

WINGS OVER *Uruguay*

Mixed-bag shooting at
Estancia Santa Clara

text & photos by Gary Kramer



Estancia Santa Clara has some of the best perdiz habitat in Uruguay—and South America.

“IN THE SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRY OF Uruguay, squeezed between Brazil and Argentina, wingshooting is virtually unknown. As a result, not only are birds plentiful, but shooting pressure is almost non-existent. Combine these conditions with an excellent array of waterfowl and upland bird species, the oldest and most stable democratic government in South America, a friendly and pro-American populous and excellent accommodations on the country’s large *estancias*, and you have the newest frontier in first-class wing-shooting.” So said a hunting brochure I ran across in 1988—almost 40 years ago.

The words spurred me into action, and in July of that year my buddy Carl Rey and I boarded a Pan Am 747 “jumbo jet” to Montevideo, Uruguay. Even though it was relatively early in my outdoor-writing career, I managed to secure an assignment from a new and upcoming wingshooting publication: *Shooting Sportsman*. That July trip resulted in the article “Wingshooting in Uruguay,” published in the June/July 1989 issue. It was one of the first stories in a US magazine describing Uruguay’s bird hunting. Since then I have written hundreds of articles on international hunting and produced several books, including *Wingshooting the World*. I have visited Uruguay several more times and found the shooting consistently excellent.

It had been nearly a decade since my last trip to Uruguay when I received an email from Trek International Safaris announcing a new wingshooting destination there. Estancia Santa Clara’s first year of operation was 2023, and

with fond memories of hunting in the country, I booked a trip for June 2024.

This time the flight to Montevideo was on an American Airlines Boeing 777, and my hunting buddy was Fritz Reid. We landed around noon, and after exiting the aircraft we were met by a fast-track service representative, ushered to immigration and then taken to a VIP salon while our luggage was collected. Our host, Luis Bonasso, was waiting, and within minutes we were in a van bound for Estancia Santa Clara, about 100 miles northwest of the airport.

Luis explained that upon arrival at the *estancia*, we would have lunch and then head to the field for an afternoon dove shoot. A little more than two hours later we turned off a country dirt road into the entry drive . . . and a castle came into view. Anxious for lunch and to get shooting, I opted to save my questions about the lodging until that evening.

We enjoyed a superb lunch of grilled pork tenderloin, roasted potatoes and home-baked breads, and then changed into hunting clothes, grabbed our gear and headed to the waiting vehicle. The drive to the dove field was about 20 minutes, and once there we were handed 20-gauge Berettas and introduced to our bird boys, Daniel and Santiago. Our blinds had been set up in a flyway between a roost and nearby feeding areas, and the birds were already streaming overhead. Most of the shots were 30 to 35 yards, and in a short time Fritz and I were consistently dropping birds out to 40.

The action that afternoon was nonstop, and by the time the doves quit flying, just before sunset, Fritz had 100 in the bag. (I had stopped after shooting 25 in order to focus on photography.) The birds were collected and would be served



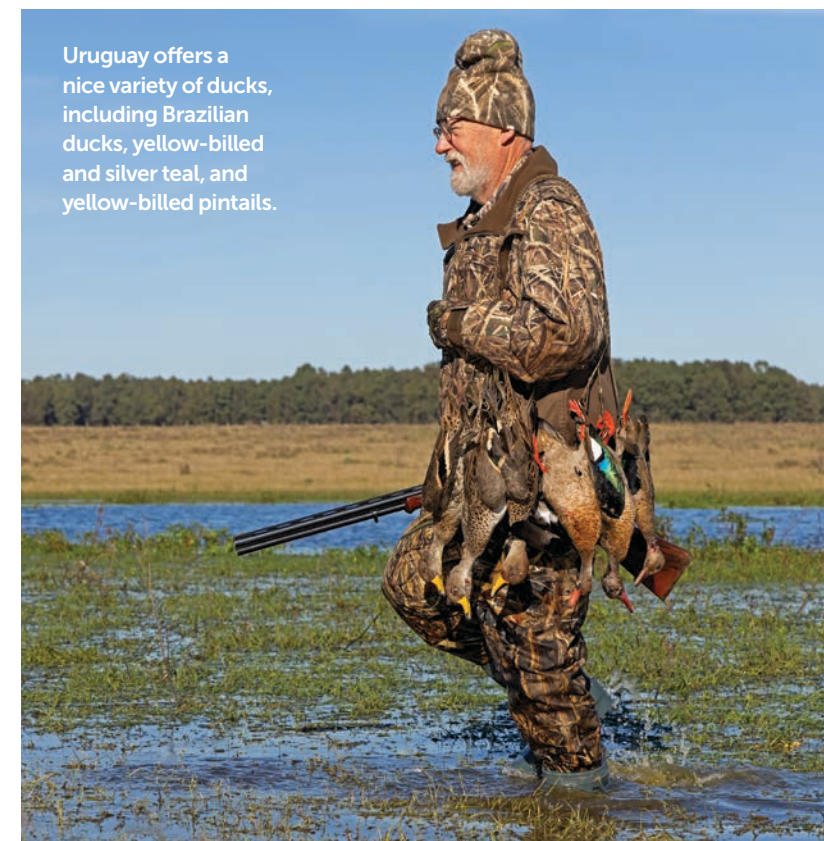
One of the *estancia*’s Brittany returns with a yellow-billed teal.



by kings and popes as well as photos commemorating visits by pianist Arthur Rubinstein, Princess Mary of York and the Duke of Edinburgh. Estancia Santa Clara has eight guest rooms, each with a private bath; a great room with a fireplace; a Versailles-replica library; a dining area; a wine cellar and a spa.

The following morning we rose early for breakfast, donned our waterfowling gear and, while it was still dark, jumped into the crew-cab pickup. The sky was clear, indicating that it would be a sunny day, and temperatures were in the low 40s. After a 25-minute drive we arrived at a small reservoir where decoys were already set and a blind was in place. It was only a 30-yard walk to the blind, and in minutes we were settled in and scanning the sky. Just as the sun was about to rise, a trio of birds came in fast and low over the decoys. We fired instinctively, and all three birds hit the water. Having heard only two shots, I asked Fritz if he'd fired twice. He said he hadn't, so one of us must have gotten a Scotch double.

We were about to retrieve the birds when a pair of larger ducks appeared over the decoys. When they were about 25 yards out, we dropped both. I hustled out and picked up the five birds—three Brazilian ducks from the first group and pair of yellow-billed pintails. Later in the morning Daniel brought out one of the *estancia's* Brittany's to retrieve the



Uruguay offers a nice variety of ducks, including Brazilian ducks, yellow-billed and silver teal, and yellow-billed pintails.

▲ The *estancia's* castle was built in 1903 with materials brought from Europe.

▲ *Perdiz* are ground-dwelling birds that are larger than quail and colored like hen pheasants.

at the lodge or given to the bird boys and local farmers.

There are no seasons or limits on eared doves in Uruguay, and the birds are considered pests by farmers. Eared doves are about the same size and have the same general appearance as our mourning doves. They are endemic to most of South America, with shooting being popular in Bolivia, Uruguay and Argentina.

That evening over a glass of Malbec, we were told about the history of the *estancia*. The castle, or château, sits on 50,000 acres of deeded land that has been the home of the Jackson family for 200 years. Today the sixth and seventh generations are the hosts. The castle was built in 1903, with materials brought from Europe by boat and carriage and the ironworks fabricated in France. The castle is a living museum filled with furniture, art and treasures that tell the story of the family and that include documents signed

birds that had fallen in water too deep to wade. The action remained steady, and by the end of the morning we each had our limit, which included Brazilian ducks, yellow-billed teal, silver teal and yellow-billed pintails.

The four-day program at Santa Clara includes duck hunting in the morning, dove shooting in the afternoon, *perdiz* hunting in the morning or afternoon and, if there are enough birds around, pigeon shooting in the morning or afternoon. Other than the dove shooting, the action at Santa Clara is not “hot-barreled” but rather steady with a great mix of species. Daily limits on birds other than doves are 10 *perdiz*, 15 ducks and 20 pigeons.

Uruguay has the reputation of providing the best *perdiz* hunting in South America. Some Argentine *estancias* might argue that, but it is safe to say that Santa Clara has some of the best *perdiz* habitat in Uruguay—and in South America for that matter. Santa Clara is a working ranch with thousands of cattle and horses on its 50,000 acres of open pasture, agricultural lands (much of it planted in corn and sorghum) and eucalyptus groves. Small lagoons and reservoirs are scattered throughout the landscape, and several small creeks flow through the property.

So it was with high expectations that we drove about 30 minutes to a *perdiz* field—this one an open pasture by a grove of eucalyptus trees. The *estancia* has more than two dozen dogs, including pointers, German shorthaired pointers and Brittany's, and we started by putting a pointer on the ground. The dog moved with grace and purpose, and not 10 minutes later it froze on point. Our guide, Santiago, motioned us forward, and I told Fritz to take the shot. *Perdiz* are typically found as singles or occasionally pairs, so it makes sense to have one shooter in the lead position with the second acting as backup.

When Fritz reached the dog, the pointer crept forward a few feet, hesitated and then moved again. Suddenly a single brown bird flushed from the short green cover, and Fritz promptly dropped it. A minute later the first *perdiz* of the trip was delivered to Santiago. The bird was larger than a quail, and its color reminded me of a hen pheasant. *Perdiz* are actually tinamou, ground-dwelling birds that occupy much the same ecological niche as partridge in Europe and prairie grouse in North America.

With the first *perdiz* in hand, we headed across the grass-covered hills. The pointer ranged wide and every few minutes came across bird scent. Some of the *perdiz* evaded the dog, but most held and presented 25- to 35-yard shots, which were perfect for our 20-gauge over/unders choked Improved Cylinder and Modified. It took only two hours for each of us to bag our 10-bird limits.

Rounding out the action at Santa Clara is pigeon shooting, although it is the least reliable of the *estancia's* offerings. We decided to give it a go even though the outcome might be less than stellar. The shooting was from blinds over decoys and,



SANTA CLARA SPECIFICS

At Estancia Santa Clara, doves and pigeons are shot from January through August, ducks are hunted from May through September, and *perdiz* are pursued from May through July. With these months being the Southern Hemisphere's fall and winter, the weather can be variable; but mornings are generally cool—sometimes even freezing—with temperatures typically increasing to the mid-60s in the afternoons. Camouflage clothing is needed for duck hunting, and knee-high boots are provided, as most of the blinds are in shallow water. Good hiking boots and Blaze Orange outerwear are necessary for *perdiz* hunts. Laundry service is included.

Hunters can use the *estancia's* shotguns at no additional cost, and there are a variety of Brownings and Berettas in 12 and 20 gauge available. Guests can also bring their own shotguns, although a gun broker is required and there is a \$200 fee per gun.

This trip is also tailor made for couples, as non-shooting partners can arrange for winery tours, cooking classes, horseback riding, hiking and spa treatments. —G.K.

to be honest, it wasn't terribly fruitful, with the bag ending up being 10 pigeons or less per shooter.

All in all, our four-day visit was exceptional, as we enjoyed first-rate hunting for ducks, doves and *perdiz*. The *estancia* was well appointed and comfortable, the food and wine were excellent, and the staff was friendly and attentive. For those interested in great mixed-bag action in the Uruguayan countryside while enjoying accommodations in an actual castle, a trip to Estancia Santa Clara should be added to their bucket lists. ➤

For more information on Estancia Santa Clara, contact Trek International Safaris, treksafaris.com.

Gary Kramer is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*. His most recent book, *Waterfowl of the World*, provides stunning images and biological information on all 167 species of ducks, geese and swans on Earth and is available from garykramer.net.