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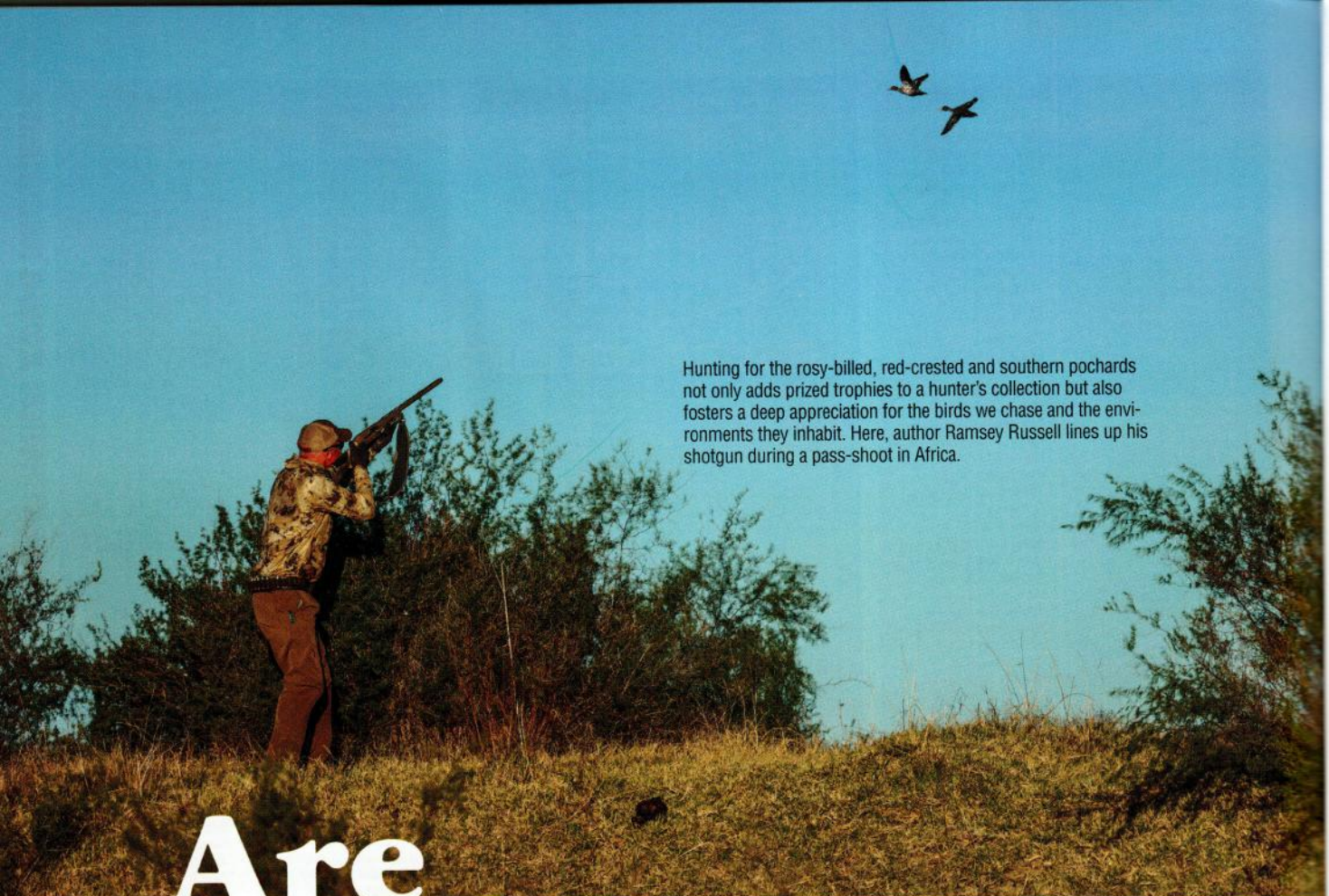
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Hunting for the rosy-billed, red-crested and southern pochards not only adds prized trophies to a hunter's collection but also fosters a deep appreciation for the birds we chase and the environments they inhabit. Here, author Ramsey Russell lines up his shotgun during a pass-shoot in Africa.

Are The Rosy-bills In?

Chasing Pochard Ducks in South America, Eurasia and Africa

BY RAMSEY RUSSELL

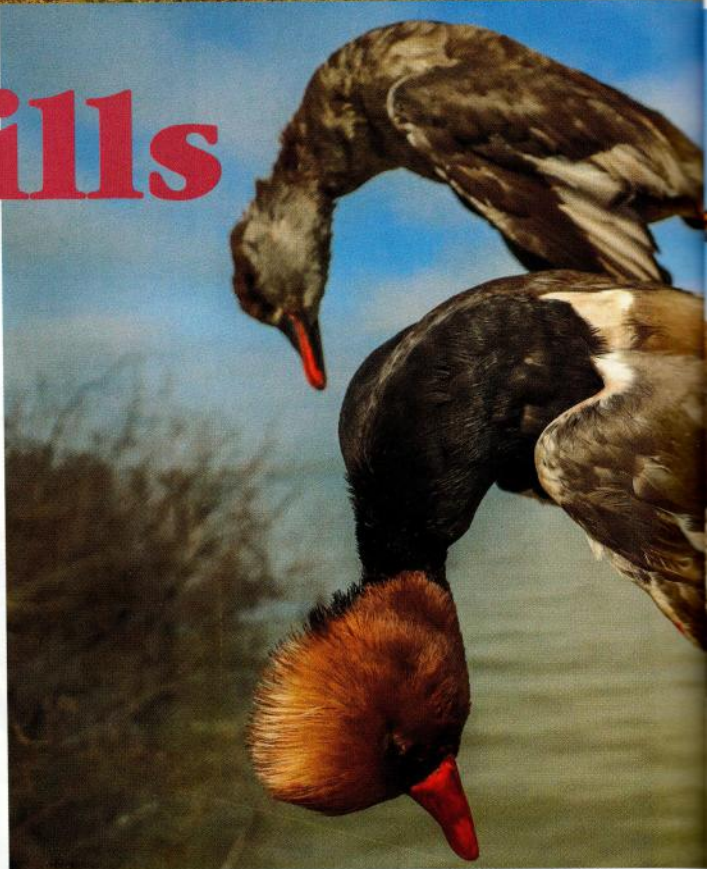
Gamebirds of the World Subchair

In pursuing waterfowl hunting's most coveted trophies, we duck hunters often find ourselves traversing the globe, seeking species that not only challenge our skills but also enrich life experiences.

And it's a mighty big world. It's so big and beautiful that it's hard to choose favorites other than "the next one!" But let's start here.

Among my personally favored ducks are the three species among the genus *Netta* — the rosy-billed pochard (*Netta peposaca*), the red-crested pochard (*Netta rufina*) and the southern pochard (*Netta erythrophthalma*). Here is why.

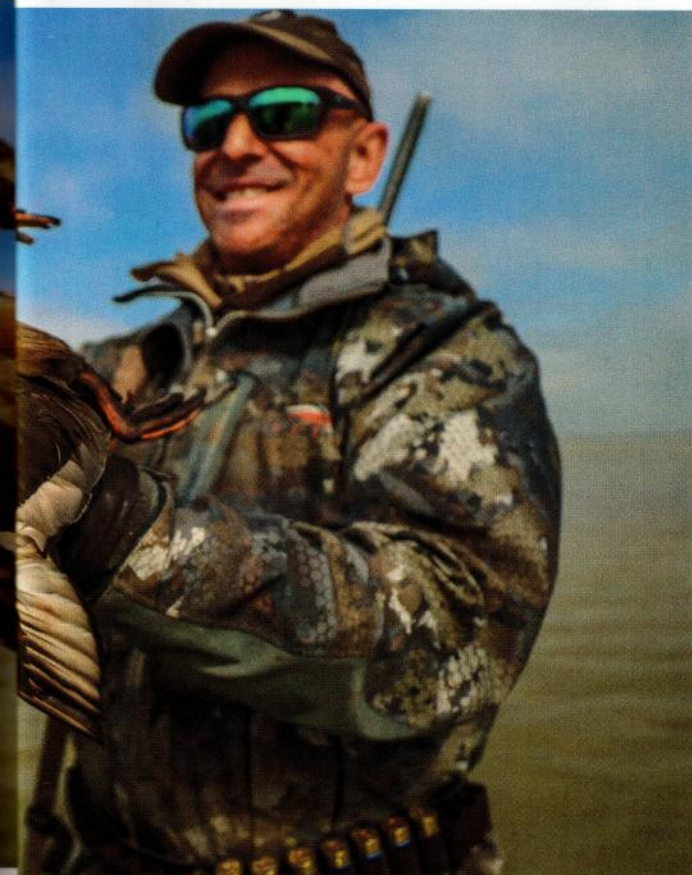
These ducks are classified as divers, meaning they feed by diving under the water's surface instead of dabbling from the surface, and as part of the tribe *Aythini*, they are referred to as pochards.



Red-crested pochards inhabit a broad range extending from the British Isles to China, with a few breeding populations in parts of Europe. Males boast a rounded, orange-brown head, vibrant lipstick-red bill and striking black breast, while females present a more understated elegance with brownish-gray plumage and a dark cap.



The rosy-billed pochard is native to South America. Males are easily identifiable by their glossy black plumage contrasted with gray sides and a distinctively bright, sometimes visible-as-a-hot-ember red bill adorned with a prominent knob.



But I've also heard them described as "false divers" because unlike more familiar diving ducks — think their *Athya* cousins, canvasbacks and scaup — the three *Netta* species prefer feeding on aquatic vegetation and invertebrates in shallower, freshwater wetlands, which makes them pretty much perfectly suited to us — the rather-stand-in-knee-deep-water-in-our-waders duck hunters hailing from the Deep South of the USA or elsewhere.

Though they are found in three separate corners of the world and appear as distinctly different as Fords, Chevys and Dodge trucks, comparable habitats and diet preferences aren't the only similarities.

Drakes have red eyes. Distinct white speculums are visibly seen as strong white contrast stripes while in flight such that despite their obvious differences if you've seen one bank over the water, you've figuratively seen them all.

Their vocalizations are coarse trills, and growling into calls oftentimes coaxes them over the decoys, which reminds me that they're strong, fast, surprisingly agile fliers, too, which can be pretty damned humbling.

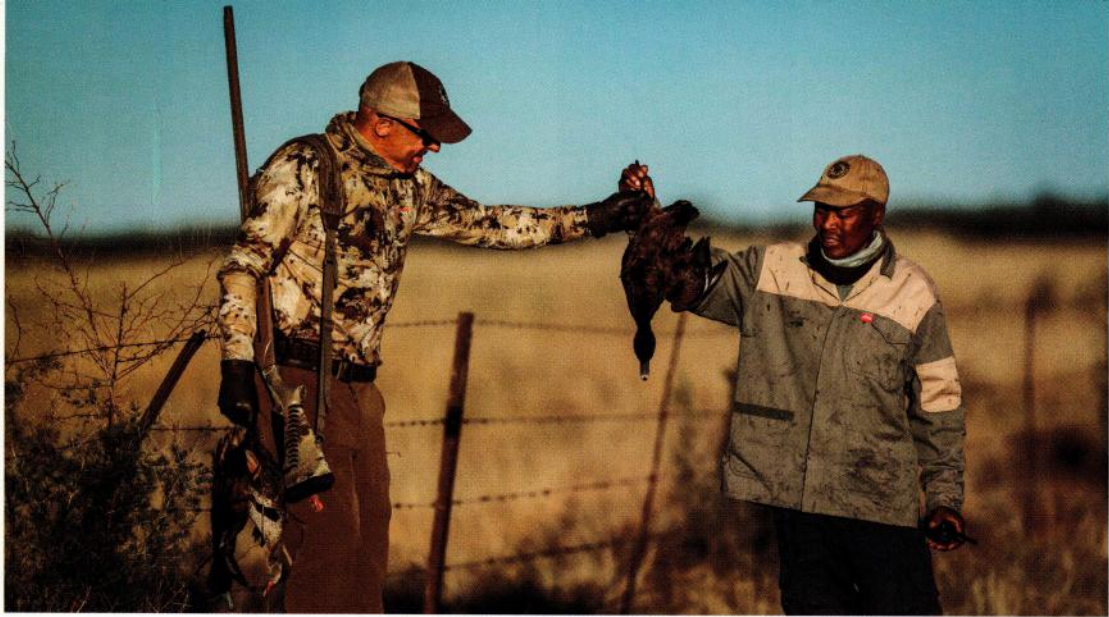
ROSY-BILLED POCHARD SOUTH AMERICA'S CROWN JEWEL

The rosy-billed pochard is a striking duck native to South America. Males are easily identifiable by their glossy black plumage contrasted with gray sides and a distinctively bright, sometimes visible-as-a-hot-ember red bill adorned with a prominent knob.

Females, in contrast, display more subdued brown tones, allowing them to blend seamlessly into their wetland habitats. These birds are predominantly hunted in Argentina and Uruguay, favoring freshwater swamps, marshes and small lakes abundant with tall grasses.

While there's no real continental waterfowl migration south of the equator, during the austral winter, hungry rosy-bill flocks disperse widely in search of fresh water and food.

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South Africa offers many opportunities for hunting southern pochards. The country's diverse aquatic habitats support healthy populations, and the hunting experience is often enriched by the presence of other unique African waterfowl species.

Hunting rosy-bills in Argentina offers an unparalleled experience. The country's vast wetlands become a stage for dramatic flights of these ducks, often seen in flocks numbering hundreds throughout the morning.

Their gregarious nature, predictable flight patterns and mallard-like response to calls and decoys provide hunters with both challenges and rewards, making the pursuit of rosy-bills a highlight in South American waterfowling adventures.

While there's about a baker's dozen worth of waterfowl species available there, the first question asked by most of us dyed-in-the-wool duck hunters on arrival, "Are the rosy-bills in?"

RED-CRESTED POCHARD EURASIA'S ELEGANT DIVER

Venturing across the globe into Eurasia, the red-crested pochard captivates us with its boldly distinctive appearance. Males boast a rounded, orange-brown head, vibrant lipstick-red bill and striking black breast, while females present a more understated elegance with brownish-gray plumage and a dark cap.

These ducks inhabit a broad range extending from the British Isles to China, with a few breeding populations in parts of Europe. They favor marshes and shallow lakes with abundant vegetation, providing both food and shelter.

Azerbaijan has emerged as a destination for hunting red-crested pochards, which is to say I've consistently found them nowhere else yet but am continuing to look.

The country's expansive wetlands serve as critical overwintering sites, hosting this species alongside other Eurasian waterfowl.

Hunting in Azerbaijan not only offers hunters an honest crack at the elusive red-crested pochard but also immerses hunters in a unique tapestry of cultures and landscapes, enhancing the overall experience.

According to returning hunters, accessing vast wetlands in black darkness by pushpoled pirogues, chasing these amazing ducks with local hunters that deploy, by necessity, only the fundamental duck hunting basics, makes the juice well worth the squeeze when it all comes together.

SOUTHERN POCHARD AFRICA'S SUBTLE BEAUTY

The southern pochard, while less flamboyant than its *Netta* counterparts, possesses a unique charm. Drakes exhibit a dark brown plumage complemented by a sky-blue bill and striking red eyes, features that become particularly noticeable upon closer observation. This species is commonly found across sub-Saharan Africa, favoring freshwater lakes and marshes.

South Africa offers exceptional opportunities for hunting southern pochards. The country's diverse aquatic habitats support healthy populations, and the hunting experience is often enriched by the presence of other unique African waterfowl species.

Unlike their rosy-billed counterparts, southern pochards are usually encountered in singles, pairs and sometimes small family groups. The southern pochard's rapid flight and agile maneuvers present a rewarding challenge for hunters seeking to test their skills in new environments.

This is an especially important note because the South African way of duck hunting oftentimes entails pass shooting at various distances while pitch-black night quickly ascends.

For dedicated waterfowlers, the quest for trophy species among the *Netta* genus transcends the act of hunting itself. It's about immersing oneself in diverse ecosystems, understanding the behaviors and habitats of each species and embracing the cultural richness of the regions they inhabit.

Hunting for the rosy-billed, red-crested and southern pochards not only adds prized trophies to a hunter's collection but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the birds we chase and the environments they inhabit.

Each expedition becomes a story woven with adventure, challenge and the enduring allure of the wild.

Know the best part of gamebird hunting for those just getting started? They're available nearly everywhere you're likely already scheduled to hunt big game! 🐾

Long-time SCI Convention exhibitor and seminar speaker Ramsey Russell founded GetDucks.com, chases waterfowl across six continents almost year-round and hosts Duck Season Somewhere podcast. He is a subchair of SCI's Gamebirds of the World Awards.