

Pheasants in Primland

by
John Shtogren

Photos by Hay Hardy



Take Highway 58 west out of Stuart, Virginia, J.E.B.'s home town, and head up Spoon Mountain towards the Blue Ridge Parkway. Just past Lover's Leap and Naked Ridge at 3,300 feet, take a left on Busted Rock Road and you'll soon get to a place that's about as good as it gets this side of paradise—Primland Resort, a 12,000 acre sportsman's playground. It's a slow drive in on Busted Rock, which runs eight miles along the length of Primland. A slow drive because of the jaw-dropping vistas along the way. The best views are to the east,

Photo courtesy of Primland



and on a clear day you can see the towers of Greensboro 60 miles away down on the North Carolina plains.

Primland's upscale cabins dot the rhododendron lined road, each with its own deck hung out over the valley. "Rustic luxury" says it well. And, even though Busted Rock is 1,500 feet above Primland's shooting fields, pheasants are often seen strutting along the roadside. And pheasants are a Primland speciality and my main reason for being there.

From Timber to Gamebirds

Primland started out as a timber operation in the late '70s, not as a shooting preserve. If you bought a shrink-wrapped bundle of kindling from your grocery or hardware store anywhere on the East Coast during the '80s, most likely it came from Primland. Buy the end of the '80s Primland's Swiss parent company steered it out of timber and into game birds. "Quailty" guided every step of the way. By the early '90s Primland had earned a coveted designation as an Orvis-Endorsed Wingshooting Destination, which it still holds today. To qualify, a lodge must meet stringent quality standards for its hunting grounds and birds, staff, accommodations and cuisine—first-class all the way or no endorsement.

Today Primland offers upland shooting for pheasant, chukar and quail. Pheasants are the favorites with over 20,000 released each season. Primland has a "stock three, take two" policy, which means hunters will always find birds. There are eight separate *courses* or shooting fields. Each field is carefully sequestered so that except for the sound of distant gunfire, hunters hardly know other hunters are in the valley. The fields are planted with a mix of milo, sorghum and warm season grasses to provide the birds with cover and protection from predators on the ground or in the air.

In addition to bird hunting, Primland offers trophy deer hunts in the fall and turkey hunts in the spring. Hunter



The author takes aim at a flushing ringneck.

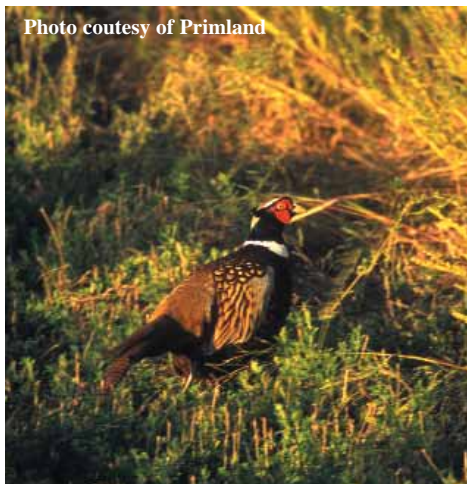
success ranges from excellent to extraordinary.

Steve Helms, vice president and general manager, has been with Primland since his college days over 20 years ago. He has seen its development to date and will guide it into the future. As he puts it, “Our goal is to provide a quality hunt that is as close to wild as possible. We hope you’ll find our staff to be courteous and friendly and make you feel right at home.”

Harvest Moon Hunt

I was feeling right at home as I sat on my porch at Otter Lodge and watched the Harvest Moon rise up out of the valley on a late September evening. I was also feeling lucky. I’ve always been lucky on full moons and hoped nothing would change while I was at Primland. So far so

Photo courtesy of Primland



good: I had just finished dinner at the Stables Saloon Restaurant, and it exceeded my expectations for *country gourmet* by a whole bunch: risotto cakes flecked with duck, elk tenderloin with a dried cherry-port demi glace, a big Aussie merlot, and a

puffed pastry filled with ice cream and local apples and topped with a to-die-for sauce. Yes, my luck was holding just fine.

As I sat watching the moon rise, I also thought about how lucky I’d been on the full moon the month before when my neurosurgeon did a little C 6-7 work on my neck. He was, lucky me, a “smooth operator,” and I hadn’t had a twinge since. However, I had not fired a shotgun for four weeks, worrying that I might put asunder what my Doc had joined together. For the past month I’d been flinching inwardly at the thought of 12 gauge recoil. Tomorrow I’d find out if I’d flinch at the real thing.

After breakfast the next morning I drove five miles down Busted Rock to Primland’s Orvis Shop and shooting center in the valley below. As I drove I watched



Primland pointers locked-on birds

hawks circling down in the valley: Other hunters out early. At the shop I met my guide for the morning, Junior Stanley. He is one of the eight full-time guides and, like many of the staff, he grew up nearby and has been with Primland for over 20 years.

As we shook hands I told Junior that I took directions pretty well in the field, both voice commands and hand signals, and was willing to sit as well as heel when told. He grinned and said, “Well sir, if the dogs behave that well, we’re all going to get along just fine and have us a good day.”

Junior has personal responsibility for five of the 40 English Pointers kenneled at Primland as do the other guides. We set out with three of them at 8 o’clock while the air was still cool and the dew heavy. As we drove to the first field I saw there might be another handicap—the mountain scenery was so captivating it could take your eye off the hunt.

In the first field Junior released



Susie and Spike to hunt. Soon they were *birdy*, and it was clear from the moving grass that there were birds in the field ahead of us. But they were pheasants, and they were running as pheasants always do until forced to fly. The dogs worked beautifully in tandem, one easing up behind the bird while the other, anticipating the bird’s escape route, circled ahead to block its path. The pheasant veered away again and again as the dance between the three continued.

Finally the bird held with both dogs locked on point in as classic a pose as I’ve ever seen.

As Junior signaled me to walk forward for the flush, I wondered how strong the bird would fly this early in the season before being fully plumed out. And I wondered about my neck and hoped that it was as fully locked in place as the two dogs. A ringneck exploded in a shower of dew out of the tall grass and climbed for the sun. I stood and gawked as I always do on the first flush, the gaudy bird’s iridescent colors flashing in the morning sunlight. But I stopped gawking when the ringneck leveled out at 50 feet and stopped him with a single load of chilled 7½s. At the shot a hen blew out from under the Susie’s nose and followed the same vertical trajectory as the cockbird. She came down with my second barrel.

Each dog brought one of the birds to Junior’s hand. He turned and grinned at

me, “So you’ve done this before, have you?” I grinned back while trying to look nonchalant and said in all honesty, “Well sir, I’ve been getting lucky lately.” And my neck felt just fine.

We spent the rest of the morning moving from field to field, each with its own vista, watering the dogs to keep them cool as the morning sun burned off the dew. The dogs continued to work as the happy professionals that they were. The pheasants flew as strong if not stronger than any I’ve flushed in Michigan or South Dakota or Saskatchewan over the last five decades. And I shot way over my head, taking clean singles and fancy doubles that I’ve made before, but only in my dreams.

Am I getting lucky or finally getting good? I mused as we headed back to the shooting center. I couldn’t decide on that, but I did decide to send a Thank You note to my Doc.

Junior took my birds away as I headed for the shooting center’s locker room. Hunters will find fluffy towels, showers and a complete line of toiletries if they would like to clean up before heading home. By the time I finished up, Junior had my pheasants cleaned, iced down and waiting for me in a special Primland cooler. I need to emphasize these were *my* birds, the ones that we’d just brought in from the field, not a swap-out for frozen birds from someone else’s earlier hunt. At Primland they think it’s just the right thing to do, for a hunter to be able to carry away his or her own birds. Sounds very right to me too.

Knowing that I’ve got my own birds in the freezer will make the next full moon even more special. The pheasants will be the main course when a dozen friends gather in late October for The Feast of the Hunter’s Moon. Perhaps Pheasant Kiev, or Titania or braised in Marsala—or maybe all three. There will be toasts to the birds, to Primland and to luck.

If You Go

There is more to do than hunt



Photo by Hay Hardy



Photos courtesy of Primland

pheasants in Primland. In addition to the excellent bird shooting, Primland offers a long list of other sporting activities for individuals, families or corporate groups. You can count on the fact that Primland only offers what it can provide in a first rate, top quality way. Here is a sample of what you can do when you come out of the shooting fields:

- Sporting clays and five stand
- Fly fishing on the Dan River or on stocked ponds
- ATV safaris on 80 miles of private trails
- Horseback trail rides
- Mountain biking and hiking
- Golf

Primland has just opened The Highlands Course, designed by golf course

architect Donald Steele. In 2006 it was named one of the best new courses in the country by *Travel & Leisure Golf Magazine*. A new 72,000 square foot luxury lodge is coming soon.

For complete information check www.primland.com

John Shtogren is the senior editor for *The Virginia Sportsman*. He is an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands. He welcomes comments at jshtogren@cs.com.