

# A Wingshooting Safari

The ultimate mixed-bag hunt in South Africa

*by Gary Kramer*







ON MY TRAVELS I often meet fellow wingshooters who have read my articles or seen my images. During our conversations, I often am asked, “Where is your favorite wingshooting destination?” I typically answer with a question: “For what kind of hunting and which species?” If they say mixed-bag wingshooting, my answer is simple: “Mark Haldane’s Bird Hunters Africa.”

I met Haldane at a Safari Club International Convention in 1994, four years after I first traveled to Africa. He was a professional hunter attending his first SCI Convention and didn’t even have a booth. A mutual friend

introduced us and, after visiting with Haldane, I booked a bird shooting safari with him. Fast-forward 25 years, and I have been on eight wingshooting safaris with Bird Hunters Africa and have been to the Dark Continent 44 times. Haldane now operates bird shooting and big-game safaris in South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana and across southern Africa, has 125 employees and has become one of the most respected PHs in Africa.

This past June I returned to South Africa for yet another bird shooting safari with Haldane. Longtime friends Alan Sands and Dan Connelly joined me on the 10-day adventure, which started with flights from California to Johannesburg via Europe, with the time in the air being about

20 hours. We then took a short domestic flight from Johannesburg to Pietermaritzburg, where we met Dylan Holmes, who these days runs most of Bird Hunters Africa’s wingshooting safaris. Like Haldane, Holmes is a bird hunter, and he approaches his job with enthusiasm that is backed up by years of experience.

At the southern tip of Africa lies South Africa, one of the most amazing countries on earth. It is twice the size of Texas, has the immense Drakensberg Mountains forming its backbone, has the red sands of the Kalahari Desert, has Bushmen living there as they have for centuries, has the wilderness of Kruger National Park, is home to more animal species than anywhere else on the continent,

South Africa offers some of the best mixed-bag hunting on the planet. Opportunities include driven guinea fowl (previous spread), walk-up guinea fowl (left) and decoyed Egyptian geese (below).

and has nearly 2,000 miles of largely unaltered coastline. It’s little surprise that South Africa has earned the title “A World in One Country.”

As for the mixed-bag shooting, if you are a waterfowl hunter, you will enjoy the duck and goose shooting over decoys; if you enjoy hunting upland birds over pointing dogs, then spurfowl and guinea fowl over pointers will meet those desires. Add high-volume pigeon and dove shooting for clients who want to put lots of birds on the ground and driven guinea fowl for shooters who enjoy a pass-shooting challenge, and I can say with conviction that South Africa has the most varied mixed-bag shooting anywhere on the planet.

One of the main reasons for the wide array of opportunities is the habitat. With both the waterfowl and upland birds, the areas hunted are a combination of agricultural lands and native bushveld. Vast fields of corn, wheat, sorghum and other row crops provide a constant food supply, while the native habitat, dominated by acacia and brush thickets, provides cover and nesting areas.

From Pietermaritzburg, we traveled about an hour to the 22,000-acre Baynesfield Estate, a rich agricultural holding nestled in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, near Richmond. It was the first of three wingshooting locations we would visit.

We arrived just after noon and checked into Mbangweni Lodge. The lodge overlooks a lake and sleeps eight in four cabins, each with a shower. Even though we were fresh off the long flight, we were anxious to get into the field; so after lunch we headed to our rooms, unloaded our gear and changed clothes. We reassembled and jumped in the Land Cruiser for the 10-minute ride to a harvested cornfield where rock pigeons were on tap for the afternoon.

We were dropped off at blinds with pre-set decoys, including a mechanical whirlybird device with rotating pigeon decoys. It didn’t take long for birds to arrive, and a pair appeared high and to the right before putting on the brakes, backpedaling to land. I shouldered the autoloader and dropped both. They were rock pigeons, the most abundant and widespread wild pigeons in southern Africa. They are about the size of barnyard pigeons, with chestnut/maroon underparts and distinctive red eye patches. The next group of a dozen birds spotted the decoys and came in. As they got into range, half the group continued on while the rest decoyed perfectly. I missed my first shot but anchored a bird with my second. The afternoon continued at a good pace, with birds coming to the decoys with regularity.

June is winter in the Southern Hemisphere, and by 5:30 PM the sun had dropped below the distant hills. We enjoyed fast action, and bags ranged from 15 to 30 birds. On the short drive back to the lodge we spotted several bushbucks grazing along the edge of a cornfield.

In addition to rock pigeon shooting, Baynesfield Estate offers quality goose hunting, so the next morning we woke long before first light, ate breakfast and drove the short distance to the field. Pulling in, the headlights illuminated a decoy spread and layout blinds ready

to go. The bird boys had arrived before we had and set out five dozen goose decoys along with a whirlybird that rotated two goose decoys. All we had to do was put our gear in the blind and load up.

Once we were in the layouts, I would have sworn we were in South Dakota waiting for Canada geese to leave their roosts and head to a cornfield laden with waste grain. It wasn’t long before we spotted a half-dozen birds. As they winged closer, we could hear their calls—a combination of hisses and grunts that sounded nothing at all like the honking and chatter characteristic of geese back home. When they were over the decoys, Dylan said, “Take ‘em!” I picked a bird and folded it cleanly, and Alan and Dan each did the same. Dylan got out of the blind quickly and picked up the geese. They were Egyptian geese—medium-size brownish geese with pink bills and legs and distinctive dark eye patches.

Next to decoy was a much larger and darker goose that came in silently. Alan was at the far edge of the spread and dropped the bird with two shots. It was a spur-winged goose—a black-and-white bird with a reddish-pink bill and legs. Adult males weigh up to 15 pounds and have large spurs at their wing joints, making them unique trophies.

The action continued, with pairs and





small groups of Egyptian geese coming to the setup along with a few spur-wings. By 9 AM the flight had subsided, and we had 18 geese in the blind. It had been a productive morning.

The second leg of the trip required a three-hour drive to Ingudlane Lodge, in KwaZulu-Natal Province near Dundee. The lodge was built in 2008 in a private game sanctuary, and impala, kudu, zebra and the occasional rhino are visible from the dining room. The food is excellent and the service impeccable.

The locale is dominated by agricultural crops, such as corn, peanuts and wheat, as well as dairy farms, and native habitat is scattered throughout. The area offers a diverse array of wingshooting, including pass-shooting for doves, spurfowl over pointing dogs, driven guinea fowl and waterfowl over decoys. Bird Hunters Africa has access to 80,000 acres within a 30-mile radius of the lodge. With this much land, specific areas are hunted only a few times during the three-month season.

We enjoyed two mornings of excellent goose hunting for spur-winged and Egyptian geese, and the third morning was a driven guinea fowl shoot. Driven guineas are a real challenge, and the shooting is much like walk-and-block pheasant hunting in the US. In the case of guineas, bird boys do the walking and push birds over the shooters. However, guineas seldom hold, they run like the wind, they seldom fly in the intended direction and they frequently outsmart the best-laid plans. So when three shooters ended up with a baker's dozen of guinea fowl that the morning, everyone was happy.

Afternoons were spent hunting stock ponds where good numbers of ducks were roosting. One afternoon was particularly memorable. We arrived about 2:30 and stowed our gear in a shoreline blind fashioned from reeds while the bird boys set out a dozen decoys. We had been settled in for about 10 minutes when four yellow-billed ducks dove toward the spread. A banking turn brought them into the wind for their final approach, and I was

able to take one while Alan managed a nice double.

Dylan sent his seven-month-old yellow Lab, Jess, who made the first two retrieves easily. Finding the third duck was more challenging, but Jess searched the shoreline vegetation until she came up with it. Quite impressive for such a young dog. The afternoon flight was nearly nonstop, and in two hours we had 30 birds—a mixture of yellow-billed ducks, red-billed teal and a few white-faced whistling ducks.

After our stay at Ingudlane Lodge, we made the five-hour drive to our final destination: Kotoko Lodge, near Bloemfontein. This area is a rich agricultural region where sunflower, corn and wheat crops support huge concentrations of rock pigeons and doves along with good populations of guinea fowl. The pigeon and dove hunting is at its peak in April and May, when the sunflower crop is harvested, and the action is hot-barreled, with shooters often firing at least 500 rounds per day. From June through October the action is steady, but the volume is more moderate.

The first shooting venue was about 20 minutes from the lodge. There we did some pass-shooting for pigeons, which began arriving only seconds after we walked to the hedgerow and loaded our guns. The birds came in high, and then quickly lost altitude as they dropped to the sunflower field. The flight continued at a fast pace, with singles, pairs and flocks of up to 50 coming to the field with regularity. Some provided inbound 30- to 40-yard shots, while others passed by as they left the field. The bag was mostly rock pigeons, but we also shot Cape turtle, redeye and laughing doves. We shot both morning and afternoon, with the morning flight being stronger, and averaged about 50 birds per half-day. Doves and pigeons are considered agricultural pests, and there is no limit or season. The birds harvested are distributed to the bird boys and farm workers.

The next day we targeted guinea fowl along with spurfowl. In contrast to driven guineas, this was walk-up

Clockwise from upper left: Mbangweni Lodge, in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands; a Swainson's spurfowl; shooting decoyed white-faced whistling ducks; a handful of Egyptian geese; and a spur-winged goose.

shooting over pointers. The strategy was to spot flocks out in the open, and then flush them toward cover. Sometimes the cover was grasslands and other times row crops, where singles, pairs and small flocks have a tendency to hold for dogs. This strategy worked, but for every bird flushed within range, a dozen flushed wild.

In this area guinea fowl share the habitat with Swainson's spurfowl, a partridge-like bird formerly considered a species of francolin. Swainson's spurfowl generally are found in small family groups of up to 10 and have a tendency to hold much better than guineas. During the morning, we ran into three coveys and added a half-dozen spurfowl to the bag.

So after covering several miles and wearing out both the shooters and dogs, we ended up with 20 guinea fowl and six Swainson's spurfowl—every bird shot inside 35 yards over points. Not a bad morning in any wingshooter's book!

At the end of our 10-day excursion, I asked Dan and Alan if the trip had met their expectations. Both answered with a resounding, "Yes!" As they said, "Where else in the world can you shoot ducks, geese, doves, pigeons, spurfowl and guinea fowl on the same trip?" The answer is nowhere but South Africa. So next time you're up for the best mixed-bag shooting on the planet, book a trip to the Dark Continent for nonstop action. 🦋

For more information, contact Bird Hunters Africa, [birdhuntersafrica.com](http://birdhuntersafrica.com).

Gary Kramer is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*. His most recent book, *Game Birds, A Celebration of North American Upland Birds*, is available from [garykramer.net](http://garykramer.net).



*The strategy was to spot flocks out in the open, and then flush them toward cover.*

