

Pacific Northwest ... (from page 1)

of **Northwest Sea Ducks**. After a three-hour drive out of Seattle, we rendezvoused with Swansen just south of the Canadian border and struck out at daybreak from the U.S. mainland into the frigid waters of the Strait of Georgia. Swansen piloted his duck boat to a spot between Port Roberts and Birch Bay where, to our surprise, he set out a rigging of only four Harlequin decoys. Backing off about 25 yards from the decoys, we dropped anchor and settled in to await the Harlequins skimming over the early morning chop.

Our wait was not long. A lone drake soon appeared on the horizon winging right to left and navigating straight for the decoys. In less than an hour of hunting we had our daily and season limit of one Harlequin each.

Swansen pulled the rigs and quickly moved us about seven miles east to set up between sheltered coves and open water—a spot tailor-made for scoters, which feed on fingernail clams and lichen. This time Swansen put out four multi-decoy lines, varying from six to eight scoter blocks to a single line, then moved the boat approximately 30 yards from the inside dekes.

During the remainder of the morning we shot surf scoters with their white-patched heads and exceptional multi-colored bills, mature big-bodied white-winged scoters, lesser scaup and a Barrow's golden-eye. But no black scoter, the only other species I wanted to collect for a mount.

A passing golden-eye drake gave me the chance to shoot away my disappointment, but Swansen caught my attention. He nodded towards the boat's bow and the flash of silver gray underwing tips against black linings and bodies. As fast as our reflexes allowed, Tom and I fired on the two lead birds and we completed our fabulous day on the water with two

black scoter drakes in hand.

Many good and reasonably priced hotels and restaurants are located along the Interstate 5 corridor between Everett and Bellingham and near hunting areas. Swansen is prepared to assist clients with arrangements and has negotiated cost savings with certain establishments. Our room at the **Fidalgo Country Inn, Anacortes, Wash. (800-244-4179)** was clean and comfortable with a very reasonable rate.

Food service in the area runs from small country inns to popular chain restaurants.

The next morning Swansen suggested that we move south, deeper into the San Juan Islands to seek Barrow's golden-eyes. After a 40-minute drive and launch from a driftwood-strewn beach, Swansen maneuvered through a fine mist into one of the many sheltered coves where he suspected large numbers of ducks would begin feeding as the day brightened. He again carefully positioned multi-decoy lines, this time using a mix of scoter and golden-eye blocks with the odd bufflehead thrown in. Shooting started out brisk, but tailed off as an unexpected hailstorm moved into the area and pounded us for about twenty minutes. Nevertheless, the quality of hunting that day was nearly a repeat of the previous day's, minus the Harlequins. In over 45 years hunting, the last 20 of which I've devoted to sea duck hunting, this trip marked the first time I had shot all three species of scoter drakes in a single day.

This outstanding experience costs \$500 per day for one or two shooters and an additional \$250 for a third. This covers guide services, a light lunch and beverage. Swansen suggests a minimum booking of two days and says his clients enjoyed a 100 percent success rate while targeting Harlequins in the Strait

of Georgia last season.

The Washington state hunting season lasts 110 days, beginning the second Saturday in October and running through late January. Ducks can be hunted seven days a week. There is a seven-bird per day limit with no more than four scoters, four old squaw and one Harlequin in the bag. In 2005, the Washington State non-resident small game license was \$164.25 and the state migratory bird stamp, \$10.95. All persons hunting sea ducks in Washington are required to fill out a "Written Authorization and Harvest Report." The report is available from the **Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 360-902-2200, www.wdfw.wa.gov**.

The hunts are not strenuous at all if you're dressed properly. When seeking a Harlequin be prepared to encounter severe weather conditions and boat travel over big water where tide swings are substantial. Heavyweight neoprene chest waders, warm waterproof clothing and a well-maintained shotgun designed to withstand elements are a must. Most important, choose a qualified guide, like Swansen, who displays these attributes: duck hunting experience, a waterman's knowledge of Puget Sound and above all, a focus on safety. Contact Dane Swansen, **Northwest Sea Ducks, 3797 Francis Road, Mt. Vernon, Wash., 90273, 360-391-0869, dane@northwestseaducks.com**.

-Kinsey M. Robinson

From **Ducks Unlimited**, this *Fowlfact*: The name of the Harlequin duck comes not from the romance novels, but rather from a character of Italian comedy that wears a colorful patchwork costume and a strangely painted face (resembling the male harlequin duck's breeding colors). Local names from Canada include: *lords and ladies*, *squeakers*, *white-eyed divers* and *sea mice*.

Dateline: Southern Africa

Mixed Bag Shooting— and Plenty of Scenery

- Over a dozen species to hunt
- Travel by train
- **Accommodations:** Comfortable luxury resorts and camps
- **Food:** Fine regional dining

- **Hunt:** Easy to moderate

For centuries the exotic and abundant wildlife of the African continent has drawn big game hunters from all over the world. In contrast, wingshooting safaris have come of age only in the past two decades. While organized bird hunting is available

throughout Africa, Southern Africa has the most developed programs and the most outfitters. And among these, two outfitters stand out when long-term program delivery and quality become the criteria for selecting a wingshooting safari.

The first is veteran bird shooting outfitter is **Mark Haldane** of **Bird Hunters**

27-34-2123624, www.birdhuntersafarica.com, www.treksafaris.com. The train trips and lodge-based safaris are

booked by Orvis, 800-547-4322, Orvistravel@orvis.com, www.orvis.com; and Blue Charm Expeditions, 800-

644-2244, Bluecharm@aol.com, www.bluecharmedexpeditions.com.

-Gary Kramer

Dateline: Argentina and Uruguay

A Closer Look At Los Gauchos Outfitters

- A favorite outfitter of *BHR* subscribers
- Lots of waterfowl
- **Accommodations:** "Little farmhouse," comfortable, modern
- **Food:** Gourmet from live-in chefs
- **Hunt:** Easy

Several *Bird Hunting Report* subscribers have described George Criddle as a straight shooter who delivers what he promises. And if he can't, as was the case last year when drought and other weather conditions put the goose migration off, Criddle will go out of his way to make up for it. Here's what he has to say about his outfitting services.

Criddle came to the business in a backwards sort of way—he was a client whose outfitter left him stranded at the airport on his very first trip to Argentina. During his flight, though, he had met an Argentine who lived in the U.S. and whose family owned land in Argentina. The two not only became friends but they also eventually created **Los Gauchos Outfitters**, in Coronel Pringles County in Buenos Aires.

For two years, they ran hunts out of backcountry *estancias*, little farmhouses that Criddle describes as old, "clapped out" facilities with thin mattresses, a trickle of a shower and fireplaces and blankets for heat. The upside was the flights of ducks and geese they were able to produce for their clients. Before long, the two built a facility with all the comforts and amenities of a modern lodge.

What sets Los Gauchos apart from every other such operation is *location, location, location*. It sits just off a paved roadway only two minutes from the intersection of three major highways in the heart of a major wintering area for Ashy-headed and Magellan geese as well as thousands of ducks. From that vantage, the Los Gauchos clients gain easy access to hunting areas. Guests at other *estancias*, located as many as 15 miles from major roadways, are often required

to take an hour's drive to get to the good roads—double that if the back roads are mucked up by rain. Furthermore, Estancia Los Gauchos' location makes it the only lodge in the region that can offer goose,



duck, perdiz and pigeon hunting all within an hour's drive, says Criddle.

He describes the goose hunting as high-volume shooting for Ashy-heads and Magellans that can be good to spectacular, depending on the conditions. In fields of cut wheat and sunflowers, hunters sit in chairs camouflaged with ghillie blankets and shoot over decoys. Duck hunting is from dry blinds among the reeds on the edge of water or in cut cornfields. Species that hunters can collect include rosy-billed pochard, yellow-billed pintail, cinnamon teal, silver teal, speckled teal, chiloe widgeon and red shoveler, and possibly white-faced tree ducks, white-cheek pintails and black-headed ducks. Los Gauchos provides decoys and Labrador retrievers.

English setters, pointers and Brittany spaniels produce "above average" perdiz hunting in pastures and the foothills of the Sierra de la Ventas mountain range. There are also some low-volume shoots for pigeons, mostly near roosts. In total, Los Gauchos has access to over 70,000 acres of varied terrain for all of their shoots.

Criddle says he spends up to \$10,000 a season on supplemental baiting, which is legal in Argentina. He also prides himself on running the business with the efficiency expected of any

American-owned and run operation.

Estancia Los Gauchos is an hour and 15 minutes from the airport in Bahia Blanca. It features four double-occupancy bedrooms with private baths. A fifth room is for couples. Groups are limited to six shooters, individual hunters are welcome, and exclusive use of the lodge can be arranged as well. Amenities include a private business center with phone, fax and high-speed Internet service. A live-in chef prepares meals. Hunt packages are for three or four days, with clients arriving at the lodge on a Sunday evening in time for dinner. The season for ducks and geese runs from May 1 to Aug. 1.

The cost is \$850 per day, per hunter; non-shooters sharing a room with a hunter, \$350. That includes ground transportation from Bahia Blanca, all meals and beverages (including premium brand liquor), use of 12-gauge Benelli shotguns, 24-hour business center with internet service, all hunting licenses and all gratuities for both the house and field staffs. Los Gauchos also offers full-service travel planning and can arrange international and domestic airfare, assistance with clearing customs and hotel stays in Buenos Aires.

Another chance meeting led Criddle to establish another lodge in Rocha, Uruguay, about a three-hour drive from Montevideo near the Brazilian border. Here he offers what he calls "old-fashioned duck hunting" on a rice plantation. The fields attract eight species of migrating ducks, plus Ashy-headed geese. While he cannot guarantee 100 geese a day, Criddle says the shooting is consistently good. He has access to over 25,000 acres of fields and pastures. Depending on the period hunted, clients can take rosy-bills, pintails, widgeons, silver teal, speckled teal, yellow-billed teal, red shovellers, white-faced tree ducks and Brazilian ducks. Hunts take place about 30 minutes from the lodge. Hunters wade about 15 yards along the rice roads to platform blinds for morning hunts. Afternoon duck hunts are on potholes, or clients may opt for an afternoon perdiz hunt

Africa. Haldane is a respected professional hunter who operates from his **Zulu Wings Lodge** in northern KwaZulu-Natal near Dundee, South Africa. Bird Hunters Africa has offered wingshooting safaris for nearly 20 years and I've had the good fortune to shoot with Haldane on four occasions. The hunting takes place within a radius of 50 kilometers of the lodge, which makes the drives to the shooting areas 10 to 40 minutes. Haldane has leased more than 100,000 acres for shooting, and with this much acreage he has the luxury of hunting a specific piece of ground only once or twice a season. Agricultural lands devoted to corn, milo and peanuts, and grazing land dominate the region. This habitat base supports a variety of game birds and waterfowl and as a result, mixed bag shoots are the strong point of this safari. During a typical 10-day safari, clients will shoot doves in harvested grain fields, francolin over seasoned pointers, driven guinea fowl, rock pigeons from pits and waterfowl over decoys.

Zulu Wings Lodge serves quality meals and has six double rooms, each with a bath. The maximum number of hunters is eight.

Bird Hunters Africa's second lodge is near Baynesfield, about a 2-hour drive from Dundee. The lodge overlooks a trout lake and sleeps eight in four cabins, each with a bath. This area was selected for its outstanding goose shooting. Here both Egyptian and spur-winged geese are hunted over decoys from pits dug in corn and milo fields. Additionally, there is pass shooting for doves and pigeons as well as francolin over pointers.

A new area for 2006 is a hot barrel pigeon shoot in the Bloemfontein area. The pigeons are hunted as they flock to large sunflower fields. This is challenging shooting and experienced hunters can expect 500 to 700 shots per day. The season for pigeons starts in early April and runs through the end of August. The earlier hunts tend to produce the highest volume shooting. Clients are housed at the Oude Kraal Guest Lodge, a property well known for its excellent accommodations and meals.

Although any trip can be customized, typical safaris are 10 days and include a combination of all three areas with a two-day break at a five-star game reserve in the middle. Trip cost is \$4,500/

hunter and \$3,800/nonhunter, excluding international airfare. The trips are available between May 31 and Aug. 31. Daily customized activities are arranged for non-hunters including visits to local crafts markets, the Drakensberg Mountains, Zulu villages, and battlefields and game reserves.

Bird Hunters Africa also offers waterfowl collector trips to central Mozambique. Mozambique is one of the few places where African pygmy geese can be collected along with spur-winged geese, Hottentot teal, comb ducks, red-billed teal, white-backed ducks and white-faced and fulvous whistling ducks. Crested guinea fowl, crested fran-



colin, and red-necked spurfowl also are available. Collector trips are available in September and October. Clients fly from Johannesburg to Beira then catch a 50-minute charter to camp. Collector trips are \$500/day once you reach camp.

Peter Johnson developed and operates bird shooting trips aboard the **Rovos Rail**. The train trips offer quality shooting, luxury travel and a serious price tag. Prices range from \$16,000 to \$20,500, depending on the duration of the safari duration and the number of guns. In 2006, there are only two shooter/non-shooter spaces left on a six-day train trip scheduled for July 24 to 29, priced at \$16,680/shooter and \$3,900/nonshooter in a 10-gun party.

In an effort to make available the same private estates and quality game bird shooting as the train-based shoots, Johnson, in cooperation with **Gamebirds Southern Africa, Inc.** (a coalition of 50 properties in four African countries totaling more than a million acres of habitat) has created three lodge-based shooting itineraries. The lodges and luxury tent camps are used as "shoot hubs" and charter flights and vehicles take clients to the shooting venues. Removing the train as the base of operations from the equation

reduces the cost considerably while the upscale lodges and excellent shooting maintain a quality experience. "The Kalahari Bushmanland Shoot" is a six-day, lodge-based South African safari (available June through August) that incorporates four shooting days. The trip starts in Kimberly where a Gamebirds representative meets clients. During the safari, clients stay at the upscale Kimberly Club or Edgerton Lodge. Each day, transfers by charter aircraft or vehicle take clients to harvested grain fields for duck/goose and dove/pigeon pass shooting, native bushveld for driven guinea fowl and francolin and the Kalahari Desert for sandgrouse. Game viewing and historic tours are arranged for the non-shooters. The price is \$7,750/shooter and \$2,775/non-shooter (double occupancy) for 7 to 10 guns.

"The Zambian Woodland Shoot" is an eight-day, lodge-based safari (July through October) that originates in Lusaka, Zambia and incorporates five days of shooting. Participants stay at the Chaminuka Lodge near Lusaka, a lodge on the Lower Zambezi River and the Sussi and Chuma Lodge near Livingstone. From these locations, clients participate in driven guinea fowl and francolin shoots where up to 150 native beaters drive the birds over a line of guns. Game viewing in Lower Zambezi National Park, visits to Victoria Falls and angling for tigerfish are part of the program. The price is \$8,850/shooter and \$3,900/non-shooter (double occupancy) based on 8 to 10 guns.

"The Okavango Delta and Zambian Woodland Shoot" is a seven-day, lodge-based safari (July through September) in Botswana and Zambia that incorporates five days of shooting. The safari starts in Maun, Botswana followed by a charter flight to a concession in the Okavango Delta. Clients stay at a tented safari camp at Gorokwe or Mababe. On day four, clients are transferred to Zambia via charter flight where accommodations are at Chaminuka Lodge near Lusaka. The shooting is a rich combination of high volume dove pass shooting and driven guinea fowl and francolin. World-class game viewing in the Okavango Delta is included. The price is \$8,350/shooter and \$3,400/nonshooter (double occupancy) for 5 to 8 guns.

Contact **Bird Hunters Africa** at 011-