

A Wingshooter's Guide to Argentina

A primer on hunting
& shooting in Argentina

text & photos by Gary Kramer

Shooting close-in
decoying pigeons
is great sport.



Argentina's eared-dove populations number in the millions, which is why there are no seasons or limits on the birds.

International travel by American hunters can be traced back to the 1800s, when epic voyages by ship were required to reach far-flung destinations. Among those early trips were Teddy Roosevelt's excursions to Africa for big game. It wasn't until after World War II, when aircraft made international travel more convenient, that a significant increase in such adventures occurred. Still, it was typically the rich and famous of the time who could afford these trips. In the 1960s international travel for hunting—again mostly for big game—became more affordable and popular, and by the late 1970s and early '80s international wingshooting had become established, with proven destinations in Mexico, Central and South America, Europe, Africa and New Zealand.

Forays to Colombia for doves and Argentina for geese were among the first regularly scheduled trips outside the US and Mexico. Among international destinations, Argentina quickly rose to the top in terms of both the number and

variety of birds available. Initial interest in Argentina was centered around the goose shooting in Patagonia and the dove shooting near Córdoba. Later duck hunting in various locations came into vogue, and then *perdiz* hunting. Eventually pigeon shooting became part of the variety as well as hunts for California quail. Today there is an infrastructure to support visiting wingshooters, including a cadre of outfitters well versed in meeting the needs and desires of hunters.

While it is difficult to substantiate, it appears that more than 10,000 Americans travel to Argentina each year specifically to wingshoot. Add to this hunters from Europe as well as anglers and big-game hunters from all over the world, and that figure likely jumps to more than 20,000 visitors. Upgraded service aboard reliable airlines, sizeable investments in quality lodging and vehicles, and leasing of hunting areas have opened exciting new worlds for wingshooters. These attributes along with an abundance of birds allow Argentina's wingshooting to be accurately described as "world class."

With a total land area of 2.8 million acres, Argentina is the

world's eighth-largest country. It is also one of the longest, with the distance from the Bolivian border in the north to Tierra del Fuego in the south being nearly 2,400 miles. There are four major physiographic regions: the lowlands, in the north; the central grasslands of the Pampas; the Andes mountains, in the west; and Patagonia, in the south. While Argentina is an industrialized nation, the country's economy is still largely dependent on agricultural-export commodities, including hides, wool, beef and grain.

DOVES

The doves in Argentina are eared doves, a species first discovered and hunted in Colombia and today shot primarily in Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia. Endemic to most of South America, eared doves are similar in size and appearance to North American mourning doves. The main difference is that eared doves have shorter square tails in contrast to the long pointed tails of mourning doves.

Eared doves are prolific, and under optimum habitat conditions their numbers can reach monumental proportions. Conditions are perfect in Argentina, where food is plentiful and includes vast crops of wheat, corn, sorghum and sunflowers. Irrigation canals and impoundments provide water, and wooded areas are used for nesting and as roosts. Doves have multiple hatches annually and do not migrate. All this equates to populations that number in the millions. In fact, doves have become pests to local farmers, and it is estimated that 20 percent or more of all grain crops in Argentina are lost to the birds. Eared doves are found throughout Argentina, from the semi-tropics of the north to the frigid region of Tierra del Fuego in the south. The only place they are absent is at the highest elevations of the Andes.

There is no season or limit on doves in Argentina. In the absence of a limit, the number of birds bagged is determined by the number of doves in the area, the skills of the



WHAT HAPPENED TO GOOSE HUNTING?

While geese can no longer be hunted in Argentina, few hunters know the reason that the hunts were halted. An explanation to clear up the misconceptions might be of interest. Goose hunting was popular for decades, with most of the action in southern Buenos Aires province as well as Rio Negro, Chubut and San Cruz provinces and along the east slope of the Andes mountains. In fact, my first trip to Argentina, in the early 1980s, was for geese and ducks.

The species hunted were the upland goose (pictured)—often referred to as the Magellan goose—and the smaller ashy-headed goose. A third species, the ruddy-headed goose, was rare and found only in a small area in southern Buenos Aires and eastern Rio Negro provinces. It was legal quarry, as well, but very few birds were shot.

In the early 2000s the population of ruddy-headed geese began to decline. As a result, in 2007 several regulations were instituted, including the closure of all goose hunting in the southern coastal areas of Buenos Aires province. All inland areas remained open, but the goose bag in open areas was restricted to male Magellan geese only. The males are predominantly white and easily distinguished from the primarily brown ruddy-headed geese. Ashy-headed and female Magellan geese also are brown or brown-gray in color and could not be harvested, to avoid confusing them with ruddy-headed geese. These restrictions continued until 2009, when goose hunting throughout Argentina was closed. As a wildlife biologist, I find this decision perplexing. It would have been easy to protect ruddy-headed geese by closing the relatively small area where they wintered. Instead, the government chose a radical strategy and closed goose hunting country-wide. Will goose hunting ever reopen in Argentina? I doubt it. —G.K.



Pigeons are often pass-shot along with doves, or they can be decoyed in harvested grainfields or between feeding and roosting areas.

shooter and the amount of money the shooter is willing to spend on shells. Like their brethren everywhere, eared doves are swift fliers, and they offer fast and furious wing-shooting.

Shooting is often offered for doves as a single species or in combination with pigeons, and some locations offer true mixed-bag opportunities for doves, ducks, *perdiz* and pigeons. Most hunters associate Argentina with high-volume dove shooting, and the location most often mentioned is Córdoba. The Córdoba region consistently delivers excellent shooting and is home to world-class lodges that specialize

in doves. However, there are numerous other provinces that offer dove shooting, including Corrientes, Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos, La Pampa, Salta, San Luis, Santiago del Estero, Santa Fe and Tucumán. Many of the lodges in these regions offer dove-only opportunities year-round, while others offer dove shooting most of the year and then switch to mixed-bag hunting in May, June and July.

Dove shooting in most areas has two distinct seasons. October through April are the warm months, and most shooting is near roosts or in flyways going to and from roosts. The days are long, and the action starts early, with shooters often returning to the lodge at midday for lunch and a siesta before heading out again for the afternoon shoot. May through September are the cooler months, and the shooting is often in grainfields where the doves are feeding and occasionally near roosts. During this period the days are shorter, and shooters often stay in the field all day, with a midday break for lunch.

Argentina is where impressive records can be set for the number of doves bagged in one day. The goal of many shooters is to take 1,000 birds in a day. In many locations this can be accomplished. Argentina is the place to hone shooting skills on seemingly endless birds. In most cases the doves are brought back to the lodge to be prepared as hors d'oeuvres, while others are given to local residents or distributed to local farmers for use as hog feed.

DUCKS

While Argentina is best known as a dove shooting destination, duck hunting draws considerable interest as well. And for good reason: When it comes to international duck hunting, Argentina really has no peer. With quality habitat, excellent duck populations, adequate limits, low hunting pressure and the availability of more than a dozen species, the country is a true waterfowler's mecca.



Argentina is known for its variety of ducks. Pictured here are (from left) a white-cheeked pintail, a Chiloe wigeon, a yellow-billed teal and a rosy-billed pochard.

One aspect that I enjoy most is the variety, with up to 13 species available. Among these are the “big” ducks: rosy-billed pochards, yellow-billed pintails, white-cheeked pintails and Chiloe wigeon. Add a potpourri of teal—yellow-billed, ringed, silver and cinnamon—plus Brazilian ducks, three species of whistling ducks, red shovelers and a couple of others, and you have the ultimate variety. While not all duck hunting areas offer the full array of species, the diversity is none the less impressive. Only cinnamon teal and fulvous whistling ducks are found in both North and South America. The others are all endemic to South America.

Because Argentina is in the southern hemisphere, the duck season is the opposite of that in the US. The season is variable by province, with dates running from April through August. Argentina's ducks

are both resident and migratory. There is a south-to-north migration, and by May most areas have seen an influx of birds from the breeding areas in southern Argentina and Chile. There is also a north-to-south migration that brings mostly whistling ducks and Brazilian ducks to Argentina from Brazil.

Duck limits in Argentina, depending on the province and outfitter, are 15 to 25 daily. That may sound excessive by US standards, but the difference is the low number of waterfowl hunters in Argentina. Most outfitters enforce the limits established by the provincial government.

Argentine hunters seldom pursue ducks, and the price of shotguns and ammunition put waterfowling out of reach for most rural residents. Therefore, virtually all ducks harvested are by visiting hunters. At various lodges, ducks are served as hors d'oeuvres or at evening meals, with the rest given to bird boys, staff and local families.

Ducks are often hunted as the sole quarry, especially in Buenos Aires and Rio Negro provinces. In most other areas, however, including Corrientes, Entre Ríos, La Pampa and Santa Fe provinces, they are part of mixed-bag packages. Duck hunting is often a morning activity in mixed-bag hunts, and generally the shooting is over decoys, with two hunters accompanied by a guide.

PERDIZ

Perdiz are actually tinamou—a widespread South America gamebird. These ground-dwelling birds occupy much the same ecological niche as the partridge of Europe and the prairie grouse of North America. Like partridge and prairie grouse, they feed on seeds and green shoots and are consequently excellent table fare. Unlike partridge and grouse, *perdiz* don't form coveys, instead traveling alone or occasionally in pairs.

Perdiz are found throughout South America and occupy



◀ *Perdiz* are hunted in grasslands and pastures, which typically have very short cover.

a variety of habitats from the high Andes to the temperate grasslands of Tierra del Fuego. While numerous species of *perdiz* are found in Argentina, most of them are not legal quarry. The species hunted is the spotted tinamou. The birds inhabit grasslands, pastures and grasslands interspersed with brush, but they avoid forested areas, dense brush and high elevations. They are larger than quail and the color of hen pheasants, and they fly like gray, or Hungarian, partridge. Their white meat is highly desirable, and virtually every *perdiz* shot ends up on the dinner table of the lodge or given to the staff.

Unlike doves and pigeons, which are considered agricultural pests, *perdiz* are revered as quality gamebirds by Argentine hunters. The season opens May 1 and extends through August in most areas, and daily limits are eight to 12, depending on the province.

Perdiz are often a key species in mixed-bag hunts. Their season coincides with that of ducks, making them a natural for mixed-bag programs. Virtually all *perdiz* hunts involve the use of pointing dogs. Pointers, English setters, Brittanys and German shorthaired pointers are the most common breeds used. *Perdiz* often hold well and offer 20- to 35-yards shots, with flushes reminiscent of bobwhite quail or gray partridge—although, as mentioned, typically only one or two birds will get up. They are hunted in the grasslands and pastures, which oftentimes have relatively short cover. *Perdiz* are included in many mixed-bag hunts, but they are most abundant in Corrientes, Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, Buenos Aires and La Pampa provinces.

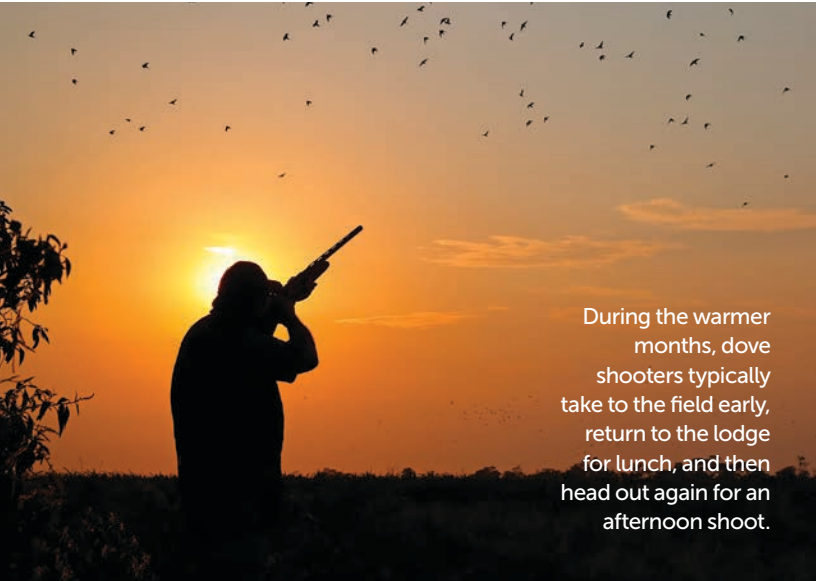
PIGEONS

There are two species of pigeons in Argentina. Picazuro pigeons are the largest and generally the most abundant. They are found in a range of habitats, from urban areas to savannas and light woodlands in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. They have purple-and-gray bodies and silvery patches on the sides of their necks. In flight their black flight feathers and pale-gray wingbars are distinctive. They are larger than domestic pigeons and can weigh up to one pound.

The other species are spot-winged pigeons, which are about the size of domestic pigeons and weigh 10 to



Duck hunting is for both resident and migratory birds, and because there is little hunting pressure, limits are generous.



During the warmer months, dove shooters typically take to the field early, return to the lodge for lunch, and then head out again for an afternoon shoot.

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12 ounces. They are mostly blue-gray in color; however, their most distinctive markings—and the reason for their common name—are the creamy white spots on their wings. They are found in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

Pigeon shooting—and specifically pigeons over decoys—is less well-known than high-volume dove hunting. The practice of placing decoys in harvested fields and building blinds for concealment is not new. It originated as an effective method of shooting wood pigeons in the UK, where the birds have been hunted this way for centuries.

Unlike pass-shooting doves as they fly to roost by the millions, decoy pigeon shooting is a more intimate affair. Commercially made pigeon decoys and dead birds propped up on sticks or wire holders draw pigeons in close. In recent years rotating devices with pigeon decoys—or pigeon wheels, as they are often called—have become popular. Similar to duck hunting, a blind made of local materials is fashioned and surrounded by two dozen or more decoys. Then as birds are shot, they are set out near the blind, to increase the size and drawing power of the spread. Blinds are generally set up in harvested rice, sorghum or corn fields or between feeding and roosting areas. The birds decoy well and, as with ducks, singles, pairs and small flocks are most likely to present close shots. It's great sport, and if you like shooting decoying ducks, you will thoroughly enjoy this challenge.

There are few places in Argentina where pigeons are pursued exclusively; more often they are pass-shot along with doves. Dove-and-pigeon combo trips are most common in Córdoba, Santiago del Estero, San Luis, Salta and Tucumán provinces. In these places the birds can be hunted year-round, and there are no limits. Most pigeons are taken as part of mixed-bag programs. Hunts that offer four species—doves, ducks, *perdiz* and pigeons—are the most limited of the mixed-bag programs. Such four-species hunts are most frequently offered in Corrientes, Entre Ríos, La Pampa and Santa Fe provinces.

TRAVELING TO ARGENTINA

All trips to Argentina start with a flight to Buenos Aires. Numerous airlines, including United from Houston, American from Dallas and Miami, and Delta from Atlanta, have daily direct flights to Buenos Aires' international airport. If travel to other cities within Argentina is required, flights can be arranged from BA's domestic airport. There are flights on LATAM Airlines to Córdoba via Santiago, Chile. Visas are no longer required, as only a passport is needed to enter Argentina.

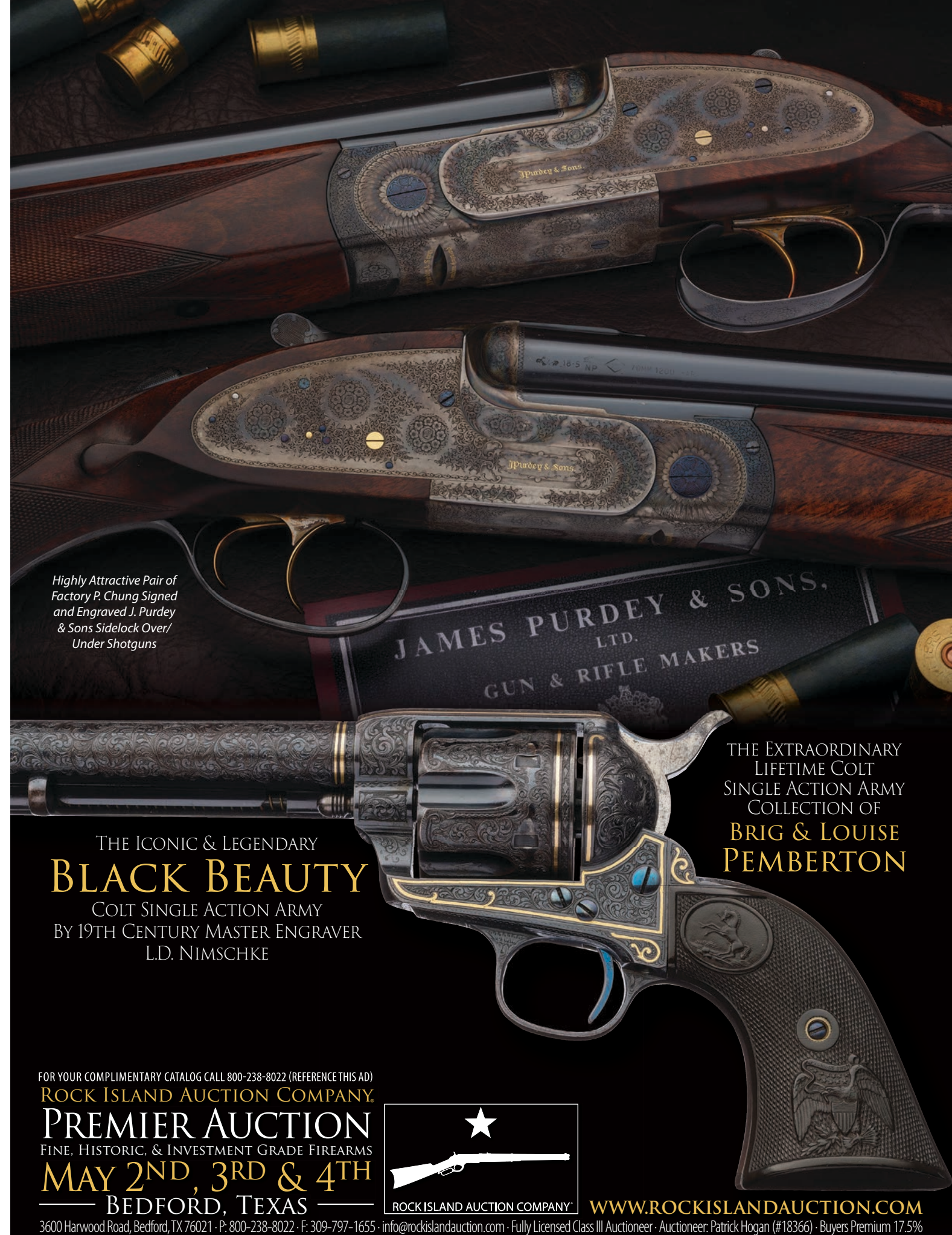
All outfitters either rent shotguns or provide them as part of the hunting package. Hunters can bring their own guns, but arrangements must be made ahead of time with the outfitter. The process can be a hassle and is expensive, at \$450 to \$500 per gun. Therefore, unless you *must* have your own gun, it makes a lot of sense to use one of the lodge's.

As an aside, Argentina currently does not allow fully feathered birds to be exported for taxidermy purposes. The weather in Argentina is highly variable and ranges from hot during the fall and summer months (October to March) to cold during the spring and winter months (April to September). Camouflage clothing and waders are a good idea for duck hunting, and hiking boots and orange outerwear work well for *perdiz* and quail. Neutral-colored vests and pants are ideal for doves and pigeons. —G.K

CALIFORNIA QUAIL

California quail are native to western North America. The first releases in Argentina took place in the 1920s. The quail quickly took hold in the brushy slopes and foothills of Patagonia, and today huntable populations are found in the western regions of Chubut and Rio Negro provinces and throughout much of Neuquén Province.

California quail hunts are single-species pursuits, but they are frequently combined with trout fishing and even red stag hunting for the ultimate cast-and-blast trip. Most of the lodges that offer quail hunting use pointing or flushing dogs. California quail are found in coveys that range from 20 to more than 100 birds. A covey rise of 100 birds often can be so



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overwhelming that only one or two shots are fired. The important part is to watch where the birds land, and then to follow up the singles, doubles and small groups. The quail season is April 1 to July 31, and the limit is 15 birds daily.

Since my first trip to Argentina more than 30 years ago, little has changed. Exotic ducks can be decoyed in pristine marshes, *perdiz* can be hunted over seasoned pointing dogs, quail can be flushed in Patagonia, and doves and pigeons can be shot until your shoulder is sore. I predict that Argentina will continue to shine as the jewel of South American wingshooting for decades to come. Isn't it about time you gave it a try? 🐾

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.

SCHEDULING A TRIP

Following is a list of select outfitters and booking agencies that offer shooting and hunting trips in Argentina along with the provinces and regions where they operate and the bird species they target. Keep in mind that it's advisable to schedule a trip far in advance, to give you plenty of time to prepare. —THE EDITORS

OUTFITTERS

- **Argentina's Best Hunting** (argentinasbesthunting.com): Entre Ríos; doves, ducks, pigeons and *perdiz*.
- **Los Laureles Lodge** (excitingoutdoors.com): Entre Ríos, La Pampa and Patagonia; ducks, doves, pigeons, *perdiz* and California quail.
- **Miles & Miles Argentina** (milesandmilesargentina.com): Córdoba and Salta; doves, pigeons and *perdiz*.

BOOKING AGENCIES

- **High Adventure Company** (highadventurecompany.com): Córdoba, Entre Ríos and Patagonia; ducks, doves, pigeons, *perdiz* and California quail.
- **Trek International Safaris** (treksafaris.com): Córdoba, Buenos Aires, Corrientes, Entre Ríos, Salta, Santa Fe, San Luis, Santiago de Estero, Tucumán; ducks, doves, pigeons and *perdiz*.

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