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# A Walk in the Clouds

When it comes to duck hunting  
and the good life, Argentina is  
pretty close to heaven

BY SKIP KNOWLES

**IT WAS PROVING A BUMPY START TO A DREAM** trip, thanks to Kenny Rogers and Castillian Spanish.

The short, perky cab driver was in the mood for chit-chat as we pointed his little beater car west from Buenos Aires and took off through the golden grassy countryside. But my broken gringo Spanish, honed from California to Costa Rica, stumbled badly in the Argentine dialect (*thi! Cath-tillian! thinco!*), which is closer to that of Spain.

Abandoning small talk, he pushed his only cassette into the crackly old stereo and began playing Kenny Rogers' Greatest on an endless loop. He gave me a grinning thumbs up, probably to assure he could sing better than the Gambler himself. He could not, but not for lack of trying.

collected six species amid the decoys: speckled, silver, and ringed teal, chiloe wigeon, red shoveler, and yellow-billed pintail. The rosy-billed pochard, a striking black duck with a huge pink bill that I was eager to see, would have to wait. White-faced whistling ducks ghosted through the southern sky as

nicer than I expected, and Diego's gorgeous girlfriend Maria made sure of that with hot coffee, plenty of wine and endless supplies of the famous Argentine grass-fed beef. The massive rack from a red stag covered a pool table. Rustic, but not rough. I slept like death that night.

More pigeons—some twice the size of teal—**decoyed to all the dead ones**, flying wildly around us for tough swinging shots or right to the water's edge for easy ones.

A few hours and four renditions of "Islands In the Stream" (retch!) and "You Decorated My Life" (gag!) later, I was ready to leap from the cab when we arrived at the wooden gates of Diego Munoz's sleepy ranch house in quiet Las Flores.

I unpacked in a rush, strapped on waders, and was soon buried in a clump of reeds, standing in a small pond on an estancia, watching ducks circle. It could have been Texas, except this was late June, and the birds were a wild smattering of species. I missed the first two, then clobbered a silver teal.

"You're shooting in front of them. You just shot that one in the head," whispered Munoz.

Ah, too much summer skeet shooting. I slowed my swing and started dropping birds, mesmerized by the whole scene. As the sun dipped, we

it turned black.

"That was unbelievable," I said, pleasantly overwhelmed.

"We shot a few, not bad, but you have not seen it yet," Diego said.

We spent the evening sipping Malbec wine by the fire and joking about a heavy-set fellow who had fallen in the icy water. Not too shabby for a "straight up duck hunt, not too expensive and nothing fancy," which is how outfitter Ramsey Russell of getducks.com pitched this trip to me a year earlier. "An affordable, authentic trip, the kind your readers will appreciate."

Going to Las Flores, I understood I'd given up a chance for the famous high-volume dove hunting. There would be no white linens, decoying pigeon shoots, or fly fishing, just the best possible duck hunt. The house we stayed in was spacious and warm,

#### DEAD DECOYING

The next morning I hunted with The Waterfowler, old man Pat Pitt, of getducks.com field staff. He was born with webbed feet, and if it has to do with ducks he's done it. He talked of how much he appreciated the kind of sunrise we were witnessing after having a massive heart attack in the blind not long ago. Ducks buzzed in the freezing air in pairs mostly, and we bagged a few dozen by mid-morning, but nearly ran out of shells for a different reason.

Wild pigeons flapped toward our dekes, to my great delight, and we let them have it. More pigeons (some twice the size of teal) decoyed to all the dead ones, flying wildly around us for tough swinging shots or right to the water's edge for easy ones. We didn't limit on ducks, but with the 70 volunteer pigeons we could still warm our hands on our gun barrels.

Shooting a lot more ducks than you're used to can make you feel bad in a hurry, but make it pigeons and I will take it to the plug every time.



Ducks were not the only birds to visit the spread in Argentina. Flocks of pigeons floated in on the breeze for bonus action.

That hunt was spectacular, I said. "Oh no, you have not seen it yet," Diego reassured me.

Oh, but I had. Ever dream you could go back in time? I could already see that Argentina is like a trip to a U.S. that was gone before most of us were born. Where fencerows and prairie grasses were more prevalent than tilled fields. A time when limits were polite suggestions if they existed, habitat was pristine and seemed endless if it was thought of at all, and the birds, oh, the birds. Ancient pickup trucks rumble down the road and old Ford Falcons are everywhere, giving the country that slightly Cuban feel. The gauchos wave from their horses, smiling through their tight, weathered faces.

In Argentina, you don't see the great clouds of ducks like you do in the U.S., (there is no duck factory in the world like North America), but there is very light hunting pressure here. Rabbits are the prime target of locals, and any who chase ducks shoot just a box or two of shells per year, holding out for a few of the delicious corn-eating



Stunning chiloe wigeon and yellow-billed pintails made up a large part of the bag taken during this South American sojourn.

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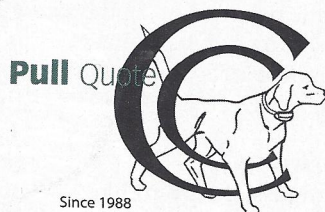
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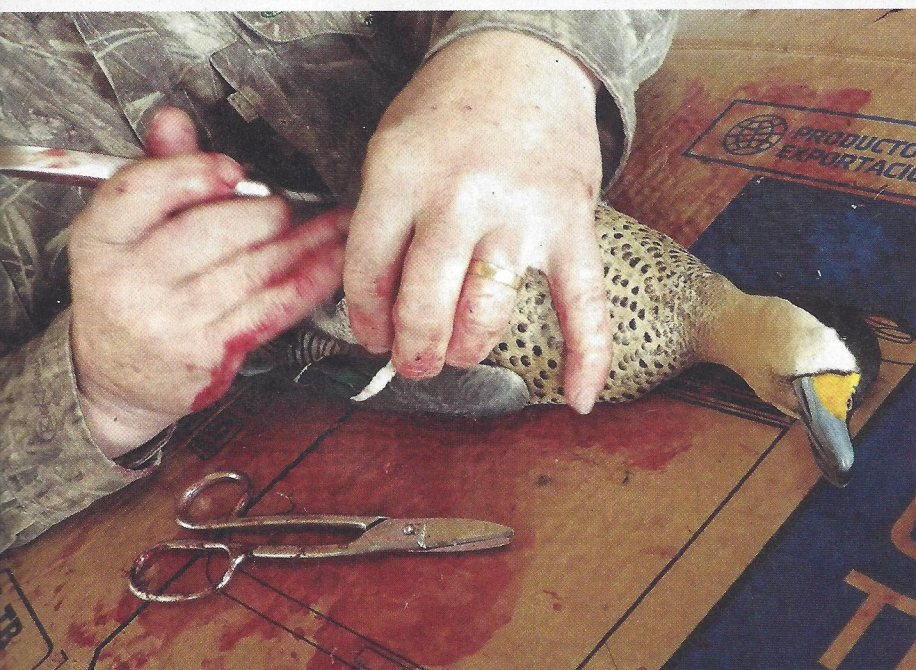


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Clockwise from top left: Big skeeters arrive on warm days; the old boys Pat Pitt and Greg Grinder hold court; silver teal and yellow-billed pintail and taxidermy lessons with Pitt.



rosy-billed pochards.

Old man Pitt has been coming down to Argentina since the 1980s, and says it has changed some but is still the best thing going. A taxidermy duck nut with 850 birds in his showroom, he wears a beat up 1971 Jones-style cap with a pin that belonged to Nash Buckingham himself. I sat with him as he peeled ducks for mounting, like an ornithologist surgeon, trying to stump him on duck trivia questions. Fat chance.

Evenings brought the chance to go fox hunting and chase perdiz (a smallish brown partridge). We walked out across the grassland and kicked up ones and twos, bagged a dozen birds and missed our share. Strolling across the pampas with Munoz and

his efficient little pointer, Lisa, in the steep angled shadows of Argentina's soft winter sunlight is about as pleasant as hunting gets.

#### HAVE YOU SEEN IT?

Diego was impossible not to like. A refined Argentine redneck, he speaks French, Spanish, and English, is polite and articulate, and has lived everywhere from Paris and Spain to the Caribbean. He is a smart and very serious hunter with all the right gear, from FoxPro predator calls to Beretta shotguns and tricked out Land Cruisers and lethal rifles. He hunts and fishes from Patagonia to Brazil. A born killer. Many outfitters down here will round up whatever local guys they can find, call them a

guide, and hope for the best. Hope is not a plan. Diego is the real deal.

Whistlers and wigeon squeals cut through the dark the next morning as he and I sat a small pond. Colors peeped from the shadows as ducks splashed down. By 8 a.m., I'd broken the extractor on my old gun and Diego and I had to take turns with his Beretta, chiding each other's shooting from our layouts. We quit shy of our limit after I swung on a flock of five teal, aimed for the lead bird, killed the three behind it in one shot, and then shot the fifth. Enough, already. We laid the guns down and watched yellow-billed pintails pile into the pond non-stop. Nice little groups, no monster flocks.

"Well, Diego I've finally seen it,"

I said. "That was just unbelievable!"

"Nah, you still haven't seen it man," Diego says. "That was plenty of birds, but it took a couple hours."

O-o-o-o-kay...but I already wanted to live here. The steak, the wine, the mild weather, the ubiquitous women with narrow hips, nice shoulders and long swaying black hair. In the countryside, at least, people were so friendly it seemed quaint.

**PINK BEAK, RED ALERT**

The rosy-pochard had evaded me, and I resigned that we would not be seeing one. Normally plentiful, a warm season delayed the corn harvest and kept the birds up north. The next morning rose grey and misty with slow hunting, a few pairs every 20 minutes or so. Then we saw him. The sole, lonely rosy I had waited to see the entire trip. My new friend Mark, in the layout to my left, is a sporting clays champion, but behind me Diego hissed "it's a rosy! Don't miss this one!" It turned our brains to instant mush. The bird flew to my right and wide, the worst possible shot from a layout, and I stayed low instead of rolling to my knees as Mark emptied his gun at the drake without a hit. To my shock, the bird crumpled at my last desperate shot. I was stuttering with glee. It remains the only one I've ever seen. Better lucky than good.

We killed an evening chasing black buck with no luck, sneaking on the wary antelope from great distance, losing a race with the setting sun. Back at camp, the guys ribbed me non-stop for not accepting an old hat offered by Greg Grinder from his esteemed Hatchie Coon hunt club, explaining that I'd broken some southern man code by doing so. Friday morning I left my gun in the truck just to go watch the old men duck hunt and listen to their banter. A crazy horse in a nearby pasture that had used a dead duck as a chew toy the day prior made an encore appearance, this time throwing retrieves for himself with a big stick.

I came to see the new species and the country, and thought we'd had great success, but Diego explained we'd stayed in Las Flores too long, "and there are far more birds in La Madrid," he said.

**NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY**

The Americans all flew home and I stayed on with Diego, my new Argentine brother, extending my trip at his urging. Jacques Haeringer, a renowned chef from D.C. (he now writes for *WILDFOWL*), and his son Marc, an editor from New York, ar-

rived with their buddy Lance Gilbert, all friends of Diego. A fun troop.

A classic decoy pigeon shoot near a forest was planned, and the birds came in high above the trees, and moving with the wind. I switched from No. 7s to 5s and started knocking more down, but cut feathers on only half



Ramsey Russel



After a final desperate shot, *WILDFOWL* editor Skip Knowles holds a rosy-billed pochard, one of the most coveted Argentine ducks. Normally abundant, they no-showed on this trip. Above, a red shoveler.

the high-flying birds. Humble pie.

My thumb was swollen from stuffing rounds in the A400, and my mid-section was swelling, too. With the daily sausages, sauteed perdiz, scrumptious steak-and-egg sandwiches and steak, steak, steak with red wine every lunch and dinner, I was happily hurting myself.

The next morning was a short, dream-like blur. We awoke to patchy fog, walking through clouds on the ground to the water, and erected the blind quickly on the stone and mud shoreline. Before we could see to shoot, the birds poured in. Yellow-billed pintails, three flavors of teal, a stunning white-cheeked pintail (finally!) and the bird of the day, the glorious green-and-white-headed chiloe wigeon, my new favorite duck. It was over in 45 minutes.

My journey was complete, but also just starting. It will never end in Argentina, not in this lifetime. The entire trip, Diego tormented me with the lurid stories of fly fishing for great golden dorado, the red stag

roaring season and chasing huge wild trout in Patagonia. Our evening fox hunts were unforgettable, the best predator hunting I've ever seen, and the upland hunting was the stuff of 1950s America. From time to time the season opens on the big white Magellan geese (considered a plague, meaning no limits), and they are shot like doves in the field over huge decoy spreads. "They will make you forget all about ducks," he says.

Add that to the list.

The best parts are the surreal moments I love about travel. Like sitting in a beater car, hearing an old American song like "Coward of the County," while watching the greens and golds of an unfamiliar sparsely populated country unfold in front of you.

In travels throughout the globe, I've only found a handful of countries that I would like to snatch up my family and live in for a few years. I told Diego that Argentina is at least three of them.

"Ahhh," he said. "At last you have seen it."

## HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Duck hunting in Argentina is still duck hunting, meaning limits are 3 to 6 times what they are in the U.S. (25 to 50 birds, typically), but they are not crazy kill-fests, nor are limits guaranteed, and Ramsey Russell has seen the occasional client ticked off that his party hasn't murdered 50 ducks apiece first thing in the morning. I don't get it. If that's your deal, go to Cordoba and shoot little doves 'til your eyes are crossed and spend a fortune on ammo. But if you're a duck hunter, go see Ramsey at [Getducks.com](http://Getducks.com).

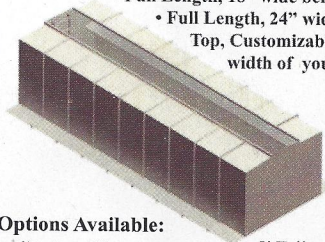
His selection of trips is mind-blowing, all vetted, and he is the most on-top-of-it outfitter you'll find, on-call while you're abroad.

"I can't help ice storms, migrations or airline schedules, but if there's anything I can do it will be done," he says. "It's not about bookings, it's about repeat bookings, so we do our best to make sure you're happy."—S.K.

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