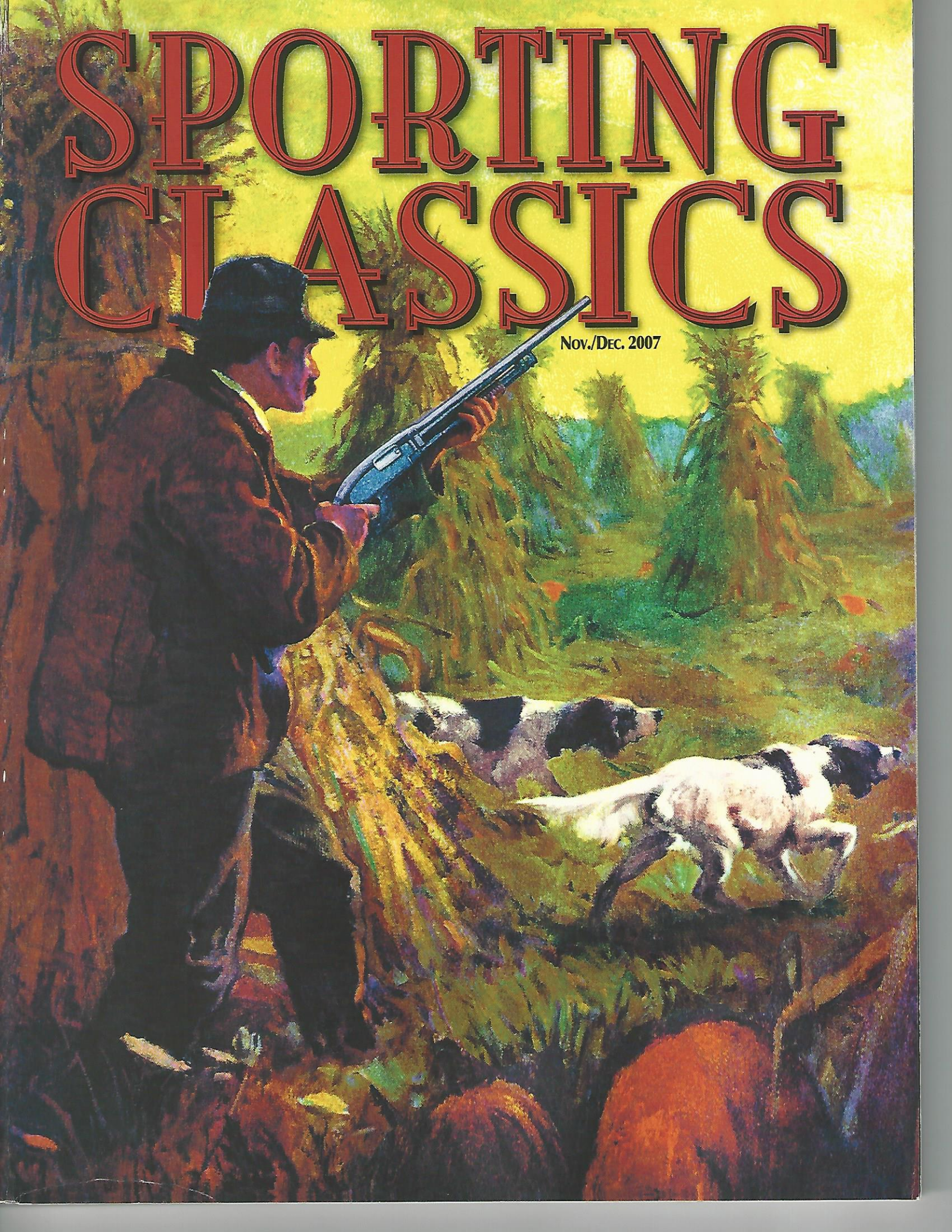


SPORTING CLASSICS

Nov./DEC. 2007



PERDIZ!



That rain in Spain just might be perdiz – hundreds and hundreds of darting, plummeting, careening missiles that can challenge even the world's best wingshots. by John Ross



The long line of hunters wound down the hillside tufted with grey green puffs of wild rosemary, called *tomillo* by the Spaniards and which Romans used to flavor their wine. The path curved down among oak trees, little higher than the heads of the hunters. The rounded ridge of the Sierra de Gredos anchored the western horizon.

Breeches and plus fours attired some of the hunters. Others had tucked their trousers into Wellingtons. It was a tweedy group, and those not decked out in plaids had donned dark loden waxed cotton. Occasionally, the procession flushed a *perdiz*, the Spanish red grouse, which was the quarry of this hunt.

I walked with Jaun José “Juanjo” Franco Suelves, great-grandson of Nationalist generalissimo Francisco Franco who wrested control of the country from the Loyalists in a brutal civil war romanticized by Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

A student now and studying management, Jaunjo and his colleague, Juan Luengo Añon, operate Coto Compartidos, the lodge from which this hunt was staged near the village of Cenicientos, about 110 kilometers west-southwest of Madrid.

Under the early morning sun we crossed a small stream, and Jaunjo spread the hunters up along the tight valley. Every fifty meters or so he’d place a hunter. To each was assigned a *cargador*, whose responsibility it was to load the hunter’s shotguns and a *secretario* who would count the birds shot with a tiny chromed clicker and mark where they fell.

The *cargador* and *secretario* erected portable butts of chest-high camo cloth held by steel rods. On each side were steel stakes that carried flat metal panels marking the limit of the hunter’s swing. When the butt was completed, the loader withdrew the hunter’s shotguns – doubles of side-by-side or over-under stripe and never autoloaders or pumps – from their soft cases. Light 12s, 20s and 28s were the bores of choice, and to feed them, the *cargador* carefully placed cartridges brass-up on a square tray so they could be easily grasped and dropped into the smoking breech of the just-discharged gun.

As the butts were being prepared, a platoon of villagers created a skirmish line about a third of a mile beyond the butts. At the sound of the huntmaster’s horn they would set out, beating the low dry scrub with wooden rods and yelling at the tops of their lungs to flush the *perdiz*.

I heard the horn and stood tense and knotted, the way I do in a sporting clays stand. The first bird cleared the hilltop above me from the left, plummeted like a cruise missile hugging the terrain, and exited to the right before I knew what had happened. I turned in embarrassment to the *secretario*, who motioned with his head toward another incomer. Slapping the trigger, I missed cleanly.

I watched that bird sail past, hoping that like a duck or dove it might circle and return. But the gentle pull of the *cargador* on my empty gun reminded me that this wasn’t Kansas or Louisiana, and that I’d better get in the game. Staccato popping from the other guns echoed up the draw.

Juanjo had told me that I’d have plenty of time to swing on the birds, but that was clearly not the case for me.

Their russet forms would appear and disappear before I could react. Then I downed a bird with quick snap shot as if it were a teal screaming over my decoys. Missing the next, I killed the following pair and forgot about swing and lead and shot as fast as I could.

Within a half-hour or so it was over. The horn sounded, beaters crested the brow of the hill, still hollering to flush whatever birds remained across the draw and up on to the plateau where the next drive would come. As my *cargador* folded his table and rolled the camo around the stakes, my *secretario* collected the birds. There were not many, maybe six or eight.

I walked over to Daryl Greatrex, managing director of Holland & Holland, who was exercising a pair of his firm’s stunning doubles on this shoot. He, too, was bemoaning his performance, fewer than fifteen birds. He’d have to do better, he lamented. Not even José “Pepé” Artecona from Puerto Rico, who is highly regarded in international live pigeon shooting circles, felt he’d done well.

“Did you see those birds, John?” Rafael “Kiko” E. García Rodón and Pepé’s brother-in-law, asked, grasping my elbow. “Wow, they fly don’t they? I am behind, I am over, I shoot in front, nothing! This is something, is it not?”



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A shooter draws on a perdiz under the watchful eyes of his cargador and secretario. Above, the beautiful main lodge and opposite, a shooter firing at a hard-flying bird. Previous page: David Plumpton (left) and Rafael "Kiko" Garcia pause during their walk-up shoot and the hunters enjoying a sumptuous lunch under the November sun.

We followed the valley downstream to where it widened. Up the right bank, stone ruins emerged from the side of the hill. As the new line of butts was being established, we clamored over the relic, the foundation of an ancient mill. We were struck that for more than 2,000 years Spaniards had been scraping to pull a living from this harsh land,

barely suitable for limited grazing.

The terrain in front of the second shoot did not rise quite so rapidly, so we could spot the birds at greater distance. This was an advantage for most, but not for me. I was shooting a borrowed AYA 20-bore, lengthened with a pad.

Earlier that morning, I'd mounted Daryl's Hollands and had been tremendously impressed by the gentle "snick" that locked them up as tightly as a Swiss banker's vault. And the lovely gold and silver inlays, the delicate engraving, the immaculate fit of metal to wood, and the wood

itself, ribboned with intervening veins the color of toffee and bitter chocolate, they sang to me. Alas, those guns were also stocked too short. And I should admit as well some trepidation about stumbling and dropping a shotgun with a retail tag higher than my annual income.

After the third drive we broke for lunch, a picnic in the late November sun. What wind there was carried the Mediterranean's warmth to us. Women from the village served us hard sausage made from the wild boar that feed on acorns from the ubiquitous stubby oaks, a shrimp scampi, thin two-bite lamb chops grilled with garlic on charcoal, and fresh tomatoes that tasted as if they'd just been plucked from a summer garden. There was a *ratatouille* that complemented an omelet of potatoes

and onion, and *anguila*, soft knot of tiny white baby eels, that tasted like fine caviar but not so saline. Among the delicacies were partridge *escabeche*, *perdiz* canned in a vinegar and spice. The wines were excellent reds from Castilla y Leon, Ribera del Duero, and Rioja.

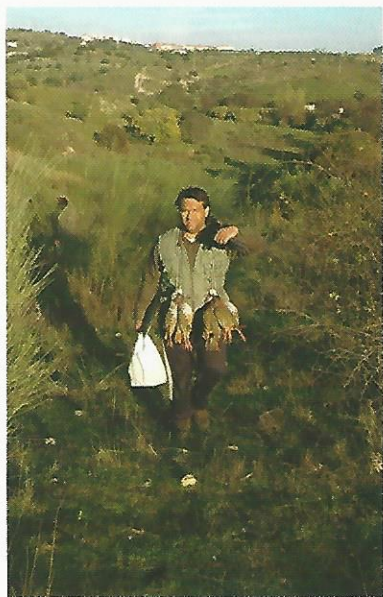
I'd assumed that the birds we took would find their way into one of our meals the way fresh doves sometimes become hors d'oeuvres before barbeque or steak down South. I was surprised that the *perdiz* we ate came from a can. Juanjo told me that, even though some of the birds we shot had been stocked to augment natural populations, all *perdiz* native or planted belonged to the villagers who sold them to processing cooperatives.

Juanjo explained that it was part of the arrangement that he and Juan Luengo had negotiated with the residents of Cenicientos and neighboring hamlets that allowed driven hunts. To stage these affairs, they have leased parcels covering more than 14,000 hectares, or 35,000 acres. It is a source of income from small plots on which grapes or olives cannot be profitably grown and which is only marginally suitable for grazing livestock. The country is far too hilly for grains or other rowcrops.

For their services, *secretarios* and *cargadores* earn more in tips and pay than the average worker nets from a week's minimum wage in Spain. In this section of the country, at least, hunting is a sustainable form of agriculture.

The final shoot of the day was the most challenging. Drivers would beat their way across a plateau that terminated abruptly. The shooters were stationed along a grassy track that fell from just beneath the tableland to a valley 300 feet below. Birds would be flying high, Juanjo advised, and those on the valley floor would have the most difficult shots. The shots would test the gunners' mettle well beyond anything I'd ever experienced. I cased my shotguns in favor of cameras, which proved to be challenge enough.

At first the birds flew high as expected, but then they swooped down on us like swifts nabbing mayflies over a trout stream. The moment I finished a string of exposures on low bird, four or six *perdiz* would burst across high overhead. I was as humbled by my photography as I'd been by my shotgunning. When the shooting was done, Kiko and the other hunters emerged from the valley



Clockwise, from right: The shooting party heads off to the first set of butts on the rolling Spanish countryside. The hunt included five drives per day; the average shooter would kill ten to twenty birds per drive. Daryl Greatrex, managing director of Holland & Holland, gave his guns a good workout. Juanjo Franco (left), great-grandson of Nationalist Generalissimo Francisco Franco, and David Plumpton. A secretario returns with a heavy load of perdiz.



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rich with cathedrals and estates many of which have their own chapels, seems frozen in time and by-passed by principle tourist routes. All are plusses in my book. Yet along with Madrid, the walled 10th century city of Ávila and Toledo, which is known as much for its Moorish heritage as for its fine swords, all can be easily reached by rental car. 🐦

IF YOU WANT TO GO

The season for *perdiz* begins in mid-October and continues into mid-March. Guests fly into Madrid and are met there by the outfitter or travel broker, in our case the lovely and outgoing Aida Bartholome of B&A eventaille SL.

Cotos Compartidos is operated by Hunter (www.huntingservices.es). Prices are based on the number of birds for which the party contracts, with 500 birds per day being the normal minimum. Fees vary, based on the services provided and the

number of gunners in a party. A typical two-day package will cost each shooter somewhere between \$3,500 and \$5,000. Fees generally cover all expenses including transportation from and to Madrid, with the exception of tips and personal items. For specific prices, contact Aida at www.eventaille.com or eventaille@hotmail.com.

Spain issues temporary firearms import permits for those who insist on bringing their own guns. Contact the nearest Spanish consulate for information. However, Hunter maintains a variety of high-grade shotguns for use by guests. If your arms are long like mine, bring along a slip-on or lace-on recoil boot and borrow a gun.

with that rueful, sheepish grin that said life, while good, was not easy.

In the lodge that night, we commiserated over cocktails and wafer-thin slices of dried meats and sausage, stuffed ourselves with a scrumptious dinner, and tumbled off to our rooms, some in the main *casa* and others in a large guesthouse beyond. Accommodations can only be described as four-star: even the towel racks in my large bathroom were heated.

In the morning Kiko, David Plumpton, Juanjo and I opted for a walk-up hunt over a pair of boisterous English springers. We tramped across a highland and could see grouse after grouse moving before us in the brush. Every time we began to hustle after them, one would burst from behind a boulder nearby or a bush just beyond a tree. Some we shot, others we missed. The gunning was good but might have been better had the springers been hobbled a bit.

We pushed the grouse to where the land fell away to a terrace 500 feet below. It was across that terrace, tufted with thick wads of underbrush and dotted with huge blocks of rock that had tumbled from the cliff, that the drivers had beat on the previous day's final shoot. I had not, until then, realized the difficulty they had faced while driving the birds to us.

There is a gentility about this hunt in Spain that I find appealing. Along with *perdiz*, hunters can pursue ibex and European boar of 300 pounds and more. The hospitality at Cotos Compartidos is unparalleled. The countryside,

