

HIGH *and* HARD

Editor Bob South visited Tuna Nui gamebird preserve and relates his experiences as one of the shooters.

NEW ZEALAND GAME PRESERVES: the mere mention of these four words still polarises bird hunters.

But this story isn't so much about taking sides. It's about actually shooting a typical preserve in this country – whether or not some consider them elitist; or prohibitively expensive; or the best or worst thing since canned corn; or contrary to Section 23 of the Wildlife Act; or, in fact, whether a few punters continue to argue that preserves fly in the face of the New Zealand tradition of egalitarian hunting. Mainly, this story is meant to help gamebird licenceholders become more knowledgeable about what constitutes Kiwi preserve shooting.

The New Zealand Fish & Game Council resolved in 1999, and reconfirmed in 2000, to “accept gamebird preserves as part of the lawful hunting process”. Any that exist – and no fewer than 19 are now sprinkled around the country – must be gazetted in the Minister of Conservation’s Game Notice and operate under strict Fish & Game regulations. Sixteen preserves, spread across five Fish & Game regions, are currently gazetted, with several others seeking, or waiting to be granted, similar status. Of the 16 gazetted, Northland has one,

Eastern seven, Hawke’s Bay four, Central South Island two, and Otago two.

I felt it would be professionally remiss, as editor of a widely circulating publication that focuses often on bird shooting, if I did not pay to experience the preserve phenomenon. That decision has facilitated my ability to discuss, with greater understanding, whatever controversy still surrounds them.

The preserve experience I had in late August was testing sport and darn good fun. Preserve pheasants, flushed and driven by beaters and dogs, mostly are extremely high and hard to hit, moving faster than any clay flung from a trap, or any bird stalked, held, and flushed on a walk-up ‘wild’ shoot. The hatchery-reared birds, in every sense, fly, run, hold, and react like wild pheasants. And, unlike most gamebird hunting scenarios, the pheasants mostly are coming flat-out directly at you, not flying away. That takes some getting used to.

The morning started over tea. Gathered on a perfect early spring day at the stately 94 year-old Russell homestead on the 2300 acre Tuna Nui Station in Sherenden, Hawke’s Bay were a diverse mix of six hunters from Turangi, Palmerston North,



Christchurch, and Mt Maunganui. We were hardly an example of “a wealthy little niche clique”, as one correspondent sweepingly described all preserve participants in this Issue’s Letters pages. At least half, if not four of us were in a class that made us necessarily discreet with our recreational dollar. Refreshingly, refreshments were shared with local beaters, including 78 year-old Springer spaniel breeding legend Jim Clarke, while sundry animated, but impeccably behaved dogs (all Springers bar one black Lab) lapped up the pre-shoot attention.

The shoot organisers were Andrew Russell of Tuna Nui and nearby friend, neighbour, and veterinarian Jeff Niblett, who runs New Zealand Game Birds Ltd and is one of the country’s leading pheasant breeders (ref: Issue 52, Cock Sure). Niblett also supplies birds for Glencoe Station, Whanawhana Trust Property, and several other preserves.

Russell released 3000 of Niblett’s poults over 800-1000 acres of Tuna Nui early in 2006 to be available for shooting over a half dozen days during the season. A typical Tuna Nui driven shoot caters for eight hunters, who together may shoot 100 birds, at a cost of \$1100 plus GST per gun. “Overs” (any bird shot over the 100 for the day) come at an additional cost of \$60 per bird. We were involved



in the last driven shoot of the 2006 season – one that cost \$500 plus GST per gun with a limit of five birds each, plus \$60 a bird for overs. Included in the tariff were morning tea, a substantial lunch of cut club sandwiches and soup prepared and served by the wives of the organisers, mixed beverages, and after-shoot drinks and finger food, including delectable pheasant meatballs laced with coriander, coconut milk, and sweet chilli sauce.

To end any suspense, the six of us on four drives during the day collectively shot 41 pheasants (30 birds and 11 overs) – an equal mix of exceptionally fat grain-fed cocks and hens, which came at a cost to each individual of \$670 (GST incl) for the day. We missed many more birds than we shot. Many, many more. Was it worth it? Yes. Value for money? Certainly. In rough terms compared to other commensurable commercial outdoor options, it was the monetary equivalent of a day's guided fishing, or a helicopter ski, or three or four skydives, a heli-hike, a raft-fish of the upper Tongariro, say, or a fixed wing fish/hunt flight into the upper Mohaka catchment from Taupo.

In preparation for my outing, I had read much about preserve shooting, most recently a book by American Robert F. Jones, entitled *Dancers In The Sunset Sky* (Lyons & Burford Publishers, 1996), which included a rather unfortunately titled chapter about pheasant hunting called *Glorious Carnage*. Jones describes a 1974 visit to 7000 acre Easton Neston, two hours from Piccadilly Circus, near the town of Towcester, and he pretty much encapsulates what little, if anything most Kiwi hunters know about or think of preserve shooting.

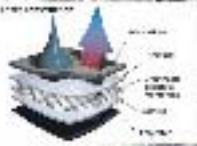


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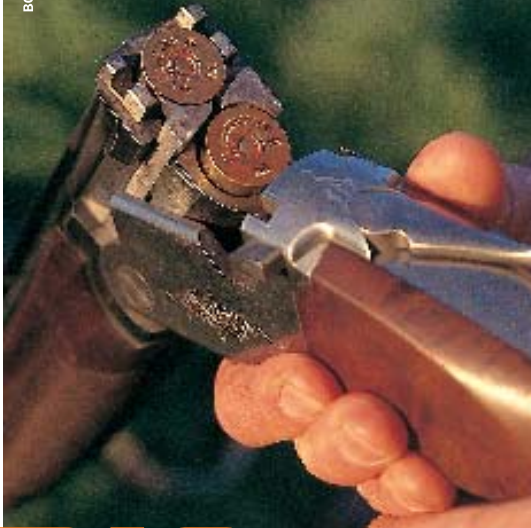
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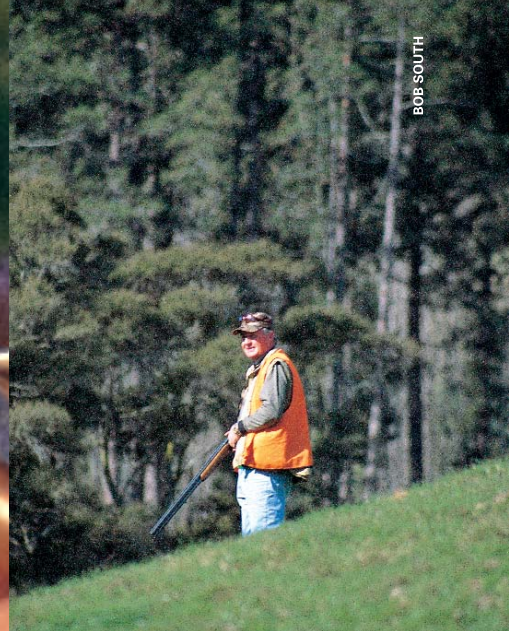
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WROTE JONES: "WE WERE eight guns that day, each man backed up by a loader to keep his matched pair of doubles primed and ready. My guns were slim, elegant, side-locked Bosses, long-barrelled 12-bores, of course, courtesy of His Lordship. My loader was a short, cheery assistant gamekeeper..."

"The beaters, some fifty men and boys and a few small girls from the neighbouring village, pushed through the first patch of wood, trilling and chirruping and bellowing to frighten the pheasants ahead of them and bang tree trunks with their clubs..."

"The gamekeeper, a red-faced sergeant-major type who ran the shoot with an iron hand, directed the beaters with his police whistle. As the beaters neared the wood edge, we could see the pheasants milling - tall, tan, scuttling figures, reluctant to approach the open ground. Then they exploded with a rattle of wet wings and lined out toward the guns where we stood a hundred yards away in the open field, each man fifty yards from his nearest neighbour. By the time the birds reached up, they were at full flight speed and thirty yards high.

"Guns began slamming all up and down the line. Blue smoke hung suspended in the drizzle and drifted slowly in the light, cold air. The birds, when hit, seemed to double in size, their feathers puffing, then crumpled and fell with wings all askew. They thumped hard on the ground. Then again that strange phenomenon, only witnessed when clouds of birds are killed directly overhead. What appeared to be bronze snowflakes began to fall from the sky: pheasant feathers..."

"As for me, on that first drive, I killed some birds, but wounded or missed a lot more. While the dogs collected the dead and cripples, we guns moved to the next drive. Already my shoulder

was aching..."

"The rest of the day was a blur of falling birds, my ears ringing hollow, ragged rage of 12-bore explosions, the hallooing of the beaters, the chirp of the gamekeeper's whistle..."

"The final tally for the day was 580 pheasants, only a muddling score for Easton Neston... nowhere near what the shooting party of Lord Stamford's party had done over four days in early January, 1864 when they tallied 4045 pheasant, 3902 rabbits, 860 hares, and 59 woodcock... I'm glad I had the chance in my lifetime to see and shoot at masses of flighted pheasants, wild clouds of them."

But let's rewind to the Tuna Nui shoot. As mentioned earlier, I really didn't know what to expect, other than what I had heard and read, and most of that was about private, exclusive English and/or American aristocratic shoots in the ilk that R.F. Jones experienced. The rest of what I had heard, in and around New Zealand anyway, came mainly from disgruntled opponents of game preserves, who staunchly maintain to this day that preserve shooting is the 'preserve' of the rich and arrogant, of the elite and privileged. Nothing could have been further from the truth on our shoot, in our group at least: journalist, builder, raft company operator, gun distributor, orchard management consultant, and confectionary businessman.

Of our six, only my builder friend and myself had not shot preserves before. But even though two others were very regular preserve goers, they exuded not a hint of social, professional, or sporting superiority. On other, more expensive shoots, this pair of preserve regulars, for all I know, might well have dressed, as Robert F. Jones might have done in England, for shooting in English style - Wellies, moleskin breeks, Norfolk jacket, tie, coiled cotton shooting cap and maybe a fold-down shooting stick on which to sit.



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At one stage for a short period, the cry of "bird" echoed down the valley every 20 seconds or so. The action was heart-pounding furious, the cacophony from the 12 gauges always loud.

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HIGH *and* HARD



ZANE MIBBIN

But not this day at Tuna Nui. It was jeans and gumboots primarily, although not swannies, and common shooting vests or gun belts for most of us.

And Tuna Nui was minus the 'traditional English' extras too – no loaders; no spare guns; only over and unders; no shooting at hares, rabbits, or wounded birds running or stranded on the ground; no hard arse "sergeant-major type" gamekeeper; no deliberate segregation at tea or lunch of beaters, guns, and organisers; and nobody but yourself doing the blood and guts plucking and cleaning of your share of the birds a day or two after it was all over.

Following important safety instructions at morning tea ("see only sky before you shoot"), and after signing in and recording pertinent hunting licence and firearms licence details, an outline of plans for the day was given. Then, filled with mild nerves and expectation, we were taken by vehicle to the first of four drives.

Two morning drives yielded 23 birds, the majority of which came on the second drive near the homestead. With the snow-capped Kawekas as a backdrop, birds were driven down a picturesque gully not far from the homestead gardens and grass tennis court. Two guns and all the beaters and dogs drove birds to the four remaining shooters stationed discreetly at the gully exit. Fair humbled after the opening drive through pine rows that dropped away to a steep farmland face, down which birds fled at an absurd rate of knots, it was nice to personally have warmed up to the shooting and notched a half dozen or so birds (and missed twice as many) on the second drive.

After lunch, we strolled across grassed farmland 15 minutes from the homestead gardens to two other large, natural bush stands to complete two afternoon drives. Spreading ourselves 60 or so metres apart 200 metres downhill from

perfect afternoon resting and loafing habitat, we fired at 40 or so birds as they were driven steadily our way in ones and twos.

We stood, guns loaded and ready in open field, staring uphill as the beaters worked their dogs through pines, gums, native and under-storey bracken, blackberry, and fern. Some of the birds you could hear get up with a racket, rattling and cackling in a rush of sound. But the real signal that birds were airborne and heading our way were those intermittent yells of "bird" coming from the beaters as another pheasant panicked, thrashed through the thick undergrowth for launching space, and set flight. At one stage for a short period, the cry of "bird" echoed down the valley every 20 seconds or so. The action was heart-pounding furious, the cacophony from the 12 gauges always loud.

This first drive after lunch resulted in 17 downed birds and much self-congratulation, even though the greater percentage of birds passed overhead unharmed, but scared to heck.

With our tally at 40, the last, much harder drive gave up just one lone rooster. The degree of difficulty of this drive was made blatantly clear when the organisers happily agreed to gift any bird, free of cost, to the total – i.e. no "overs" charge to the shooters. A single rooster fell from the stratosphere, incredibly at 20 metres above an impressively high stand of poplars in fading light and dropping early spring temperatures. It was a preposterously high, difficult shot, perhaps best described as a fluke given that another dozen or more equally high pheasants escaped untouched. Still, it brought praise from fellow shooters, beaters, and organisers alike. Even the farmhand, driving past on his way home at the time with his black Lab aboard his quad bike, shouted his approval at the height from which the fair-motoring cock folded and fell.



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The success rate of most preserve shooters is well below 30%, closer to 25%.

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ONE OF THE POPULAR MIS-conceptions about game preserve pheasants, discussed at length over drinks after the shoot, is that

driven birds are easy pickings. Nothing could be further from the truth. The success rate of most preserve shooters is low enough (well below 30% and closer to 25%) to make even the best guns, even the DTL and skeet A graders and the topline duck shooters, shrug their shoulders with mild embarrassment and shake their heads in disbelief with the frequency of misses. Because driven birds are invariably moving at full flight speed and regularly end up arriving so high in the sky over well-spaced shooters, few shots are gimmies. In fact, when you get a gimme, which is seldom, you feel simultaneously relieved and slightly cheated. Andrew Russell, who diligently keeps a little red book of rounds fired and birds dropped for each of the drives he engineers on Tuna Nui, can quote, with a cheeky smile, some horrendous percentages. At one shoot many weeks before ours, on the same drive we did just after lunch, a group of eight fired 198 rounds at more than 500 birds, yet a mere 18 thumped hard to the ground. Hardly great statis-

tics, but good for the ammunition manufacturers and a hauntingly accurate indication of the degree of difficulty in hitting these elusive, high targets.

The other noteworthy game preserve falsehood is one that even Robert F. Jones perpetuated in his chapter entitled *Glorious Carnage* – that thousands, rather than a mere hundred birds or less, are taken most driven shoots. Sure, in the old days of preserves in England, the likes of one Lord Ripon undoubtedly aimed for and met the standards of what might be labelled “glorious carnage”. For instance between 1867 and 1904, Lord Ripon on his tod shot 142,343 pheasant (that’s an average of 3847 per year for 37 years), 97,759 partridge, 56,460 grouse, 29,858 rabbits, and 27,686 hares – a grossly obscene record no one could possibly either want to beat, nor want to own, certainly not these days, and never in New Zealand. In fact, most Kiwi preserves don’t even release more than 3000 birds for a season, let alone allow that many to be shot.

Today, eight shooters taking 100 birds total in one day on a New Zealand preserve can hardly be considered causing carnage. Six shooters taking 41, as we did, is even less likely to offend a sole. Granted, it is usually a tougher grind for a single

hunter and dog, in a typical New Zealand walk-up hunt scenario, to manage seven or 12 birds, particularly when most daily limit bags are well below that. But that shouldn’t automatically reflect badly on preserve outcomes for the average gun.

Inevitably, the main discussion point surrounding hunting on a game preserve still comes down to cost, although in talking cost, less and less concern is actually expressed about the fact that preserves now exist, and more talk is about the affordability of visiting one. It is interesting that as long as nine years ago, few people seemed upset at the prospect of pheasant preserves. In fact, the results of a 1997 survey on hunting preserves by Fish & Game Hawke’s Bay Region, which canvassed 150 clubs, found that 71% of those surveyed believed a demand for some form of paid pheasant hunting existed. That same survey indicated that 54% believed the demand should be catered for; 50% believed Fish & Game should be involved in moves towards commercial preserves; and 72% believed preserves should be required to adhere to regional regulations and conditions. Acceptance was not universal, but it was surprisingly strong even back then. And acceptance is arguably stronger now. That survey also determined several significant reasons why modern hunters favour preserves, including greater opportunity for new entrants and for older, more frail hunters, better predator control, possible extension of the present hunting season, promotion of gun safety, and the ability of landowners to diversify their income base.

Only individual hunters know their own affordability factor for their sport, but costs do vary from preserve to preserve. Few, however, have a basic charge under \$500 a day and some fill their season quite easily charging three times that much. Others, such as Whanawhana Property Trust, also in the Sherenden area, run preserves on a syndicate basis and charge for a whole season (four eight man shoots), not individual days. Syndicate members at Whanawhana, for instance, get four shoots a year for \$1200 plus GST, equating to \$300 per shoot. This last season, Whanawhana released 1800 Niblett-reared birds of which approximately 500 were shot over four days.

In ending, perhaps it’s best to quote something the New Zealand Fish & Game Council released in 1999 when it decided, somewhat contentiously at the time, “to accept gamebird preserves as part of the lawful hunting process”. The NZFGC back then said “it considers game preserves could provide legitimate hunting opportunity”. Without in any way meaning to champion the preserve concept, my recent experience certainly corroborated that line of thinking.



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