

SPORTING CLASSICS

MARCH/
APRIL 2016



Americanos bold enough to head south of the border can enjoy unforgettable action for doves and bass.

With ice tinkling in our glasses, a buddy recently told a rousing story about an acquaintance who stayed with a young and difficult woman for years despite the constant rough seas.

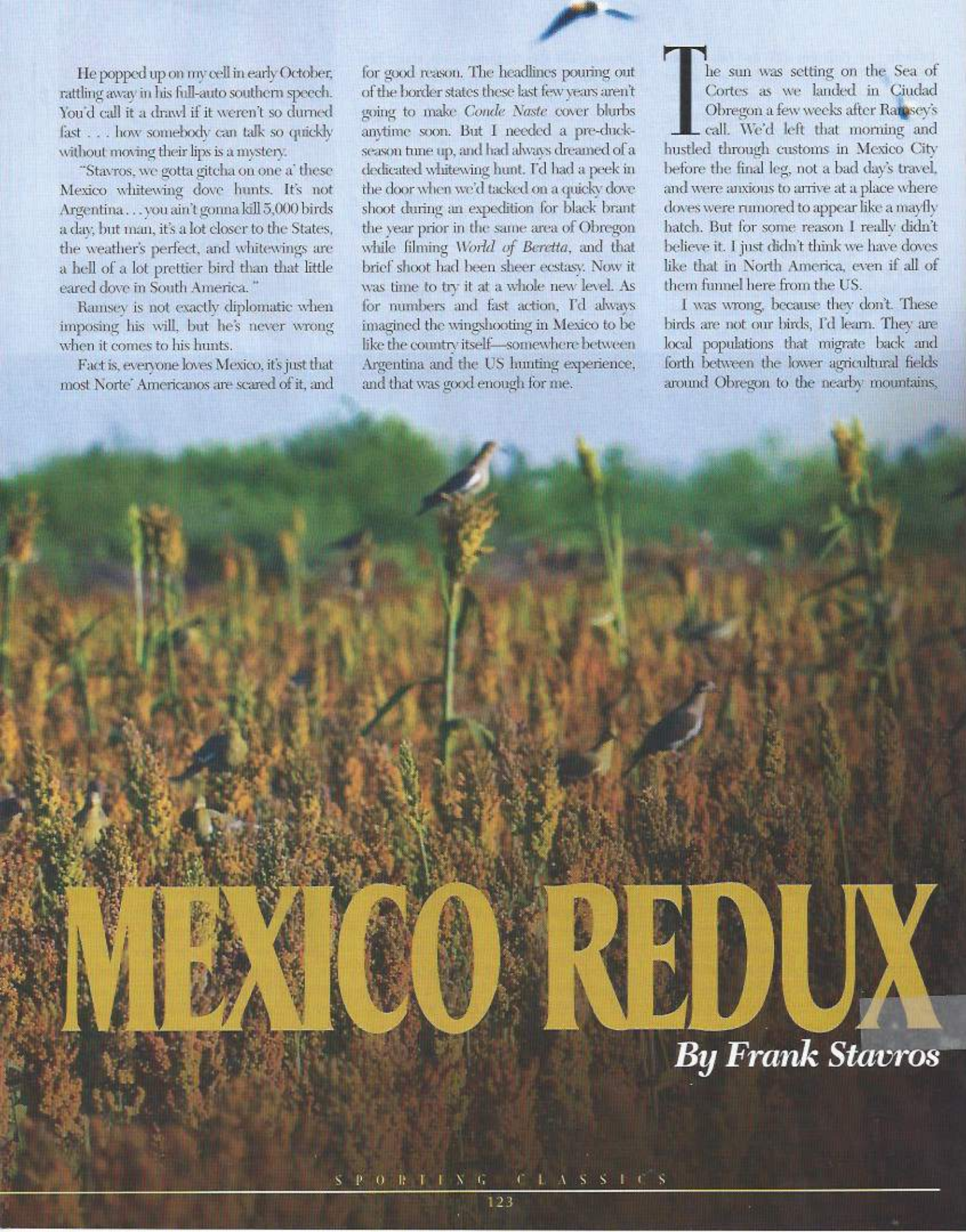
"It worked," he said, "because she was bipolar, and he loved both sides of her."

Mexico of late has been just such a mistress for North American hunters. Gringos love the oldest true south because hunting there is like we experienced in America back in the 1850s. From the giant Sonoran mule deer to the outsized largemouth bass to its lights-out wingshooting, Mexico is the affordable and not-so-very-far-away destination our fathers and grandfathers enjoyed.

But fewer of us have been going in recent years due to a collective schizophrenia induced by media images of border violence and gunplay, even though more people are shot on a hot weekend in Chicago.

Enter old Double-R, the globe-trotting gospel preacher of wing-shooting, Ramsey Russell. The Mississippi mad man is a biologist gone feral who quit a cushy government job to become the shotgunner's bucket-list booking agent. An unexpected phone call from him can be like walking into a flimsy table covered in empty beer cans in the dark when you're half awake.





He popped up on my cell in early October, rattling away in his full-auto southern speech. You'd call it a drawl if it weren't so durned fast . . . how somebody can talk so quickly without moving their lips is a mystery.

"Stavros, we gotta gitcha on one a' these Mexico whitewing dove hunts. It's not Argentina . . . you ain't gonna kill 5,000 birds a day, but man, it's a lot closer to the States, the weather's perfect, and whitewings are a hell of a lot prettier bird than that little eared dove in South America."

Ramsey is not exactly diplomatic when imposing his will, but he's never wrong when it comes to his hunts.

Fact is, everyone loves Mexico, it's just that most Norte' Americanos are scared of it, and

for good reason. The headlines pouring out of the border states these last few years aren't going to make *Conde Naste* cover blurbs anytime soon. But I needed a pre-duck-season tune up, and had always dreamed of a dedicated whitewing hunt. I'd had a peek in the door when we'd tacked on a quicky dove shoot during an expedition for black brant the year prior in the same area of Obregon while filming *World of Beretta*, and that brief shoot had been sheer ecstasy. Now it was time to try it at a whole new level. As for numbers and fast action, I'd always imagined the wingshooting in Mexico to be like the country itself—somewhere between Argentina and the US hunting experience, and that was good enough for me.

The sun was setting on the Sea of Cortes as we landed in Ciudad Obregon a few weeks after Ramsey's call. We'd left that morning and hustled through customs in Mexico City before the final leg, not a bad day's travel, and were anxious to arrive at a place where doves were rumored to appear like a mayfly hatch. But for some reason I really didn't believe it. I just didn't think we have doves like that in North America, even if all of them funnel here from the US.

I was wrong, because they don't. These birds are not our birds, I'd learn. They are local populations that migrate back and forth between the lower agricultural fields around Obregon to the nearby mountains,

MEXICO REDUX

By Frank Stavros

following the different milo and other grain harvests and breeding virtually all year in the same general areas. And I would soon be pleasantly proven wrong about the shooting being middle-of-the-road between the US and Argentina. It is, in fact, much closer to the latter, only more challenging.

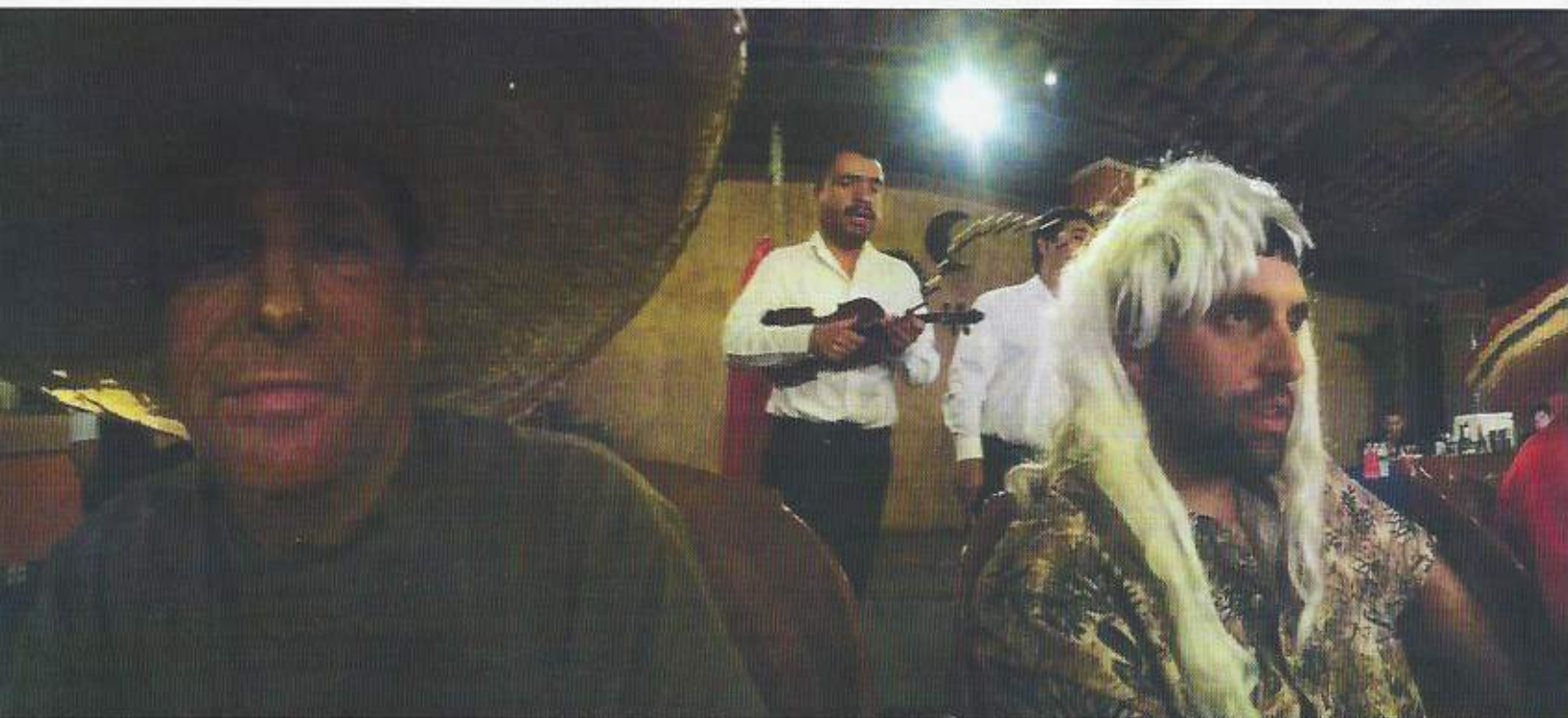
As our AeroMexico plane began its descent, our view of the landscape and knowing what awaited us in the fields below was a reminder of why Mexico was for so long North America's best and favorite wingshooting destination. It was hard to imagine the lawlessness brought about largely by the drug cartels

horizon. The shooting was steady, about like what you would expect on a stateside dove opener, but nothing crazy.

Crazy came about 9 a.m. when a black cloud of doves started building in the fields behind us. For the next hour we could not load our guns fast enough as the birds swarmed in, but flying much lower than earlier in the day. For about 15 minutes it was a *dove-nado*, bigger than any I'd ever seen in Argentina.

All of the birds were whitewings—larger, stronger, and prettier than the little eared dove. It was wingshooting nirvana.

In late season, October typically, Mexico's



while descending over a green, pastoral countryside set below craggy mountains on one side and the sea gleaming on the other. Outside my window a sunset like polished brass was retreating across the ocean into a rosy blur on the horizon.

The action started the next morning at dawn, about as I'd imagined. Small groups of birds passed overhead from roost trees and brushy thickets to the fields behind us for the first hour. Winged high overhead, they reminded me of shooting driven pheasants from a stand below a bluff, except these were doves flying on a wobbly, erratic axis. Every one had that bizarre ability to flinch at the noise from your shot and dive wildly, so you think you've hit them, only to see the bird level off and line out for the

doves are more concentrated, which explains the dense swarms. Earlier in September or even August the hunting is still terrific, though the days can be bloody hot, which is not a big deal because you normally quit by 9 a.m. The evening hunts are scorcher.

Most traveling sportsmen consider a "volume" dove hunt one that involves shooting 20 boxes of shells in a morning and we did that every time. It's not the endless river of doves in the sky that sometimes happens in Argentina, but it's a much shorter trip, and it's not the same shot over and over again.

The birds tore in from all directions. You may have mastered that slanted, descending shot at an incoming dove, but when you

have to spin and take the rising away left-to-right shot, you will surely enjoy a solid bite of humble pie, if not an entire slice.

The butler who greeted us at curbside each time we returned to the lodge was a doting gentleman who like most of the outfitter's staff, has worked for him for many years, which says much of the outfit. His real name escapes me because we all call him by his nickname, Hammer, and also because whenever I first see him he is handing us cold margaritas as we step hot, tired, and sweaty from the Suburban. The second and third drinks don't help your memory much.

A *rita* or a cold Pacifico goes perfectly with the tray of tender, spicy hot wings,

chorizo, cheeses, and bacon-wrapped dove breasts that are always waiting. The service was phenomenal on this old-school hunt, the best I've seen in any hunting camp, and the lodge was an intimate retreat, filled top to bottom with mounts of monstrous kudu, black bear, whitetails, and a museum's worth of other trophies the owner has collected all over the globe.

Stop staring at the giant largemouths yawning from the walls long enough and you'll make it to dinner, where so much fresh, authentic food awaits you'll find yourself wondering if all that exhausting shooting is a form of meaningful exercise. You know it

hunt. Far more low-flying birds came than in the morning, and we tried to melt the barrels on our borrowed 20-gauge Benelli Montefeltros, burning through 20 boxes each in about two hours. The hunt was about as much fun as you can have after a big meal and midday siesta.

Unlike Argentina hunting, where seeing that all the birds killed land in someone's pot is a physical impossibility, the bird boys in this outfit chased each dove at the shot, scampering like track stars all over the place with an unbelievable ability to find them in the cactus and tall grass. In Argentina, the bird boys use clickers and pick up some of

the power lines for half the length of vast milo fields. Their dark, stubby forms also sagged the power lines along every waterway we passed, while black clouds of doves danced like smoke in the distance. It was clear that except for the heat, this was nothing at all like Texas. As we passed the Yaqui Indian Reservation, its vast orange groves were atwitter with birds.

We marveled at the subtle beauty of the Mexican mallards we saw loafing around the dikes and sandbars, a cool Spanish-speaking subspecies of our beloved greenhead. It was a languid and lovely country, the craggy mountains looming over bucolic fields.



isn't, but gorge anyway. The steaks, barbecue chicken, skewers of shrimp, and of course, Mexican food night featuring the best tortillas and fajitas on the planet—all are trademark staples, but you will hurt yourself on a dozen other delicacies. Such as (write this down) hot pequin peppers tossed in a blender with five fingers of soy sauce, the juice from 15 limes, and a good dollop of Worcestershire. Eat this with shrimp, and just try and stop.

The first evening hunt found me and Ramsey hunkering under mesquite trees that bordered a tall creek dike. Bonus numbers of big Eurasian collared doves mixed with whitewings provided a royal "schutzenfest" as my buddy and writer Joe Coogan dubs a torrid

the birds when the smoke clears. Which is also why shooters run such high numbers down there—the boys hit that clicker if you so much as cut a feather, even if you're a notorious tail-shooter like me. In Mexico the only birds that count are the ones they find and add to the pile. If you shot 400 doves in a morning, it's because there is a warm sack with 400 birds in it being loaded into the truck.

Driving back to Obregon after our afternoon hunt, we saw doves packing

Above: Hunters gather for a send-off party on their last night at the estancia's lodge in the heart of Obregon. Entertained by a ten-piece mariachi band, they don sombreros and Mexican wigs while enjoying steaks and margaritas.



Many hunters shoot 700 doves in a morning here, Ramsey told me. Dead doves in hand, not a click on a counter because a feather floated down. And it was clear to us that if we'd worked two guns and had bird boys reloading for us, we could have easily killed a thousand birds an outing here on good days, just like Argentina. But we are not into that. Rams and I like to relax, pick our shots, shoot as many birds as possible out from under our buddy at the last second, heckle each other ruthlessly, compliment each other's shots sparingly and with chagrin, and torch about 20 boxes apiece in the morning and evening.

That's enough, thank you. It's both exhilarating, and exhausting, the shooting and the snack-talking. We simply had more pure fun than we do on Argentine

dove slaughters, and the Preacher nailed it with a comment.

"In Mexico you can't just get on a line and shoot the same angle over and over and over and run percentages," Ramsey said, in exactly 1.5 seconds. "Most of

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the time here the birds come from all over, all directions and all heights, sometimes flying low as a jackrabbit and other times overhead but swirling like a damned leaf in the wind."

That was an understatement. At times they appeared to dive-bomb us in their confusion, flying kamikaze to within five feet of the gun-barrel so wildly there is nothing you can do except yell "Remember the Alamo!" and take it to the plug. These birds were almost impossible

to hit, and this bizarre last-second flaring will make you feel like the world's worst shot. Then a group of loafers will come bobbing slowly into the wind and you'll bang out three straight triples.

The only way it would be more perfect is if you could have a lazy start. But it is not a totally casual sport. You will get the duck hunter's wake-up, as Hammer politely taps your door an hour before dawn.

"Meester Frank."

Knock, knock, knock. Again, in the nicest possible, almost apologetic tone.

"Meester Frank. Time to wake up."

October can be scorching hot one day and a 72-degree paradise the next. Our most memorable morning was one of the coolest, with a light breeze coursing over a mesquite and sage flat where we had set up, instead of the usual field edge. Not much happened for the first 30 minutes, then someone sprung the trapdoor and birds buzzed in from every direction on the compass.

You simply could not stayed loaded, and the low flyers used the small trees and bushes to their advantage, seeming at times to almost spring at you from



them, making incredibly challenging shooting and turning casual dove hunting into a desperate gunfight.

Popping up in your face, a flock would split around you and accelerate so fast you could barely spin and shoot. Grinning from ear-to-ear, you'd use your sore thumb to jam more shells into a gun that has been shot so much you have to grab the forend knob and tighten it about every 15 minutes.

You learn stuff about your shooting on a trip like this—and get so much better. I'm fairly proud of my shotgunning, which means my form must be good, right? Then I noticed by day two that my right deltoid was all rashed up, the skin bruised and leathery, out where a properly tucked shotgun butt is never supposed to ride. Hmm . . . might explain those periodic six straight misses, eh?

But you'll also make those impossible, memorable shots that you can't believe, the kind that only happen when nobody is looking. And the practice pays off.

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A happy hunter clowns for the camera among his American friends and their morning's bag of white-wing doves.

