

Wings over Africa

An experienced wingshooter reveals his favorite places, outfitters and species to hunt when planning a bird-shooting trip to southern Africa

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GARY KRAMER

First light in the Okavango Delta is almost surreal—a heavy mist rises among the papyrus while the melodious call of Cape turtle doves and the cackle of red-billed francolin fill the air.

Not far from camp we come upon a herd of Cape buffalo in the tall grass. Just beyond, a trio of giraffe stop long enough to make sure we pose no threat, then continue stripping the leaves from a mopani tree. As we break out of the bushveld to an expanse of water and reeds, our professional hunter points out a band of red lechwe. We move closer and the herd bolts, racing through the shallows in a burst of spray. However, the early morning sojourn is not for buffalo or greater kudu, it is for sandgrouse and doves.

For decades, Africa has been the exclusive domain of the big game hunter. Formerly, bird

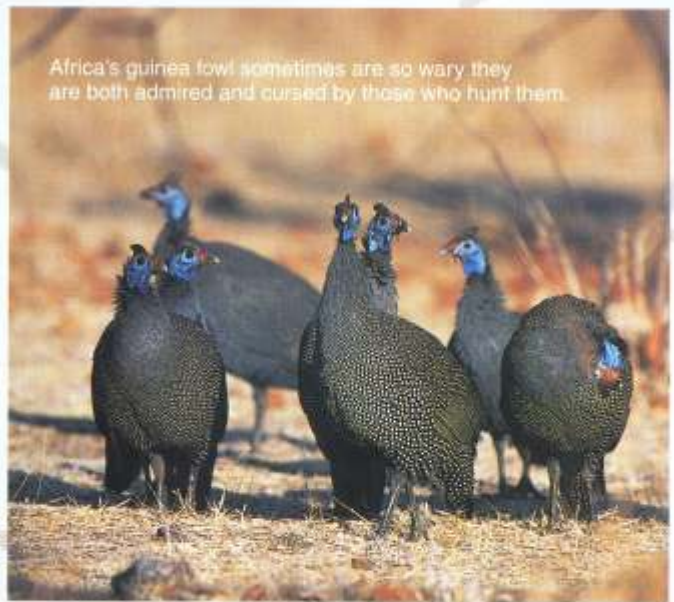
shooting was an infrequent event. When practiced, it was often an add-on to big game hunting—either after the game animals were accounted for or as an afternoon diversion. That has changed, and today several outfitters have developed full-fledged bird-shooting operations.

While bird shooting takes place in virtually all African countries to some degree, the infrastructure to support it is best developed in South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. All three countries have professional hunters who guide for both big game and birds. However, in recent years many of them have given extra attention to developing their bird-shooting programs. They have leased large tracts of land for bird shooting, obtained well-trained pointers and retrievers, hired adequate staff and, most of all, are bird-shooting aficionados themselves.

South Africa

One of my memorable hunts in South Africa was in the company of PH Mark Haldane at a small lake near the KwaZulu-Natal hamlet of Dundee. In the pre-dawn darkness, we stowed our gear in a shoreline blind made of reeds and set about placing the decoys strategically in front of the blind. Once everything was in order, we settled in to watch the sunrise and scan the horizon for birds. I was about to pour my first cup of hot coffee when Mark tapped me on the shoulder and pointed toward the horizon. At first I noticed only a dark blemish against the rising sun. But as the distant forms winged closer, the blemish took on the familiar form of wild fowl. We crouched low in the blind while our bird boy steadied the trembling retriever, which sensed the impending action. Six yellow-billed ducks pulled their wings back and dove swiftly toward the decoys—then pulled up at the last minute to pass overhead. A wide circle and steep bank brought them back into the wind and their final approach to the blocks.

The moment of truth came with the command "now," and I looked up to see the yellow-bills committed to the decoys—wings cupped and feet down. I picked a pair to the right and swung past a bird that was putting on the brakes to land. A single report from my over/under anchored the bird. My second shot was intended for a yellow-bill that was going vertical. However, when I pulled the trigger the bird kept on climbing and all I could do was watch it fly away. Mark managed a nice double. We were very satisfied with round one. That morning was one of the best waterfowl hunts I have experienced anywhere. In just over two hours we had 40 birds between us, a mixture of yellow-



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billed ducks, red-billed teal, white-faced whistling ducks, southern pochard and a bonus Egyptian goose.

In addition to fine waterfowling, South Africa offers the most diverse bird shooting in all of Africa. In KwaZulu-Natal we experienced outstanding shooting for three species of doves and rock pigeons in harvested corn and milo files and top-notch francolin shooting over pointers. Then add driven guinea fowl shooting, and we knew we were in a bird shooter's paradise!

Due to the varied habitat, South Africa supports 11 varieties of francolin. Some hold well for a dog, while others would rather run than fly, which makes them difficult to hunt unless they are found in heavy cover or are driven.

One species stands out among the others as far as sporting qualities go—the greywing francolin, or partridge, as it is referred to by the locals. Greywings are birds of the highlands and are found in the mountain ranges from the Western Cape to the Orange Free State. They are one of the few game birds South African hunters pursue with regularity and are held in high esteem, much like the red grouse of Scotland or the red-legged partridge of Spain. They are covey birds about the size of a Hungarian partridge and hold well for a dog. Last July, I joined PH Mike Ross in the Cape for a few days of greywing shooting.

We started on a high plateau and left the Land Rover, following the dogs into the wind. Mike and his partner ran two English pointers that knew the terrain well. About 10 minutes from the vehicle, one of the dogs wheeled around and froze, head up and tail erect. The second dog moved in and backed the first. Mike motioned us to move up.

A few steps before my partner reached the pointers, a single gray bombshell exploded from the rocks and grass. Suddenly, six more birds flushed—four out in front and two to my right. I swung hard right and picked out the last bird. In a puff of feathers the bird fell dead. My partner worked on the birds that flushed straight away and managed a bird as well. A couple of minutes later we were admiring our first greywing partridges ever. The hunt continued, with the terrain changing from flat to steep to rolling as we followed the dogs and found birds.

By 10 a.m. we had our six-bird limits and headed back to the Land Rover.

In my mind, greywing shooting is similar to Hungarian partridge hunting. However, the birds hold better than Huns and are found in slightly rougher habitat. The area reminded me of southeast Oregon or the benches along



Geese are called in by a local expert employed by the outfitter.

the Snake River in Idaho. Now I can see why grey-wings are revered by South African bird shooters.

Zimbabwe

While Zimbabwe delivers quality francolin, dove, pigeon and water-fowl hunting, nowhere in Africa have I seen as many guinea fowl and experienced shooting as consistent. My most recent hunt was with PH Steve Seward in the Chinhoyi region southwest of Harare. On the second morning of a five-day bird shoot, we left the camp as the sun was rising above the distant hills. Our first shooting venue was a driven shoot for guinea fowl. If you have ever hunted guineas, you know that while they look like barnyard guinea fowl they act totally differently. In fact, they are so wary, they are both admired and cursed by those who hunt them. I can tell you from experience there is nothing easy about guineas. They prefer to run rather than fly, seldom hold for a dog and generally flush well out of range. As a result, shooting driven birds is the most productive and popular method of hunting guineas in Africa.

Six or eight native beaters begin the drive up to half a mile from a line of waiting guns. The beaters move through the brush whooping and hollering and push the birds over the shooters. Some birds escape from the sides and others fly back over the beaters; however, most birds fly high, hard and fast over the guns. It is not unlike pushing pheasants to the end of a cornfield. This method may sound easy, but because the guineas are strong fliers and often flush at the last second, it's challenging shooting. Further, drives in Africa are unique among all the driven bird shooting in the world. Where can else can the beaters drive kudu, duiker, impala or the occasional jackal past the shooters?

The first flock was spotted out in the open, and as we approached, the birds ran for cover, lodging themselves deep in the tall grass and scrub. Steve stationed the shooters and directed the beaters with the skill of a military field commander. I was stationed next to a tangle of brush to guard the left flank. Soon, the beaters could be heard shouting and chanting as they moved through the bushveld.

It wasn't long until I spotted a half-dozen birds running toward me—they were more intent on what was behind them than in front of them. Suddenly, two of the birds flushed, and in seconds 30 guineas were heading my way. By the



Because guinea prefer to run instead of fly, driving them is the most productive hunting method.

thud. I heard the beaters yell that birds were coming, but by the time I loaded two more rounds in my over/under they were too far away for a shot. It was over as quickly as it started. There were five shooters and we managed nine birds—not bad for 30 minutes of hunting. That morning, we completed four drives and ended up with an even two dozen birds.

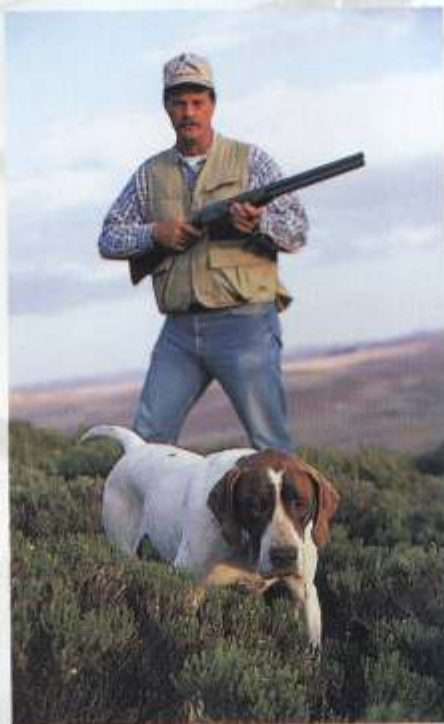
Botswana

One of the finest bird-shooting operations in Botswana is owned by well-known PH Mark Kyriacou. His Lake Nigami Camp southwest of Maun is run by PH Glenn Munger, and the shooting includes francolin, guinea fowl, doves and my favorite African game bird—the sandgrouse. Sandgrouse are probably the most famous game birds in Africa and are hunted at water holes or by walking them up in the brush. In my opinion, and that of other longtime African wing-shooters like Peter Hathaway Capstick and Col. Charles Askins, water hole shooting is the classic format.

Sandgrouse come to water on a regular basis—some species in the morning and others in the evening. The first time I hunted sandgrouse, our PH said the birds would arrive at 8:30 a.m. They arrived at 8:32. Since that time, I have been amazed at their punctuality.

In Botswana, Burchell's or spotted sandgrouse come to water in the morning while double-banded sandgrouse show up at sunset. On a recent hunt, we arrived at the selected water hole at 8 a.m. to warm up on doves, with the sandgrouse due at 9. At 8:57, the first sandgrouse alerted us with their chattering call as they dove toward the water hole. The guns began to respond to the birds, which swooped in from amazing heights. The first singles and doubles were followed by small bunches, then large flocks numbering 50 or 60. The sky soon swarmed with sandgrouse. Some birds actually made it through the gauntlet of lead to the water, where they drank for a few seconds while standing belly deep in the cool liquid before

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Pointers are used regularly during hunts for francolin and greywing partridge.

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From left: Natal, Swainson's and Shelly's francolin from South Africa.



departing for the desert and their feeding areas, which were as distant as 50 miles.

As the flocks grew in size, it became difficult not to shoot into the tight groups and make multiple kills. Seasoned sandgrouse shooters soon learn that the true sport is taking fast-flying singles and doubles, often from towering heights—not flock shooting.

Trailing birds and those on the edges of the flock are the targets of skillful shooters. Just as quickly as the birds arrived, they departed—yet the hour-and-a-half hunt was among the most exciting wing-shooting events I have ever experienced.

Another hot-barreled shoot at the Nigami Camp is for doves as they flock to water in the late afternoon. The hunt takes place in the dry lake bed that was once Lake Nigami. Here, the native cattle and goat herders dig wells to provide water to their livestock. Upon arrival, the hunters—each with one or two bird boys to retrieve—are stationed near one of the water sources. The wells are protected from unregulated livestock use by fences of thornbush. Inside the thornbush fence are open wells and water troughs to quench the thirst of both livestock and doves.

The lack of water in the surrounding areas makes the wells magnets for doves and draws birds from far and wide. The birds literally flock to water, and at times there are so many birds in the air it's difficult to pick a single target. The most common species are Cape turtle doves, a bird larger than our mourning dove and pale grey in general appearance with a distinctive black ring on the back of the neck. Other species include African mourning doves and palm or laughing doves.

In a typical afternoon, it is not uncommon to shoot 10 boxes of shells, with the size of the bag dependent on the ability of the shooter!

No matter where you decide to sample the wing shooting in southern Africa, it promises to be world-class. It will also provide the opportunity to step back to a time when game bird and waterfowl populations were abundant, limits liberal and hunting areas virtually deserted. But as many hunters already know, a day in the African bush is a unique adventure that will be remembered long after others have been forgotten. 