

BIRD HUNTING ADVENTURES In South Africa

BY CURTIS L. FRISBIE JR.

When we told our hosts Joe and Nicole da Silva, the owners of Cape Town Hunting Safaris, that the primary goal of our trip was to chase a large variety of birds, we did not realize that the “chase” part of our request would be taken quite literally. Around Cape Town, the majority of the huntable birds are guinea fowl and francolin but also some of the several varieties of geese. Joe also told us that the largest quantities of pigeons and doves were actually located considerably further north near the city of Bloemfontein.

We were going to use Joe’s shotguns, so at the Cape Town airport, we were promptly whisked through customs. Driving out of the city, we passed miles and miles of flat-as-a-pancake land to gently rolling hills – most of which is farmed. Many flocks of guinea fowl pecked and slowly moved about in the wheat fields, sometimes only 10 to 12 in a group and sometimes over 50 massed together looking for food in the bare, harvested fields. Dozens of ostriches ran wild but ignored us.



I REALIZED I WAS SHOOTING BEHIND THE BIRDS, MADE MY MENTAL CORRECTIONS AND THEN STARTED CONNECTING. **SHOOT IN FRONT OF THEM, NOT AT THEM.**

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Twenty-five minutes later, we arrived at the Rondekuil Hotel in Durbanville, which was unlike any “hotel” we had ever seen – several round cottages with thatched roofs seemingly in the middle of nowhere. It was surrounded by more bare farm country, sometimes enigmatically referred to as wineland, with nothing but plowed ground and views of small mountains in every direction. Our cottage had three bedrooms and two baths, full kitchen, living room and dining table, and an upstairs with more beds available.

Joe presented us with a .20 gauge SKB over/under for Gená and a .12 gauge Beretta over/under for me. Providing each of us with a box of 7-1/2 shells, we took off scouring the countryside for guinea fowl. It was not long before we spied a flock entering a dry river bed that led to a small forested area well over 200 yards distant. Driving in a very bare plowed wheat field, Joe skirted far around the birds to a point in the distant grove of trees where there was an old, dry, riverbed. We hid behind some tall bushes at the bottom of the naturally undulating ground, and Joe drove back around, gently rousting them in our direction.

Suddenly, without warning, about 20 birds took to the air, a few coming generally in our direction. I shot and one fell to the ground, then I swung on another that was running. The second shot barely pricked the runner. It got its stride back and galloped away into the distance. Gená was so surprised she did not have time to take a shot. It was all over within seconds. Loading fast enough and loosing another volley of shot was impossible. The remaining guineas – maybe 30 or 40 in total – were spied sprinting away from us and up the far side of the dry river bed, never taking to the air, trusting their strong legs rather than their wings.

A search for the downed bird then ensued but produced nothing. Not even a wayward feather! At the next spot, we repeated this maneuver. When Joe flushed them, the very intelligent birds acted like they had seen this movie before and took off in a totally unexpected direction, way out of range.

We loaded up again. At the next spot, we went for a walk in a lightly wooded area where we could get a clear shot. A small group got up way in front of us, out of range, but Gená saw where they landed so we headed in that direction. The next flush was unexpected – aren't they all? Gená and I shot together and our volley grazed the rising bird and the second volley brought it to the ground. Walking rapidly to the spot of the downed bird, we found lots of feathers but again, no bird! I wished for a bird dog! Once more, the search yielded exactly nothing, so we again moved on for a really long walk which only produced birds getting up far in front of us and out of range. We tried one more trick of laying in the undulations of the field while Joe tried to herd our feathered friends past us. No luck. Time to eat and rest.

The early-evening hunt on that first day was for spur-winged goose. A hide was built facing toward a water tank about 40 yards distant. Two guides were in my blind, one to do the calling and the other to help keep a lookout. Decoys were put in place. I was given



A bird in the hand ...

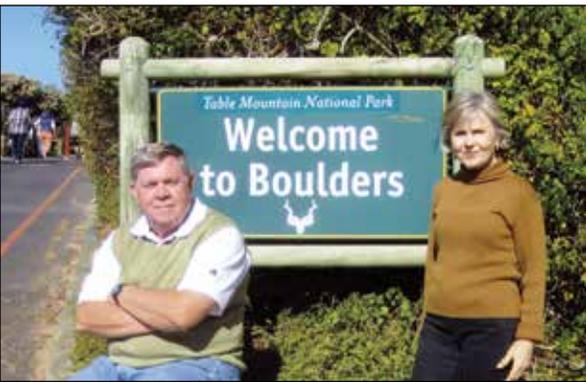
.12 gauge AAA shells (like BBs), and we hunkered in to wait. Nothing stirred until it started getting hard to see in the distance. Then, by twos and threes, the geese started their fast attack runs, speedy but without noise, coming from in front of us to the north and behind us from the south. Everything was happening in the last 20 minutes before it got pitch dark. Wings whooshed overhead with the birds in range for only a split second. Tall reeds near the water made night vision even more difficult. My few first shots were well behind the darting wings. Once I figured out the flight pattern, and right before the curtain of darkness enveloped us, I took one final shot and heard the crash of a heavy bird into the reeds and a resounding splash. I finally got one! It was an end to a good first day with Joe da Silva.

On day two, we set up on a dry river bed while Joe again tasked to run the birds toward us. But the guineas continued to fail to cooperate. We did find the guinea that I shot the day before. Apparently, a caracal had dragged it off and eaten it after we left the day before.

Shortly after that, two francolins were then sighted ducking into tall weeds near some running water. Gená and I followed in the weeds where they had good cover. We were sneaking along when one unlucky francolin – who had obviously seen me shoot – took to the sky with little concern. Shots were fired and, remarkably, it was down. But, wouldn't you know it, we could not find it either! This time we fetched Liege, a hunting dog, and got it on the trail. She found the bird, but it had moved almost 100 yards away. This South African bird hunting



Gená and author, with a fair catch after making necessary corrections



Plenty of beautiful sightseeing in the area

was turning out to be a lot harder than we first imagined.

The next day was for sightseeing. Our destination was the famous Table Mountain, 1,085 meters in height, seen by every ship that sailed around the southern tip of Africa. It is one of the seven wonders of the natural world and is a “must see” for any visitor to Cape Town. A cable car took us to the top as it continually rotated so everyone could see in every direction.

The fourth day, Saturday, our objective was to take some Cape spurfowl, another type of francolin. Of course, we had to get the truck stuck on the property in the soft sand. It was necessary to get a tractor to pull us out when the

axles were covered by sand. Afterward, we chased more francolin and got one fairly early in the day.

On Sunday, it was time for all-day wine tasting and shopping at several area wineries. We later drove in the rain to the southwestern-most tip of South Africa – Cape Point, the place where the Atlantic meets the Indian Ocean. One could easily imagine all the ships over the centuries that had foundered and wrecked there in the treacherous waters. That evening, one or two bottles of the recently acquired wine made a perfect ending to a perfect day.

Our sixth day was spent traveling through wine country to Brandfort near Bloemfontein for bird hunting. Almost 12 hours later, we arrived at Carel and Carina Coetzer’s beautiful home. Tired of sitting so long, the offer of a refreshing drink (or two) and a delicious dinner was immediately accepted.

The next day, we were up at 5:30 a.m. with rock pigeons as our quarry. I was looking forward to shouldering my shotgun, and doing it many times. When we got out, the pigeons were busy zipping around, looking for food. Because there were so many birds, it was going to be an outstanding shoot. I quickly got into my place with Gená stationed nearby. My watch said 7 a.m. almost to the minute. In no time, we rose and fired – and missed. We rose and fired again – and missed again. This result was repeated over and over until I knew we were jinxed. After a half-hour, I had a total of three birds in hand, and only 10 by 8 a.m. It took a while to realize that those large birds were flying much faster than they appeared. I realized I was shooting behind the birds, made my mental corrections and then started connecting. *Shoot in front of them, not at them.* By lunch, I had 61 in the bag.

After eating, there was no time for a nap as the sky began to darken with thunder clouds. We hurried back to the pigeon field and 19 more feathered friends fell to my shotgun before the sky opened up. We moved and decided to focus on doves the rest of the day. By now, Joe had been helping Gená and she was starting to do well and

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knocking the birds down. We left that second field at 6 p.m., took pictures as I counted 122 birds in my bag. We got the birds cleaned and headed to our roost.

Another day dawned, and the morning quarry was to be geese. Gená and I set up in the corner of a field over flat decoys spread in front of us. The hunters were spread out over 300 yards in an "L" shape. Not very many geese were enticed to come close to our blind, but Gená and I did manage to knock one Egyptian goose down while missing the very next and much closer one – how can that happen?

Back to the dove place we went. I tagged 14 doves and pigeons in quick succession with few misses, and felt like I was back "on." We switched to guineas and francolins after a break. Leaving the trucks, we noticed that this hunting territory was huge and unbroken by fences. This promised to be a lot of work as there were numerous places where birds could sneak away from the approaching hunters. We walked and walked. Parts of the field were soaked from the previous day's rain, making the walking more difficult. Three shooters marched in line while the others acted as flankers on the ends of the line. But the guineas would not play fair, jumping up ahead of us and out of range. We were convinced that the last group of about 20 had simply circled around and behind us. Time to move on.

At one point, Gená was walking with Joe on the outside of the line where the hiking was somewhat easier. Suddenly, Joe urgently ordered Gená to jump instantly to the right, and luckily she did so without asking a lot of questions. There was a Black Mamba ahead of her that Joe's trained eye picked up in the matted brush. The snake

was left to live another day. Seeing snakes is always a good omen for quitting, so we did.

The rest of that day saw us back in the dove field. I could not hit anything until I realized I was keeping my head off the stock. After a correction, I started hitting the fleeing flyers consistently. Suddenly, I was hot and hitting everything. I avoided those high ones to the left because of the sun in my eyes, but there were plenty of others to keep me busy enough that I could actually practice going away shots, or left to rights, or those crossing over the corn. I wound up the day with 210 birds in the bag, my best day, especially considering the slow start. The weather was turning demonstrably colder as we packed and headed back to the house.

Our last day of shooting saw us up and out the door at 5:30 a.m. to shoot pigeons and doves. It was much colder. I shot miserably most of the morning with a bag of about 70 by the time of our very late breakfast. Then I decided to move out into the field where some camo cloth had been planted on poles in a rough square. The birds clearly had seen this setup before and knew how to game that system. But I also figured that I could game the system by jerking my shotgun quickly when they jinked, pulling the trigger instantaneously. There were so many birds that even an unlucky shot could do well. I ended up the day with 156 birds.

It was time for our fun to come to an end. Those last hours were spent like the tourists we were – walking through Port Elizabeth and shopping for about an hour before being taken to the airport. We were ready to leave, but sad to leave Joe and Nicole, our wonderful hosts. **GT**

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