

# ON A DRIVE OUT WEST



## THE RAREST OF SHOOTING SPORTS AT LAZY TRIPLE CREEK RANCH

The guns were booming from all eight pegs far below as we anchored the ends of our line of beaters near the top of a bluff and let the center continue pressing toward the drop-off. From my end of the line, looking toward that closing center, I could see dozens-no, hundreds-more pheasants escaping the standing corn into the 20 yards of open space between the crops and the precipice. In the sage and scrub they zipped about, panicky, until the human commotion pressed them onward, pushing them into the air and over the edge as their best escape route. In singles and pairs, in clusters and waves they broke for the open, launching downslope or clawing for enough altitude to carry them above the aspens and evergreens rising 100 yards away on the far side of the canyon.

The gunfire built to a crescendo as shooters picked their targets, loaders stuffed shells and passed shining guns in that most vigilant ballet, and we beaters waved hats above our heads or flapped orange flags as the last waves of birds flew. Finally, all of the pheasants had gone-some peeling back over us and into the corn, the bulk taking their chances over the void. Only the luckiest birds made the other side, as the Guns knew what they were doing. Shooting Director Lars Magnusson gave a two-second blast on his hunt horn, and the final drive of a spectacular day came to a close, as dog handlers and pickers-up began scouring the far hillside where many of the birds had fallen.

BY ED CARROLL

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From the beaters' vantage atop the plateau and above the bustle, Gamekeeper Martin Taylor's radio crackled briefly, and then the second-generation keeper and British ex-pat raised the hand-held aloft for the benefit of all of us working the drive: "Congratulations, everybody!" came the greeting from a partner of Lazy Triple Creek Ranch who had watched the excitement from the line of Guns. "That was as good a drive and as many great birds as you'll find on a shoot anywhere- anywhere in the world!"

"Great work, everyone! Thank you!"

The peculiarities of this shooting day were not in the towering pheasants and red-legged partridge, or in the thrill of high birds sweeping over the pegs and hot barrels. The affluent Americans enjoying this rarest of days were well practiced from years on the clays course, and many were experienced with driven shooting. No, the real difference here was that this

traditional English shoot took place on a stunning September day in the American West under sparkling blue skies, amid sagebrush and wild country, and all within a two-hour drive of Jackson, Wyoming, one of the West's pre-eminent gathering places for outdoor pursuits. It was my privilege to take part-even as observer and beater-on a shooting day at Lazy Triple Creek Ranch in the Big Hole Mountains of eastern Idaho.

It seems an unlikely place-somewhat isolated and out of character-for this Old World tradition, staged in the rugged draws between eroded plateaus of Western ranchland. Still more unlikely: A zealous application of capital and talent has created one of the finest of the few authentic driven shoots ever attempted in the US. No detail is overlooked or expense spared, and the chance to stay and shoot at Lazy Triple Creek will be regarded as a treasured sign of arrival among American wingshooters.

A group of investment partners bought Lazy Triple Creek's more than 2,200 acres and existing 9,000-square-foot log lodge with the intent of concentrating 25 home sites on a small portion of the land while holding the vast majority of it open for recreation and the owners' use.

They brought in Magnusson, who was an instructor at the prestigious West London Shooting School for nearly a decade and was lured from his most recent position as Managing Director of the Griffin & Howe Shooting School by the prospect of creating a shoot that bears his creative hand. Martin Taylor, joined the team and left his position as a beat keeper at Ashcombe, the 1,100-acre estate in Southern England now owned by Guy Ritchie and Madonna. That decision could not have come easily, as Taylor's father was a keeper in the area before him, and The Field selected Ashcombe as one of the top 10 pheasant shoots in Britain.

The money, vision and talent have built far more than a simulated shoot to stage a time or two each year like some cultural reenactment. Lazy Triple Creek hosted 14 driven days between late August and the end of October 2007, the ranch's second season of shooting.



This scale entails habituating thousands of pheasants and partridge-literally truckload upon truckload-to the grounds and sheltering them from avian and ground predators amid the crops planted to sustain them. (The Wyoming-based supplier raised not only pheasants, but also special-order red-legged partridge hatched from eggs imported from France. He said he was awestruck by the wild-flying results when he visited in November.) Magnusson and Taylor have recruited a network of enthusiastic helpers from the surrounding rural farm towns and small commercial centers, bringing in upward of 30 for each shoot day to work the beating line or handle dogs in picking up birds.

The handful of investment partners have changed course since the outset, deciding that their original plan might have allowed more owners and guests than the exclusivity of the sport could really support. This past season Lazy Triple Creek hosted two-night stays for a range of groups. A typical stay includes an afternoon shooting clays, a full day of drives, and walked-up shooting behind dogs on the final morning. What few openings remained were advertised at \$4,000 per Gun, but such opportunities are sure to diminish as new partners and their guests fill the shoot calendar. The group I tagged along with flew to Idaho Falls in a private jet from Atlanta, arriving at the lodge in time for lunch on Friday. I already had had the full grounds tour with Magnusson, who was intent on tweaking the target presentations at a new 5 Stand setup. An impressive network of roads and cart paths winds through the hills on the far side of the valley from the lodge amid a complete, top-notch sporting clays course that would be the envy of many well-established clubs. Magnusson has positioned more than 60 new claybird

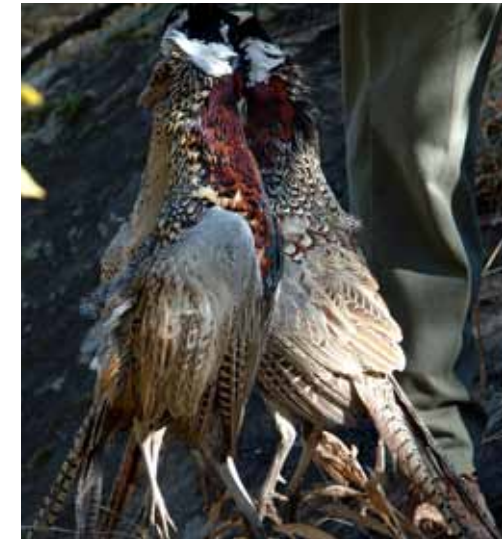
traps throughout the various features on the ranch, giving a sense of scale to the investment in facilities. A rock-lined simulated grouse butt sits at the base of an extensive cleared slope, where Magnusson can call for at least eight different targets that help prepare guests for shooting driven birds. It's also an opportunity for Magnusson to check shooters' skills and offer tune-up tips-and he can be engaged for more extensive instruction or a gun-fitting.

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Our group shot the grouse butt after lunch on Friday, and later we moved to a trail partway down a steep hillside where we were strung out 20 yards apart. Here, with loaders, we took our stands while 40 yards above a battery of nine ProMatic launchers hurled a random and dizzying flurry over and past us. We shot a couple of flurries that seemed to run about two boxes apiece, and occasionally looking up and down the line I could see that poaching others' birds was the game for this cordial group.

The lodge experience has the same hybridized culture

that gives rise to a true British shoot near a trendy resort town of the American West. The food is extraordinary, from gnoshings to desserts, with entrees built around the best Western beef and bison one can imagine. But the manners are ceremonial as from British custom: Gentlemen wear jackets and ties at dinner; all sit together without fail, as at a proper dinner; and when dinner is finished, all move as one to the great room for port, fruit, cheese and conversation. And no



approaching the last stage of its drive. We stood in the arid scent of sage and evergreen, anxiously awaiting an onslaught of gamebirds in a ritual that dates back at least to Victorian England.

The beaters approached the crest of the opposite slope, which rose perhaps 20 yards above our positions and almost 200 yards away; we could hear their murmur and sticks and commotion coming through the underbrush-and at long last the cackles and wingbeats of launching roosters and hens. The birds burst through treetops and into the open with little distance or time left for shooters to react-maybe 75 yards and closing fast. Safety is of the utmost importance when shooting over a line of beaters, and this team of Guns was rightfully choosy in waiting for birds that showed plenty of blue sky beneath them. This resulted in passing up all "easy" shots in front and forcing up muzzles for birds almost overhead.

As an observer unhurried by the rigors of shooting, it was interesting to recognize the ways that a good gamekeeper orchestrates each drive, collects and pushes birds across the terrain, and also sets the pace and tenor of the day. The first drive, although exciting and offering more birds than the average foot hunter might see in a year, was basically a warm-up for the Guns, who settled into the day with birds that numbered in the dozens rather than hundreds. With the beaters visible through the treetops, the first drive ended and the dog handlers let loose a squad of mostly Labs to fetch the birds.

The second and third drives built in intensity, offering more birds and a greater open space in front of the guns. But because of canyon walls sloping up to the







line of beaters, the blue-sky rule required that Guns not shoot until the birds were nearly overhead-and as a result really moving. To add to the challenge, more partridge started plunging off of the top, forcing shooters to adjust between big, fast birds and smaller, really fast birds.

Nature and topography played a role in the third drive, which was lower but facing the same slope. The downhill end of the line faced a steep bluff of rock high above, and as the drive gained momentum it was clear that hundreds of partridge were coming over the edge but settling into the rocks rather than flying. Several raptors circled, and it looked like the red-legs would take their chances on the ground rather than share the airspace with predators. Martin marshaled the beaters down the slope, and as they picked their way to the rocks, the partridge took wing by the dozens, sweeping over the last two or three Guns in less than a minute of frenzied shooting.

We enjoyed six drives that day, with four in the morning and two after a sumptuous lunch. The afternoon drives moved amazing numbers of birds, which I saw from the beaters' perspective.

Dinner that night was so much better, with the day's excitement still fresh and tales of poaching prowess

and the quality of the birds on everyone's minds. Conversations lingered over port a little longer, and several of us carried on into the wee hours with far broader experiences shared.

Sunday morning after breakfast we set off for lower lands and streambeds for a few hours of walked-up hunting. The course I shared with two other Guns, a guide and a dog was thick with birds. We had great fun, and I even managed to drop a few pheasants in the going-away mode I'm more accustomed to. Like orchestrating the drives, though, these walk-ups serve a greater goal of breaking up concentrations of birds and also pushing them back toward the draws and plateaus where they'll become part of future drives.

Our group's card for the driven day showed a bag of 273 pheasants and 107 partridge taken by eight Guns. When I spoke with him after the season, Magnusson said that every subsequent shooting day got better, especially as the weather grew colder. (This was corroborated by Guns who shot there later in the season.)

"The birds got broken up better, they flew better, and Martin really tweaked the drives and made the results better," Magnusson said, adding that few subsequent days showed bags of less than 400. "Our biggest single day was 775 birds, and that was one that just

came together perfectly and the line of Guns really knew what they were doing."

Lazy Triple Creek Ranch will expand its offerings this year, and Magnusson is enthusiastic in his belief that the driven shooting will continue to improve with greater experience. The ranch plans new offerings for '09 that will include packages of a shooting day and a guided fishing day on an area river; two days of driven shooting; and shooting combined with golf. Opportunities will start at \$32,000 for a team of eight Guns and from \$4,000 per Gun for individuals as openings occur.

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