

Dateline: Botswana

On-Site Report: This Bird Shoot Is A True African Safari

Editor's Note: A trip to the Dark Continent just wouldn't be complete without experiencing the romance of the African savannah and its free-ranging wildlife. Senior correspondent Gary Kramer says that's just what you'll get on this mixed-bag shoot.

I just returned from a bird shooting safari in Botswana with **Mark Haldane** of **Bird Hunters Africa**. Haldane is known for a popular shooting program he offers in the Dundee region of South Africa, an agricultural area where most of the shooting takes place in and around farm fields. But he recently expanded his operation over the northern border into Botswana, where the hunting is in the wild African bush. I first told you about this new venture back in the April issue (see page 6); now, after hunting in two of the new camps Haldane has established in Botswana, I can give you a first-hand report on this shoot.

The first leg of my trip started in Maun, Botswana, where I hopped on a short charter flight to the northeastern portion of the famed Okavango Delta. The delta is a vast tract of untamed wilderness roamed by herds of elephant, Cape buffalo, lions and cheetahs. The habitat is a mixture of bushveld, savanna and water courses charged by rains that fall in the Angolan Highlands and eventually flow to the delta. The shooting here is varied and includes guinea fowl, francolin, dove and waterfowl.

The guinea fowl and francolin shooting is driven; that is, a line of eight to 10 beaters drive the birds over the waiting guns. The shooting for francolin (mostly red-billed along with some crested and Swainson's) was as good as I've seen it anywhere on my 11 trips to Africa. The guinea fowl shooting was good, and as anyone who has hunted them knows, these wary birds would rather run than fly, often doubling back over the beaters. Haldane did not have his dogs on this trip, but he plans on bringing in some of his pointers from South Africa in the future. The dove shooting was for Cape turtle and laughing doves along with a few redeye

doves. Most of the dove shooting occurred near water, and while not what I consider hot barreled shooting, there were plenty of birds. Finally, there is some limited hunting for comb ducks and red-billed teal along with both Egyptian and spur-winged geese. This



is mostly pass shooting and is more of a diversion than a serious shoot.

What really makes this a unique shoot, however, is the exotic location and teaming wildlife. Generally, bird shooting in southern Africa takes place in areas where native habitats are mixed with farming areas, such as Haldane's shoot in Dundee. As a result, the hunt may be African, but the presence of a strong agricultural component sometimes makes you feel as if you are hunting in South Dakota. In contrast, the delta is completely wild, and the bird shooting is like nowhere else in Africa or the world for that matter. For instance, on the way to a shoot, we stopped to photograph a pack of wild dogs, then started our first drive for birds less than a mile from where we saw them. On another occasion, a herd of several hundred Cape buffalo impeded our progress and we had to wait until the herd crossed the road in front of us.

During my hunt in the delta, I stayed at the TsumTsum Camp - a well-appointed tent camp with *en suite* bathroom facilities and a permanent dining area. The food was exceptional, particularly when you consider that we were a 100 miles from the nearest store. Meals included well-prepared game, such as impala, buffalo, lechwe, guinea fowl, francolin and dove. The wines were quality South African reds and a few whites. The camp is unfenced, and one night we heard a pack of hyenas making

short order of a bush buck that wandered into camp and was killed and consumed only yards from the front flap of my tent!

From the delta, we traveled to a 260,000-acre ranch in the Ghansi District, a 40-minute charter flight from Maun in the Kalahari Desert. Since 1990, ranch owner Clive Eaton has been slowly phasing out cattle, removing interior fences and restocking the area with indigenous game. The restoration of the property is more than half way complete, and several species, including giraffe and rhino, have been reintroduced. Here the main draw is excellent dove and outstanding sandgrouse shooting at water holes in the morning and driven guinea fowl in the afternoon. The shooting lived up to expectations, with Burchell's (spotted) sandgrouse coming to water by the hundreds. It was sandgrouse shooting as described and popularized in the writings of Capstick and Ruark. At times, the birds were so thick one was tempted to flock shoot, which of course is considered unethical. The high birds on the edge of the flock were the most sporting and challenging. As for accommodations at the ranch, Eaton has built a comfortable tent camp with *en suite* bathroom facilities and a permanent dining room constructed of beautiful local stone.

While TsumTsum and the Eaton Ranch were operational this year, Haldane won't have his third shooting location up and running until next year. This camp will be near Lake Ngami, south of Maun. Lake Ngami is one of Africa's biological wonders. It is fed by waters that flow through the Delta, but its flooding is sporadic, occurring only every five to seven years. When it does flood, the bird life and waterfowl attracted to this shallow lake are unsurpassed in all of Africa. Even when it doesn't flood, the dove, sandgrouse, guinea fowl and francolin shooting is excellent. Haldane has high hopes for the shooting here, especially since the diamond mining operations that were diverting much of the water flowing past the delta to Ngami have either closed or severely curtailed production. This has allowed more water to flow to Ngami. When I left in early August, water

had already flowed through much of the delta and was only 20 to 25 kilometers from Ngami.

Construction on the Ngami Camp will start late this year and will be completed by June of 2002. The camp is a joint venture between my recent hosts, Mark Haldane and Clive Eaton, and long-time professional hunter Mark Kyriacou. The camp will be a permanent structure with individual chalets and will accommodate bird hunters from early July to late October. I hunted Ngami 10 years ago when the lake was dry and found the francolin, guinea fowl, dove and sandgrouse shooting outstanding. If it does flood, the upland bird shooting will remain excellent and the waterfowl shooting will be world class.

The only disappointing aspect about bird shooting in Botswana is the bird limits, which are ridiculously low, ranging from five guinea fowl to 15 doves daily. It has been brought to the attention of the government authorities that these limits are unrealistic and frankly unenforceable. As a result, game bird and waterfowl bag limits in Botswana and bird hunting in general are under review. The outcome is unknown, but the authorization of more realistic limits looks favorable. The government is starting to recognize that bird populations are high compared to the total number of birds harvested and that wingshooting is a growing sport that will bring additional revenue into the country.

While it's too late to book a hunt this year, it's not too early to start plan-

ning for next year. Haldane's Botswana hunts can be combined with his already popular South African bird safaris, or they can be booked separately. Prices are about \$550 per day. **Trek International Safaris (PO Box 1305, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL 32004; tel. 800-654-9915; web site: www.treksafaris.com)** represents Haldane in North America and has put several packages together that include airfare and transfers. Additionally, Haldane offers collector hunts for all 16 species of African waterfowl in Mozambique and South Africa and recently leased land near Baynsfield, South Africa, an area that arguably delivered some of the best goose shooting in all of Africa this past season.

- Gary Kramer

Dateline: Maine

How To Plan A Self-Guided Sea Duck Hunt

Editor's Note: If sea ducks are your passion, then Maine is the place to go, says correspondent Stephen D. Carpenter. Not only are the birds plentiful and the season and limits generous, but a self-guided hunter can easily organize a successful shoot in this state. Here's how...

One of the most dependable marshland gunning opportunities in the Northeast has not changed since market hunting was outlawed. Maine's coastal sea duck hunting is still the most liberal game in town, with long seasons, hefty bag limits and lots of opportunities for the self-guided waterfowler. A typical day on the coast will produce good shooting for eiders, oldsquaw, goldeneyes, black ducks, mallards and buffleheads. Geese are available too in protected bays and marshy areas near convenient inland feeding sites, such as cornfields, dairy farms, golf courses and other open areas. On a good day, accomplished shotgunners can take seven sea ducks, two Canada geese, five mergansers and four other ducks, for a total combined daily bag of 18 birds! If you happen to be in the right place at the right time, you can legally take another 15 snow geese.

There are lots of guides who can set you up on a hunt for these birds, but it's not that difficult to do it on your own. The most common method for taking

inshore diving ducks (primarily goldeneyes and buffleheads), plus mallards, black ducks and geese, is to select a protected bay or cove and go to work with the traditional decoy setup and a blind.



However, during the late season (December and January), you can actually sit on the open shore all day and take birds as they pass over the decoys without bothering with a blind. Just wear camouflaged clothing to match the dead grass shoreline colors and be sure to sit still until the birds are in range. The Maine coast is open to such hunting under the general rule that you don't discharge firearms within 100 yards of a dwelling without the permission of the landowner. But coastal property rights include ownership of everything down to the low-tide mark, so hunters must seek the landowner's permission to trespass for the

purpose of duck hunting. Fortunately, most long-time coastal residents are familiar with Maine's coastal duck-hunting traditions and will gladly allow responsible hunters to access their marshland properties. Otherwise, hunters may anchor anywhere beyond the low-tide mark while hunting from a boat or blind.

Another technique is to access the offshore ledges and islands to target eiders, oldsquaw, scoters and sea ducks. These ledges may be a few yards offshore, or they can be a mile or more out. A word of warning is due here, as hunting these ledges can be dangerous. Hunters must be cautious because a ledge or island that's high and dry at low tide can be covered with water at high tide, creating some interesting situations for hunters using lots of decoys and who forget to properly tie off their boats! Strandings occur annually, so plan ahead using local tide information, be prepared and know when to quit!

Fortunately, it is not necessary to motor miles offshore to enjoy great Maine sea duck hunting. There are countless small islands and ledges within sight of shore that are open to hunting and attract plenty of birds all season long. Most of these low-tide hotspots can be reached with a seaworthy boat of at least 16 feet equipped with an eight to 10-horsepower motor. If you don't have a boat, local lobstermen or fishermen will act as transporters and