



TBD shows his son where the doves are flying.

# Doves Deep in Texas

Story and Photographs

by

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My favorite places are along the far edges, out in the borderlands where the road ends. My favorite places are where I find my favorite birds - clapper rail on the Eastern Shore, sharptails in Montana below the forty-ninth parallel, and mourning dove in south Texas just north of the Rio Grand.

Essentially, after peeling off the labels of profession and position, I'm a hunter. It seems only fair to say that up front in case you might want to pick something else to read. As Hemingway said about hunting game birds , "They were made to shoot and some of us were made to shoot them and if that is not well, never say that we did not tell you that we liked it."

If you are one of us who like hunting doves, South Texas should be on your shortlist of places to go.

### Doves Here and There

I am one of the 30,000 hunters here in Virginia who sit over fields of cut corn and bushhogged sunflowers each year. I have been one for 30 seasons, half my life. The *Harvest Information Program* says that we take 350,000 doves each year, about twelve apiece per season, a day's limit.

I am also one of the 200,000 dove hunters in Texas. Texas has more dove hunters and more doves than any other state - 40 million are there on opening day with more migrants arriving on every cold front. According to *HIP*, Texas hunters take *over 5 million* doves each year, more than 25 birds apiece. The numbers are pretty compelling - go to Texas if you want to shoot a whole bunch of doves.

### Looking Back

But hunting in Texas is more than filling your gamebag; it is about hunts that will stay with you and make you smile for years to come. As Hemingway also said, "When you cannot shoot you can remember the shooting... and when you have



Author with his limit of Texas doves

been lucky in your life you find that you have a lot of damned fine things you can remember."

I have my Texas Buddy, Dick to thank for my having a lot of damned fine things to remember about dove hunting down along the border. TBD has wrangled me eight straight invitations to his annual family dove hunt. It is always the first

week in October on the same 5,000 acre ranch south of Cotulla, north of Laredo. Maybe if I share a few of my memories about the friends, the food and the shooting, you might decide to head down that way and get your own.

### Four Days in October

As I put Texas in the rearview mirror and look back on my eight four-day trips, I can separate each of the four days, but I cannot separate one year from the other. I'm very OK with that. In this post-9/11 world, it is good to have something you can count on, something that doesn't change much no matter what. For the lucky, the past is always in the present tense.

### Day 1, Richmond to Gonzales

Getting into the heart of Texas always takes me a day. Texas is a frame of mind as well as a place. Rites and rituals help keep it all together.



Incoming at 10 o'clock



A Texas size backyard barbecue



Dove on Horseback just off the grill

TBD picks me up at IAH, and we are heading out by late morning, getting tuned up along the way on non-stop Willie Nelson and Lyle Lovett.

In the late afternoon we pass through Gonzales, the Texas Lexington, the cradle of its independence (“You want our canon? Come and take it!”) Along the nineteenth century courthouse square, dark cafes with open doors beckon with icy Dos Equis. “Easy pardner, gotta keep moving.”

Soon we pull through the rusty

gate of Rancho Dos Arroz, home of TBD’s Uncle Tommy, Master of the Hunt. At precisely five o’clock under the lattice sunshade, I formally seek Uncle Tommy’s permission to enter South Texas and offer my credentials - Virginia Gentleman and Naked Mountain Chardonnay. Offerings are accepted, permission is granted, and the deal is sealed with a very fresh and frosty Shiner Bock brewed just ten miles down the road. *I have arrived!*

#### Day 2, Gonzales to The Ranch

As we head toward the Border, the landscape shifts from live oaks and

cow-belly-high sweet grass to downright mean. Green pastures and pecan tree lined arroyos give way to mesquite scrub, prickly pear cactus, thorn thickets, sand and rock. When you step out of the truck now, you watch where you step. As TBD says his daddy used to say, “A whole lot of things down here sting, stick or bite.”

The ranch is at the dead end of fifteen miles of dusty gravel road cut through the chaparral. The prettiest thing about chaparral to most folks may be its name, but the animals love it. As we pull through gate, we begin to see whitetail and axis deer, Rio Grand turkeys and quail, wild hogs and javelina. The coyotes and cougars, along with the doves, hang back in the brush. We tip our hats and say our traditional “Howdy and good luck!” to the single bull buffalo who wandered in from the chaparral a decade ago and fell in love with a local Charollais. She pays him no mind, but hope springs eternal in his steadfast heart.

We hurry to unpack the truck but then sit and wait. Time slows down from two to four o’clock as the sun hangs in place and the temperature hovers at ninety-two in the shade. At four o’clock the sun takes a sudden dip, and the doves pour out of the chaparral and into the newly planted wheat fields. At the start we shoot too quickly and too often. We don’t swing through. We shoot at doves that should be passed. While reloading we fumble and drop live shells in the dirt. Finally we settle down and begin to shoot well. At dusk we pick up plenty of birds, but pick up far too many empty hulls.

First supper is always platters of steaks (rare on the right, well on the left), baked potatoes with cilantro sour cream, green beans and bacon, and mixed greens with Gulf shrimp and avocado - backed by a very drinkable Llano Signature Red out of Lubbock. Finally, cherries jubilee set

ablaze with top shelf tequila not for sale in Virginia.

#### Day 3 Shooting and More Shooting

Like Virginia in October you can shoot in the morning as well as the afternoon in Texas.

In the morning the shooting is more serious, more deliberate than the afternoon before. We follow a common routine - squint through the ground fog to make sure what you see is not a Forktail Flycatcher, set down your go-cup in the dirt, straighten up, shoulder your gun and try to drop the dove close enough not to get your feet wet in the heavy morning dew. Then trot back to your go-cup before the fire ants wake up and smell the coffee. There are more single pops than doubles this morning and almost no wasted thirds.

In the afternoon we shoot for fun. The pressure is off. Plenty of doves ready for grilling, plenty more in the freezer to take home. Challenges are made, money is discussed - most birds with the fewest shots, one shot doubles, and other cowboy bravado. I once brought my extra full choked Winchester Model 12 Duck Gun down for Saturday afternoon. "My limit with no bird within fifty yards!" No, I didn't make good, but it was pure fun trying. However, I did see TBD drop a limit within fifty feet of his stool as he had promised on one strange and rainy afternoon. Him saying the field was too muddy to walk far, and me paying and grinning.

The Second Supper is always Doves on Horseback, Butch's Brisket, Killer Slaw, chili pinto beans, stuffed portabellas and Naked Mountain Chardonnay. And Bananas Foster, of course.

#### Day 4. Parting Shots

We shoot only in the morning on the final day, which is about all we can handle.

The shooting is slow and painful but again not for lack of doves. Shoulders are bruised and tender from the three previous shoots. Still you cannot pass up the picture-perfect double, or the favorite going away bird, or the high flyer with a tailwind. While standing side-by-side with TBD, I see two whitewings, bigger than pigeons, come high over the chaparral dead at us. He knows to shoot right while I take the left. Our guns come up together - -

TBD and I take the long ride back to Houston alone, alone except for the four dozen doves, our legal possession limit, in the cooler. If we have time we swing through San Antonio and pay our respects at The Alamo, maybe have a final Shiner across the street in the Mendel Hotel Bar where Teddy Roosevelt recruited his Rough Riders. As we get close to Houston, I put on Willy's *Stardust* CD and hear him croon, "You were always on my mind." By eleven I'm back in Richmond, and Texas is once again in the rearview mirror.

#### If You Want to Go

You don't have to have a Texas Buddy, Dick or an Uncle Tommy to hunt dove in Texas. Outfitters and guiding are very big business all over the state. A web search will turn up places like the 167,000 acre Pitchfork Ranch up near Lubbock or the 19,000 acre Halff Brothers Ranch down near San Antonio. Maybe go for a cast and blast, redfish and whitewings, or a combination hunt for dove and wild hog. If you want to play it safe, check out the Orvis-endorsed operations. Good luck for memorable shooting! I doubt that I will see you down around the Border or anywhere else in Texas. It is a very big place.

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Besides being a hunter, the author is an international management consultant whose travels often take him out to the far edges and borderlands.



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