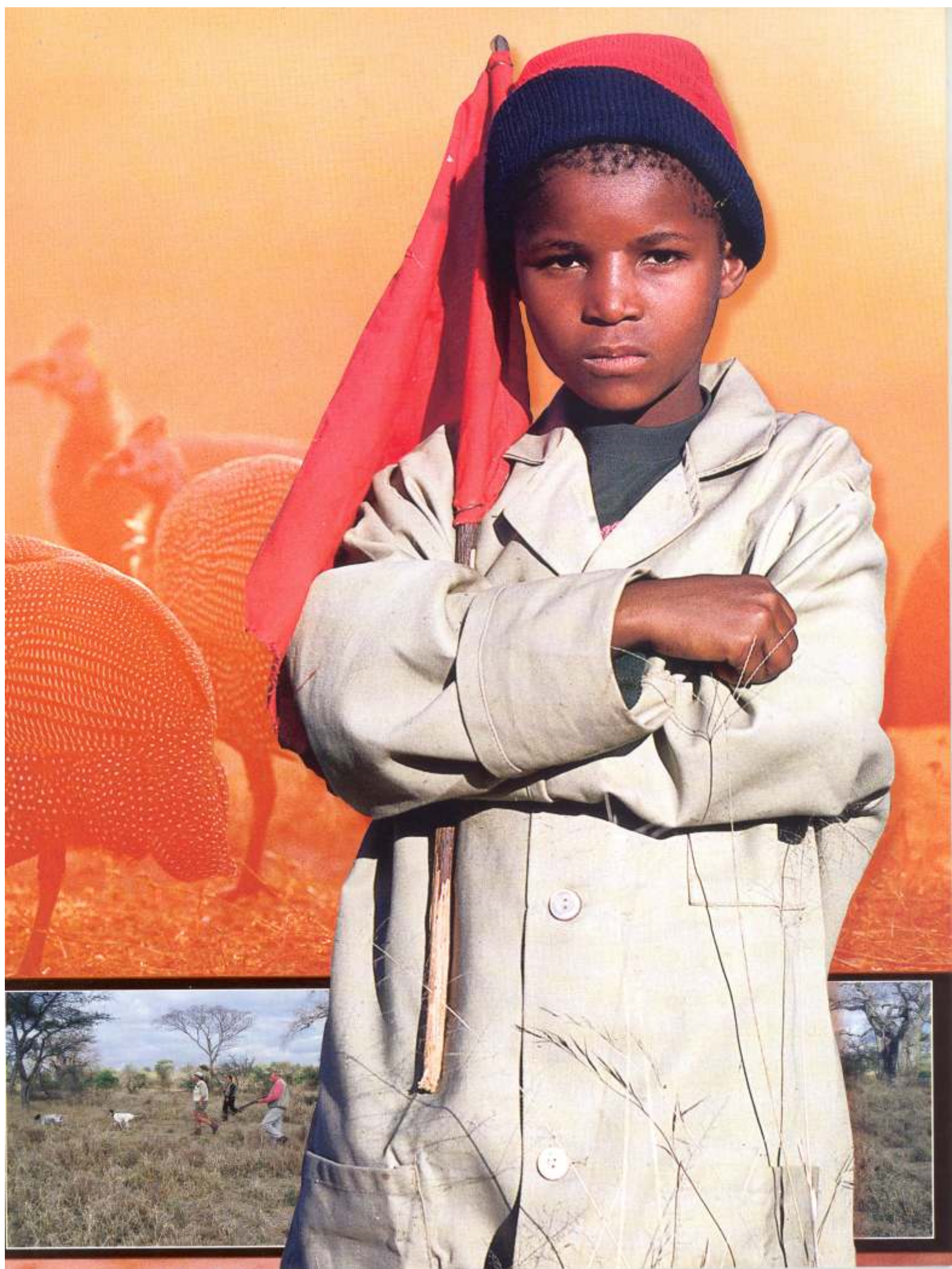
An African Odyssey

*An amazing eleven-day journey in pursuit
of Africa's most exciting gamebirds.*

Story & Photography by Gary Kramer



*Clockwise, from left:
White-faced whistling
ducks, shooting driven
guineas, bird boy and Labs
on hunt for Egyptian geese,
helmeted guineafowl,
young boy who served
as a beater and gunning
francolin behind pointers.*



As we left camp, the melodious call of cape turtle doves and the cackle of Swainson's francolin filled the air. Soon we came upon a herd of impala in the tall grass. Just beyond, a trio of giraffe stopped long enough to make sure we posed no threat, then continued stripping leaves from a tall acacia. As we left the bushveld and came to a narrow, reed-fringed pond,

our professional hunter pointed out a band of waterbuck. We moved closer and the herd bolted, racing through the shallows in a burst of spray. Our early morning sojourn, however, was not for impala or waterbuck. It was for guineafowl and francolin.

For centuries Africa has been the domain of the big game hunter. Formerly, bird-shooting was only an add-on for the hunter pursuing dangerous game, antelope and other big mammals. That has changed and today several outfitters offer full-fledged bird-shooting safaris.

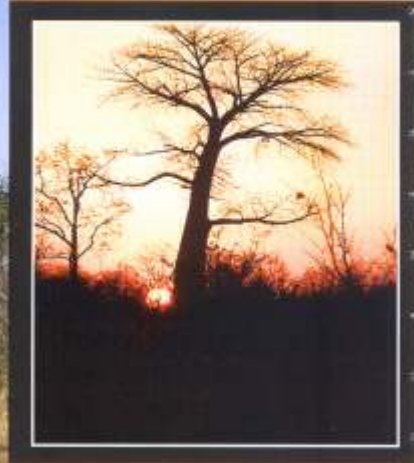
While bird shooting now takes place in many African

Our adventure began in Durban, South Africa where our host and PH Mark Haldane of Bird Hunters Africa met us at the airport. Then it was a two-hour drive to a rich agricultural region in KwaZulu-Natal Province and Baynesfield Camp. The next morning we found ourselves in a goose pit before dawn. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn we were in North Dakota waiting for Canada geese to leave their roosts and head for the field laden with waste corn.

It didn't take long before Mark said, "Here they come." But instead of the honking and chatter characteristic of geese back home, it was a combination of hisses and grunts that sounded nothing at all like geese. When the Egyptian geese were twenty-five yards out, with wings cupped and feet down, Mark shouted "Take 'em." I stood in the pit, found a target and pulled the trigger – a goose folded. Alan dropped one as well and we were off to a good start.

The next bird to decoy was a spur-winged goose that looked huge as it settled into the spread. Alan was on target and the big bird hit the ground with a resounding thump. With adult males weighing up to fifteen pounds and a namesake spur at the joint of the wing, these geese are splendid trophies.

By mid-morning the flight had subsided and after a quick count, Mark reported we



countries, the infrastructure to support it is best developed in South Africa and Botswana. In recent years PHs in these countries have given extra attention to their bird-shooting programs, leasing large tracts of land, obtaining pointers and retrievers, and training staff in the specific needs of wingshooters.

Additionally, superb fishing for little-known trout and largemouth bass fisheries and legendary angling for tigerfish make Africa an attractive fishing destination as well.

It was the promise of driven guineafowl, francolin over pointers, dove and pigeons as they flock to grainfields, ducks and geese over decoys, and tigerfish on the fly that brought Alan Sands and me back to Africa. It was Alan's third trip, my twentieth. I'll admit, I've been bitten hard by the Africa bug and find myself returning year after year.

had about a dozen birds per gun. We decided to call it a morning and

head to camp. On the way back we stopped to glass a trophy bushbuck feeding in a brushy draw and flushed a trio of francolin, reminders we were a long way from North Dakota. Soon-after we arrived at camp we sat down to an English breakfast of eggs, beef sausages, bacon, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms plus steaming cups of dark Kenyan coffee.

From Baynesfield, we traveled to Zulu Wings, Mark's lodge near the hamlet of Dundee. The region is a mosaic of agricultural lands and wild bush that supports a high diversity of gamebirds and waterfowl. The first shooting venue was for driven guineafowl on several grasslands sprinkled with acacias and wild figs.

As we stepped out of the van, Mark said, "Keep your voices

low . . . these guineas are cagey critters.” He then deployed the six gunners and positioned the beaters to entrap the birds. Once everyone was in place, Mark signaled the beaters to proceed.

At first not a bird was visible, then a shot rang out down the line. One shot turned into three, then six. I glanced down the line to shotguns raised and birds over the line. Then I turned to face the beaters and a guinea appeared high and to my left. As I shouldered my over/under, I saw ten birds heading my way. When the first bird passed overhead, I found a gray blur, blocked it out and fired. The guinea fell and hit the grass in a spray of feathers. More birds were approaching and I fired my second barrel – a clean miss.

Mesmerized by so many forms buzzing all around me, I almost forgot to reload, then came to my senses, breaking my double gun and dropping in two cartridges. I picked a target, fired again and a bird fell. The guineas were still coming as I reloaded, but it was over as quickly as it began and all that remained was the chanting of the beaters.

After the first drive, those not familiar with guineafowl gained a respect for the birds. Guineas are both admired and cursed by those who hunt them. They prefer to run, often flushing early, and don’t always fly in the direction you want them to. Because they’re smart and everything happens so fast, each

horizon for waterfowl. Mark tapped me on the shoulder just as I was pouring a cup of coffee and pointed toward to the east. “I think you’d better hold off on the coffee.” I answered with a nod and put down the thermos.

We crouched low in the blind while our bird boy steadied the trembling retriever. A dozen yellow-billed ducks slanted toward the decoys, then pulled up at the last minute and passed to our right. A wide circle brought them back into the wind and their final approach.

“Now,” Mark yelled, and I looked up to see the yellow-bills committed to the decoys – wings set and feet down. I picked a pair to the right, blocked out a bird that was putting on the brakes and pulled the trigger – the bird dropped. My second shot anchored a yellow-bill that was going vertical. Mark managed a bird as well and we were satisfied with round one.

The shooting continued at a steady pace and in two hours we had twenty-five between us – a mix of yellow-billed ducks, red-billed teal, white-faced whistling ducks and Egyptian geese. During the four days at Zulu Wings, we enjoyed driven guineafowl, decoying pigeons and waterfowl, francolin over pointers and dove-shooting in milo fields.

Right: A South African bird boy and beaters gather after a successful guineafowl drive on grasslands sprinkled with acacias and wild figs. Opposite: Dozens of guineas roar past the line of shooters. Ancient baobab stands as a silent sentinel to Africa’s storied hunting grounds.



and every bird becomes a hard-won trophy. At the end of the morning and several drives later, thirty guineas were on their way to the picking shed and ultimately the dinner table.

That afternoon we gunned rock pigeons flocking to a harvested cornfield. Our hand-dug pits were surrounded by pigeon decoys – some on the ground, others on poles plus dead pigeons propped on wires. Our 20-bores worked overtime as the birds came in – singles, doubles and flocks of up to twenty-five birds. The pigeons decoyed perfectly and many were shot as they fluttered to land among the plastic impostors. The hot-barreled action yielded about forty-five pigeons per shooter.

The next morning our destination was a small lake about twenty minutes from Zulu Wings. In the predawn darkness we stowed our gear and set about placing decoys near a large blind. Once everything was in order we settled in to watch the sunrise and scan the

The next leg of our safari took us by commercial aircraft from Johannesburg to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. There we were met by Dylan Holmes who runs the Botswana operation for Bird Hunters Africa. Our stop in Vic Falls was short and soon we were on the road, bound for Ichingo Lodge and for some excellent tiger-fishing. Over the next two hours we crossed the border from Zimbabwe into Botswana and then the Chobe River into Namibia.

Ichingo Lodge is on the banks of the Chobe near its confluence with the Zambezi River. An upscale operation, Ichingo has double-bedded East African style tents with en suite bathrooms. Access is by boat and you are only minutes from good fishing. It so happens that some of the best tiger-fishing is in June, July and August, which coincides with the bird-shooting season. We spent two days there, fishing and touring Chobe

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National Park where we saw elephants at point-blank range along with antelope, cape buffalo, hippos and giant crocs.

The first morning started with a standoff between a pod of hippos that decided against sharing their domain with a 16-foot aluminum boat, two fishermen and a guide. Their intention became crystal clear when our guide Alan Bonella fired up the outboard about the time I looked back at a hippo's gaping mouth heading in our direction. The unscheduled move took us to a set of rapids downstream.

"There are usually some good tigers in this run if we can get the flies deep enough," Alan said while dropping anchor at the head of the rapids. "Cast toward the center of the run." Alan Sands hooked the first tiger on a flashy streamer, then fought the eleven-pound fish for about ten minutes. Up close, tigers look like striped bass on steroids, complete with formidable sets of dentures. We landed at least a dozen each day, most in the three- to eight-pound range, and lost three times as many. Tigerfish are notorious for their hard mouths, spectacular jumps and ability to throw hooks.

From Ichingo, we took an hour's drive to Panda Matenga, which consisted of six tents covered with thatched roofs. The camp was carved out of native bush surrounded by fields of corn, sorghum and sunflower.

In most places, it's almost impossible for walking hunters to flush and shoot guineas, but at Panda Matenga it's the preferred method. First the birds are pushed out of the grainfields and into the bush, a mixture of acacias and grassland. The grass is heavy enough for the birds to hold and offers fast shooting at singles, doubles and small flocks.

The first morning was cold and clear as are most mornings in July and August, the winter months in southern Africa. Just out of camp we passed a small herd of roan antelope, then spooked a pair of ostriches. A mile down the road, Dylan

stopped and raised his binoculars. "Look in the center of the field," then passed the binos to me so I could watch a flock of at least 500 guineas running across a harvested sorghum field. He put the Land Cruiser in gear and punched it. About 200 yards from the nervous flock, they flushed and flew into the heavy cover.

"That's exactly what we need them to do," Dylan exclaimed.

Dylan assigned a bird boy to each of the six shooters, then we formed into a line along the road and began marching toward the birds. About 100 yards into the bush a pair of guineas flushed in front of John Fletcher off to my right. John shot once and his bird boy was on the guinea quicker than a seasoned Labrador retriever.

Within a few minutes about sixty birds flushed wild. Dylan stopped, then realigned us in the direction the birds flew. That accomplished, we continued moving through the tall grass, flushing birds as we walked. It was like classic pheasant shooting back home, but instead of gaudy roosters, it was wary guineas. By the end of the morning we tallied three dozen birds for six guns. The afternoons at Panda Matenga were spent walking up francolin and shooting doves over waterholes.

At the end of our eleven-day safari, I was satisfied that we had experienced some of the best and most varied bird-shooting anywhere, along with world-class tiger-fishing. Toward the end of the trip, hunting buddy Alan Sands asked me if I ever got tired of going to Africa. My answer was No! *WHS*

Planning Your Trip

Mark Haldane's Bird Hunters Africa offers the most diverse array of bird-shooting opportunities on the continent. Accommodations are first rate, the food excellent and service impeccable. Between May and October, hunting is offered at Baynesfield Camp and Zulu Wings Lodge in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa and in Botswana at Panda Matenga Camp, the Okavango Delta and Kalahari Desert. Bird Hunters Africa is booked by Trek International Safaris, 800-654-9915 or 904-273-7800; www.treksafaris.com.