



A mornings geese over decoys on stuble. The spurwing, being held, is the world's biggest goose.

Under African Skies

Story and photos
by
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“This has to be illegal this is so much fun,” said Robert Smith of South Carolina during a July 2005 hunt in South Africa with Hunts and Hounds Africa. These words are what Francolin hunting in South Africa is all about! Upland hunting began when the first settlers colonized Africa, bringing with them fine dogs and fine guns. This tradition has made South Africa a prime destination for any hunter

in search of a variety of wild yet honest birds.

For the uninitiated—or for the hunter who has grown up with domestic guinea fowl around the garden—you are in for a surprise. One can hardly believe how such a large bird (three pounds) can be so fast and cunning. Not only can he outrun the fastest of sprinters, but when he does get up, he can also fly at a great speed. Guinea fowl are sought after amongst

hunters as they are the size of a domestic fowl and, whether driven or hunted with dogs, are a very sporting bird indeed. Flocks of up to 200 are not uncommon.

When hunted with pointers, a flock is first located, and then the guns try to “bump” the flock into thick cover. Thick cover may often not be that nearby, making this a most testing exercise. Good cover can be anything from planted pasture, stubble or natural grass, but it needs

to be at least knee height for birds to hold in. Once a flock is “pushed” or “bumped” into good thick cover, the sport begins. The dogs have normally seen all the above action and know exactly what ground to work. More often than not, dogs locate singles out of the very widespread flock, making for quite a long hunt if enough birds are put into the said cover. They might seem cumbersome when flushed, but once airborne, they put in a good turn of speed, providing wonderful shooting.

Of the two species of quail hunted, the Common Quail is migratory, spending summer in Southern Africa and winter in the Northern States. Small groups do however stay behind for the winter months. In some areas, these groups can get larger and larger every year, with some farms having a resident quail population almost year round. Otherwise, the Common Quail is nomadic

and can be “here today and gone tomorrow.” Thousands of birds may arrive and then disappear after a couple of weeks. To hunt these birds, the hunter has to be in the right area at the right time. The “resident” birds are what most people in South Africa hunt. Coveys are generally from two to eight and found in cereal, alfalfa and natural short pastures. These birds fly at a moderate speed, but because of their small size and rolling motion in flight, they are most certainly a good sporting bird.

The Harlequin Quail may be found in coveys up to 20. On the Kafue Flats of Zambia, these birds will be found in coveys of hundreds. Quite similar in size to the Common Quail, these birds also are great little game birds. They never really clear head height when flushed, and more often than not, they break in pairs that crisscross in flight, landing some 80 yards away.

The Francolin is split into two general groups depending on the bird’s behaviour when hunted. This the earlier settlers did when comparing African birds to the birds they hunted back home. Some fly like pheasant (Swainsons), whereas others are really honest, sit tighter and behave like partridge (Greywing). Hence today when locals talk of hunting pheasant or partridge in South Africa, they are referring to birds that belong to the Francolin family. The heaviest are the pheasant type, with cock birds weighing nearly two pounds and hens a little lighter. By contrast, partridge-type Francolin cock birds only weigh around a pound. Of the 10 species of Francolin available to hunt, the five that are most commonly sought after are the Cape, Orange River, Swainsons, Greywing and Redwing Francolin. Habitats vary from cornfield edges and other cultivated lands for Swainsons and

The Drakensberg Mountains provide the backdrop to most of our hunting grounds.





A hunter is steady as a Swainsons bursts into the trees

other pheasant-type Francolin to high mountain grassland for the Greywing and other partridge-type Francolin.

Of all the species hunted, the two most commonly hunted are the Swainsons and the Greywing, with Greywing considered the *crème de la crème*. Because the Swainsons occurs in and around agricultural lands, it requires dogs that can work somewhat tighter. Dogs that can settle down into work with noses down will most certainly win the day. Big ranging Greywing-type dogs often get frustrated working this most cunning bird, which can literally run circles around any dog before flushing.

When hunting Francolin, the guide would have previously run his dogs on the various beats to determine the volume and location of your birds within reason. All these birds occur 100% naturally,

thus making it a truly wild hunt. You will, in an age-old tradition, hunt your quarry down, using only skills and man's best friend. Winters are clear and mild with some frost in the mornings but very warm by lunchtime. This provides for a window period of about two hours of good scenting after sunrise and then again before sunset. Usually, four hunters will hunt over two dogs and a guide, walking abreast of the guide and coming up alongside the dogs, with hearts pounding in ears and ready to pull their shot once the flush command is given. Many a hunter stands gob smacked, gun broken, shells ejected, with birds still rising after missing what normally would have been an easy shot. The speed at which the birds rise is nothing less than super fast. Even when one is standing right on top of a covey, the brown blur bursting into the sky does nothing for the coolest of

nerves. Thousands of years of predation by all numbers of predators in Africa have made them fast—fast to get up and fast to get away. This provides for hunting that only wild birds can offer—and only under magnificent African skies.

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