

VARIETY *is the* SPICE

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Mixed bags at Argentina's Los Laureles

It was mid-July when I boarded the plane in Dallas bound for some mixed-bag hunting at Los Laureles, in Argentina. We left a bit late, but the 10-hour flight to Buenos Aires was routine . . . at least until the final approach. Suddenly, the gentle descent changed to a steep climb. I looked at my hunting partner, Alan Sands, and we both shrugged, hoping this was a momentary setback. Wrong! The aircraft was diverted to Mendoza, nearly 800 miles away, where we were stuck for the next 12 hours. It turns out that because we had gotten a late start, our flight had wound up conflicting with that of the Argentine soccer team, fresh from its loss at the World Cup. Fans were at the airport waiting to greet the team, which apparently was more important than we were. The team's aircraft was the last to land before the weather deteriorated and other flights were diverted. Thankfully,

the rest of our trip went off without a hitch.

Named after indigenous trees of the region, Los Laureles sits on 5,000 deeded acres, with a total of 40,000 acres available exclusively to the *estancia's* guests. Live-stock grazing and farming are the dominant land uses, and a good portion of the property borders the Paraná River. Located about 50 miles from the city of Paraná, the *estancia* is a five-hour drive from Buenos Aires or a short flight to Paraná followed by a one-hour drive. The 12,000-square-foot lodge can accommodate 12 hunters in six double rooms, each with a private bath. The five-star lodge has a spacious lounge with a fireplace and bar, a dining area with an adjacent grilling area, and a swimming pool.

May through August is the combination season (ducks over decoys, high-volume doves, decoyed pigeons, and

perdiz over talented Brittanys), and from September through April high-volume dove shooting is the order of the day. Fishing for golden dorado in the Paraná River is available year-round. The opportunity to shoot four species of birds and catch dorado without leaving the property makes Los Laureles unique among Argentine lodges.

We arrived at the lodge with time to settle in before sitting down for lunch. Various cuts of grass-fed beef were grilled over an open fire and served with fresh-baked breads and salads.

After lunch we gathered our gear, jumped in the vehicle and headed to the afternoon shooting venue, where the quarry was doves. The ride was literally five minutes. I looked at Alan and rolled my eyes. It was hard to believe that a good dove shoot was possible within sight of the



Los Laureles is unique among Argentine lodges in that it offers mixed-bag shooting for pigeons (previous page), doves (above), *perdiz* (below and right) and ducks, as well as quality fishing for dorado—all without leaving the property.

lodge. But when we got out of the vehicle, we could see hundreds of doves flying over an open field before being swallowed up by the tangle of brush and trees that was their roost. Come to find out, Los Laureles boasts of being the only lodge in Entre Rios with a major dove roost on its property.

Standing next to a blind fashioned from palm fronds, my bird boy, Chile, was waiting. He handed me a loaded Benelli 20-gauge and said, “*Listo*,” (“ready” in Spanish). Each hunter was paired with a bird boy, who kept track of the birds shot and made sure that shells and cold drinks were readily available.

I wasted no time and started picking away at the almost-never-ending stream of doves. The birds came in waves, riding a 10- to 15-mph breeze that made for challenging shooting. There were singles, pairs and flocks of several hundred doves in the air at all times. The shots ranged from 25 to 50 yards at every conceivable angle, allowing us to select the shots we favored or wanted to work on. The action was non-stop, with daily bags dependent on one’s shooting abilities



and how much he was willing to spend on shells. After the shoot, the birds were retrieved and brought back to the lodge to be prepared as hors d’oeuvres—stuffed with jalapenos and wrapped in bacon—or distributed to local farmers.

Argentina holds impressive records for the number



of doves killed in one day. From what I've been able to ascertain, the current daily record stands at 15,216 doves for 16,570 shells fired. Now that's a sore shoulder! But you don't have to be interested in records to enjoy the benefits of Argentine dove shooting. At Los Laureles you can shoot to your own satisfaction. That first afternoon I achieved my personal best by taking 23 doves with my first box of 25 shells. It was downhill from there, but I still ended the afternoon with several hundred birds in the bag.

Eared doves were first discovered in Colombia and later in Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia. Endemic to most of South America, they are similar in size and appearance to North American mourning doves. The main difference is that eared doves have short, square tails in contrast to the long pointed tails of mourning doves. Eared doves are prolific, and under optimum conditions their numbers can reach monumental proportions. Conditions are perfect in Argentina, with food such as wheat, corn, sorghum and sunflowers plentiful. Irrigation canals and impoundments provide water, and wooded areas are used for nesting and roosting. This equates to enormous dove populations that become pests to local farmers. Estimates indicate that up to 20 percent of all grain crops in Argentina are lost to doves.

That evening over dinner we had a chance to visit with James and Sommer Tucker, a husband-and-wife shooting team who had been at Los Laureles for three days. We already knew about the doves, but the Tuckers' stories of ducks, pigeons and *perdiz* made us even more excited about the days to come.

The next morning was bright and clear with just a hint of ground fog. This day our quarry was *perdiz*, which is Spanish for partridge. We proceeded to a large alfalfa pasture on the far side of the property about 15 minutes from the lodge. Having hunted *perdiz* often, I was not surprised by the short cover. The birds feed in such places early and late in the day, and then retreat to heavier cover during midday. Alan and I were paired with Chile and one of his best Brittanys, Candela. The dog was a graceful, well-trained athlete, and just 10 minutes into the hunt she froze on point. As we approached, I told Alan to take the first shot. Candela crept forward several steps, and then assumed the classic pose: head forward, back straight and tail rigid. The moment Alan reached the dog a single brown bird blew out of the cover, and at the shotgun's report the first *perdiz* was on the ground. Candela was on the bird in a flash and brought it to Chile.

Perdiz are slightly larger than bobwhite quail, are

the color of hen pheasants and flush like Hungarian partridge. For those not familiar with the birds, *perdiz* are actually tinamou, which are widespread in South America. These ground-dwelling birds occupy much the same ecological niche as the partridge of Europe and the prairie grouse of North America. Similarly, they feed on seeds and green shoots, and they are excellent table fare. In contrast to prairie grouse and partridge, which form coveys, tinamou generally travel alone or occasionally in pairs. They are found throughout the continent and occupy a variety of habitats from the high Andes to the temperate grasslands of Tierra del Fuego. They reach their greatest abundance in the grasslands, or pampas, of Uruguay and Argentina, where the main species is the spotted tinamou.

After the first *perdiz* was in the bag, we headed across the pasture and watched Candela range wide and quarter perfectly. The next point was mine, and as I moved in behind the dog, she edged forward before stopping. This occurred several times until the *perdiz* had had enough and erupted from the green cover. At my shot, which hit its mark, another bird flushed. The second load of No. 6s clipped a wing, and as the bird tumbled toward the ground, Alan made sure it wouldn't run.

We continued working the pasture, the field edges and the shallow draws, flushing *perdiz* after *perdiz*. The birds came mostly as singles but also in pairs. Later when I commented on the high number of pairs, lodge owner J.J. Reynal explained that the birds were starting to pair in anticipation of the nesting season, which would begin in September or October. This explained why the frequency of pairs was greater than I had experienced hunting in May and June. In addition we were hunting superb habitat, and the density of *perdiz* made the probability that two would be feeding close together relatively high. In any event, it was an excellent hunt, and my 20-gauge Beretta over/under choked Improved Cylinder & Modified suited the situation perfectly.

The *perdiz* season in Entre Rios runs from May to August, and there is a daily limit of eight. Unlike doves and pigeons, which are considered pests and have no seasons or limits, *perdiz* are respected gamebirds. In fact, they are the only gamebirds regularly pursued by Argentine hunters. (Pigeons, doves and ducks are more the quarry for visiting Americans and Europeans.)

Most mornings were dedicated to duck hunting, with the drives to the blinds being only 10 to 20 minutes. The best action came one cloudy morning when the birds

were moving between a marsh and an adjacent cornfield. The field had been flooded by the Paraná River due to unseasonably high rainfall. A blind was set up along the fence that divided the marsh and the cornfield, and we put out two dozen decoys. I was still sleepy-eyed from the 5 AM wake-up call when Alan spotted a distant flock of ducks. The yellow-billed pintails made one pass, and then settled in with wings cupped and feet down. Alan said, "Now," and we rose together. I snapped the O/U to my shoulder, caught up with a bird and pulled the trigger. Alan's shot followed, and two birds hit the water simultaneously. I picked a second duck that was banking left but missed, while Alan was on target and secured a double.

With the first pintails in our possession, we took a moment to examine them. They were large, mottled-brown birds with distinctive yellow bills. We were still admiring our trophies when Chile hissed, "*Mas patos.*" Moments later a dozen Brazilian ducks were above us. After the shooting, two remained behind.

The action that morning was steady, with mostly Brazilian ducks and white-faced whistling ducks along with a few rosy-billed pochards, yellow-billed pintails and speckled teal over the decoys every few minutes. It reminded me of a quality mixed-bag California duck hunt—minus other hunters. By 10 AM we had our limits of 20 birds each.

After the morning hunt, an *asado* was prepared in the field. Fresh empanadas filled with beef were served, and then sausages and various cuts of beef and lamb were grilled over an open fire.

The fourth segment of our mixed-bag hunt was pigeon shooting. After lunch the third day, we drove 30 minutes to a pasture with a small waterhole. While pigeons are sometimes pass-shot along with doves, in my opinion they are at their best when hunted over decoys. We set up a spread of four-dozen decoys about 20 yards from a circular blind of cut vegetation.

We had been in the blind for less than five minutes when a pair of spot-winged pigeons came in low over the field. As we hunkered down, it occurred to me how similar this was to duck hunting. When the birds were in range, I stood and fired, dropping the first pigeon in a puff of feathers while Alan anchored the second. That afternoon we enjoyed an outstanding shoot, with about 80 percent of the birds decoying and the remainder presenting passing shots. In about two hours we put 60 pigeons on the ground and missed more than I'd like to admit. All of the birds were spot-wings: blue-gray birds about the size of domestic pigeons with distinctive white wing spots. We saw a couple of the larger *picazuro* pigeons, but they failed to decoy.

One afternoon was spent fishing for golden dorado on the Paraná River. The launch site was 10 minutes from the lodge, and we fished along the banks of the Los Laureles property. We used spinning gear and fly rods and had astounding success, catching more than 20 fish from four to 10 pounds. The dorado made this

an adventure for five species and one of the most diverse trips anywhere.

Since my first trip to Argentina nearly 30 years ago, little has changed. Exotic ducks can be decoyed in pristine marshes, *perdiz* can be hunted over seasoned pointing dogs, and doves and pigeons can be shot until your shoulder is sore. So now that Argentina has gained international acclaim as a mixed-bag destination, isn't it time you gave Los Laureles a try?



Author's Note: For more information on hunting at Los Laureles, contact Argentina Wingshooting Co., 949-783-6193; www.argentinawc.com.

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