

Ducks and Tinamous in Argentina



My Argentine friend, Federico Paralta-Ramos of the previous chapter, was always referred to by us as Don Federico, out of respect. Sadly this quintessence of a gentleman-sportsman succumbed to cancer a few years ago, but his stature and innate courtesy were of such depth as to leave a lasting impression, not to be dulled by passage of time.

If his persona manifested the slightest negativity, it was a certain inflexibility in his viewpoints. Or, as we would say in the uncouth world of South Texas, he was hardheaded as hell on some subjects, including hunting and fishing. For example, he was adamant about using cartridges that had brass about midway up the casing of the shell. No amount of reasoning or supporting statistics in the hunting literature could change his mind: the more powder and shot the better. He also had definite thoughts about how and when things should be done in the shooting field, which resulted in minor (but entirely forgivable) inconveniences from time to time.

Cyril, Myra, and I made our first trip to Argentina in 1983, at the invitation of Don Federico. The two cattle ranches that his family owned in the pampas of Buenos Aires province

offered an array of shooting opportunities, but were superb for waterfowl. Both Estancia Cardal and Estancia Deslinde had extensive marshes, surrounded by pastures and cropland, so both water and ample feed were available for ducks, geese, and swans. In addition, Don Federico's neighbors were all close friends and readily shared their properties on a regular basis for different kinds of sport.

We were pleased to learn that none of the locals shot the beautiful Black-necked Swan (*Cygnus melanocorypha*) or the Coscoroba Swan (*Coscoroba coscoroba*), nor were they much inclined to hunt the numerous Upland Goose (*Chloephaga picta*) or Ashy-headed Goose (*Chloephaga poliocephala*). They considered the real sport to be abundant ducks that frequented this area in the austral winter (our summer months). We concurred with this choice and this assessment of challenge. For the reader not familiar with common South American ducks, the following is a tabulation of species we pursued in this inland marsh habitat:

Chiloe (Southern) Widgeon	<i>Anas sibilatrix</i>
Yellow-billed (Brown) Pintail	<i>Anas georgica</i>
Speckled Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>
Silver Teal	<i>Anas versicolor</i>
Cinnamon Teal	<i>Anas cyanoptera</i>
Red Shoveler	<i>Anas platalea</i>
Rosy-billed Pochard	<i>Netta peposaca</i>

Chiloe Widgeon closely resemble American Widgeon in flight, but are patterned differently. Yellow-billed Pintail have the appearance and flight characteristics of female Northern Pintail and are quite common in Argentina, as are the rather drab Speckled Teal. The diminutive Silver Teal is quite elegant, with its extensive black cap bordered white below on the cheek, a pale blue bill, and prominent spots on its underparts. Although the Cinnamon Teal population in Argentina is disjunct from Cinnamon Teal found in western North America, it is otherwise identical. Red Shoveler

superficially resemble Northern Shoveler, but feature bright rufous underparts, boldly spotted, and lack the green head of their male northern cousins. Rosy-billed Pochard are large and quite spectacular. Males in flight have a boldly distinctive black and white pattern and a shockingly bright rosy bill, obvious at considerable distance. A rubbery, soft knob of the same bright pinkish red develops at the base of the bill on mature males.

Also prominent in the marshes and pastures of this region are the bizarre Southern Screamer (*Chauna torquata*), a primitive form of waterfowl. These remarkable birds are at least as large as turkeys, with huge but unwebbed feet for walking in the marsh—calling to mind perhaps a pudgy, long-legged goose with a bill shaped like a turkey's beak. They are gregarious and blatantly noisy, befitting their common name. The three species of screamers in South America are not considered game birds, understandable in view of their slow and cumbersome flight.

Our first exposure to duck hunting à la Don Federico was never to be forgotten. We had enjoyed a casual day touring the ranch and visiting his friends, including Prince Charles Radziwill of prewar Polish royalty, who was then living in Argentina. About midafternoon we were advised that a "go at the ducks" was in order, so we donned our waders and were delivered to the dropoff point at the edge of the marsh. Here we were told simply to wade into the reeds, spacing ourselves far enough apart for safety. There were no blinds of any sort. Water came only to our knees, but the reeds were essentially head high.

As we took our respective shooting positions, we stirred up several small groups of ducks and perhaps a dozen magnificent swans. A few casual shots were fired with equally casual results: Three or four ducks fell, at the most. As it was a still and sunny day, those birds alarmed by our invasion settled back into the extensive marsh, joining a host of comrades feeding and relaxing in undisturbed stupor. Past experience had taught me that waterfowl are disinclined to move when in such pleasant circumstances, which made me doubt that we would fire another shot

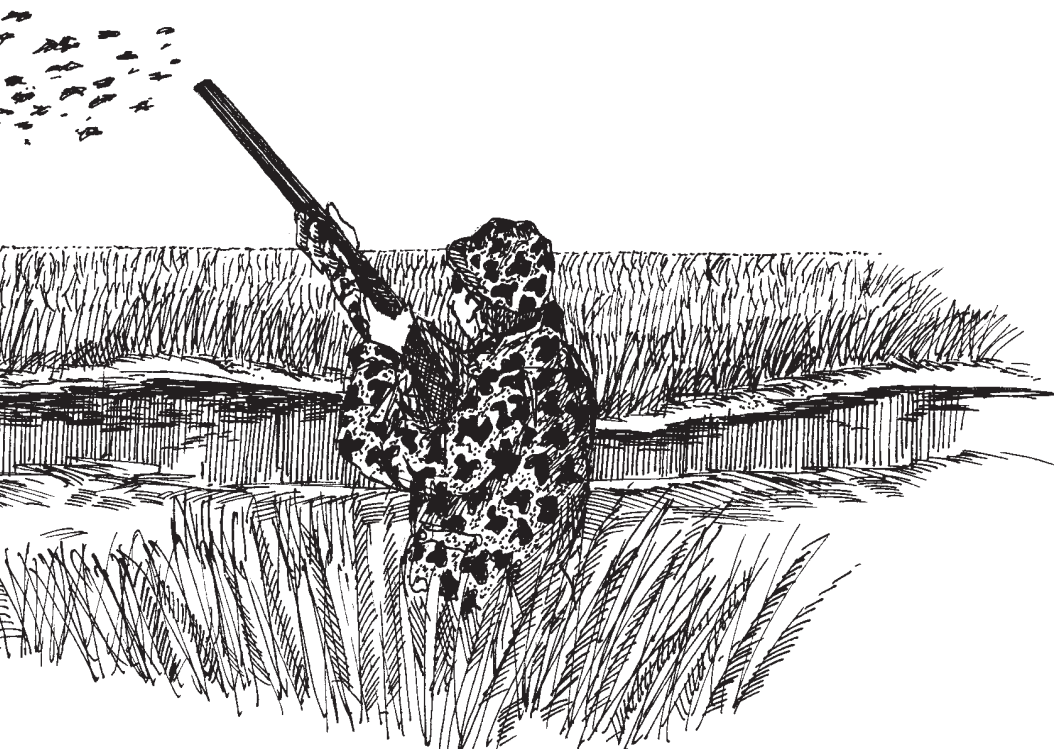
until near sunset, when there would likely be some marginal activity in or out of the marsh. About fifteen minutes passed in a manner that confirmed my assessment. Silence was interrupted only by background vocalizations of feeding ducks and occasional raucous complaints from Southern Screamer and coots, who seem to need no excuse to sound off.

We had not counted on Federico's surprise tactics. From the opposite side of the marsh suddenly came a deployment of about ten mounted gauchos waving and shouting as if driving a herd of cattle. In an abrupt instant the sky was filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of alarmed waterfowl that milled and circled in random directions. Confusion reigned, for ducks and shooters alike. Wads of teal would almost collide with mixed flights of pintails and widgeon. An occasional Rosy-billed Pochard added color to the scene. None of the birds seemed anxious to leave their previously happy marsh, so the shooting continued



at a feverish pace for forty-five minutes or so, until casualties finally persuaded the larger concentrations to evacuate the area.

During the height of this melee, I had the disturbing thought that recovery of downed birds would be almost hopeless, given the reedy cover and the impossibility of remembering even approximately where ducks had fallen. But Don Federico had admonished us in advance that we should not concern ourselves with retrieval, so we dutifully followed instructions. When this spectacle finally reached its conclusion, our now silent cadre of gauchos moved into our sector of the marsh and proceeded to comb the area for downed birds, joined by the two labs that we had seen earlier in the day. Apparently, visibility was quite good from their elevated position on horseback, for our drivers turned out to be equally effective at recovery, assisted as they were by the dogs. It was a satisfactory conclusion to a most spectacular



shoot and our first exposure to driven ducks. Don Federico enjoyed our amazement as much as he did the shooting.

We were subsequently entertained on other ranches with a variety of opportunities to shoot ducks in moderate numbers, but never by using blinds, decoys, and calls, hunting early in the morning, or otherwise employing standard North American practices. Evidently, ducks are so abundant here that none of the usual inconveniences and planning we associate with waterfowling are considered necessary—at least by Don Federico and his neighbors. Cyril and I had a few ideas of our own that we desperately wanted to try, but gentle hints about new techniques fell on deaf ears. As mentioned earlier, our host was not receptive to deviation from the plan, nor was his inflexible nature open to change of approach. Obviously, we respected his position as the 800-pound gorilla and left well enough alone. Our big chance came a few years later.

We received another invitation from Federico to return during the austral winter of July 1986. On this occasion, we were invited to stay for a week or so, during which period we could enjoy a variety of sports, with the understanding that he would have to leave us on our own at least once because of business commitments in Buenos Aires. Since we had a truck at our disposal and a general familiarity with his two *estancias*, this prospect delighted us. Now was the opportunity to test a different approach. Our plan was based on what we had carefully observed: the feeding pattern of Yellow-billed Pintails. This species abounded in the marshes, but regularly left to feed in nearby cropland about midmorning. We had seen flight after flight passing in the same line over a pasture en route to fields of grain stubble. The pasture afforded little in the way of cover—a few scattered bushes—but a large herd of cattle was grazing there, which we hoped would help cover our presence.

As things turned out, cover was not much of a problem. Seemingly endless flights to and from the marsh passed overhead at a perfect height: about thirty yards up, challenging but

within range. For some unknown reason, our bovine friends, particularly the bulls, did not desert us, which allowed us to use them as moving blinds. I must shamefully admit that we were guilty of unsportsmanlike conduct, and shot considerably more birds than could possibly be justified. At the time, we rationalized our greed by concluding (correctly) that opportunities like this are rare, and that Don Federico would be unlikely to concede that any different approach was worth trying, regardless of our success. At any rate, we disgracefully “pigged out.” On no occasion, before or since, have I been able to duplicate these high, passing shots on such splendid waterfowl. It was entirely different than decoying birds or shooting casual passing ducks in the marsh—more like shooting high pheasant in Britain. It was unbelievable sport!

When we finally realized the enormity of our sin, we were faced with a challenge of a different sort. Now came the problem of transporting our not inconsiderable bag to the truck that we had parked over a mile away because of wet conditions between our flyway pasture and the only passable roadway. Cyril and I both had duck straps, but these usually adequate devices were sadly overburdened, as was Myra’s game bag. We were loath to make two trips through the intervening mud flat. Then I was struck with the imaginative (for me) idea of using our belts as “emergency” duck straps by tightening them around the collective necks of numerous pintails all oriented identically. We then set out for what proved to be a torturous ordeal, dragging our ducks most of the way. It was only proper that we should have been punished in some way for our gluttony.

There was an amusing sequel, however. Shortly after we returned to the ranch headquarters, we were greeted by the ranch foreman, who was notably impressed with the success of the gringo method. We had determined that it would be diplomatically wise to refrain from relating details to our host; but, when Don Federico arrived back at the ranch around dark, the foreman filled him in, with dramatic reference to the truckload

of ducks brought in by the *norteamericanos*. Federico, ever gracious, was as pleased as he was surprised. Upon questioning us further, his only negative comment ran along the lines of, "It sounds like too much work." We all agreed privately that we would accept this kind of work anytime.

It is time now to turn from waterfowl to tinamous. During our first visit to Argentina in 1983, Don Federico introduced us to the "partridge of the pampas." As a result of extensive reading about the history of wingshooting around the world, Cyril had often spoken to me about how European settlers of Argentina had shot native partridge at numerous locations, but particularly in the vast pampas grasslands. These accounts left me puzzled, for my amateur study of ornithological taxonomy had indicated that South America, despite its richness of individual species, was poorly represented by gallinaceous birds, except for the family *Cracidae* (guans, chachalacas, and curassows), which could hardly be defined as game birds. It is true that the order *Galliformes* contains certain South American quail species, but these birds are usually Wood Quails found in dense habitat certainly not suited for sport. Nothing taxonomically or morphologically similar to partridge of the Old World are found as native birds in Argentina.

We are, nonetheless, presented with both historical and current accounts of shooting various types of partridge in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. It finally became apparent to me, after a bit of reading, that the birds in question were actually members of the family *Tinamidae* (tinamous) of the order *Tinamiformes*, which are considered to be among the most ancient of extant families and not related in any direct way to the family *Phasianidae* (pheasant, grouse, quail, and turkey). It is, however, understandable how the confusion arose and has been sustained in current sporting literature: Tinamous have strong (but superficial) resemblance to *gallinaceous* birds and often flush from the ground in a similar, but less explosive,

manner. Here the similarities end. We shall return to our ornithological lessons subsequently.

Cyril was particularly taken by early accounts of how these “partridge” were hunted around the turn of the century. Shooters strung a light cable (or heavy wire) between two widely spaced horses and dragged it across areas of low grass. The guns walked behind the cable and shot partridge as they were flushed, which shows how tightly these birds are capable of holding. We mentioned the technique to Federico when we initially met him in Houston, prior to our first trip. He was aware of the method but had never tried it himself, explaining that dogs were normally employed by today’s sportsmen. Imagine our surprise, then, when he announced upon our arrival that he had arranged for us all to experiment with this historical approach. We were admonished, however, that the decline in partridge populations meant that we should limit the numbers of birds taken, to which we readily agreed.

As it turned out, this unusual method worked perfectly. Our horses were spaced about one hundred yards apart, and they dragged a heavy wire with weights and ribbons attached. We walked behind the wire and shot the partridge (actually *Nothura maculosa*, a tinamou commonly called Spotted Nothura) as they flushed. After about ten of these quail-sized birds, we halted the operation. Although it was most interesting to replicate this historical precedent, we did not consider the shooting particularly sporting, nor were we anxious to be guilty of overkill. On another day we walked up a different species of tinamou, *Rhynchotus rufescens*, which bears the common name Red-winged Tinamou. This species is much larger, almost the size of pheasant, and they are normally found in heavier stands of grass. When Don Federico advised us that this tinamou is even more sparsely distributed, we stopped shooting after two or three birds.

In subsequent years, Myra and I have covered almost the entire country of Argentina on bird-watching trips and have seen

eight species of tinamous at various locations, and in widely varying habitat associations. The entire family consists of nearly fifty species, distributed from northern Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. In no location could they be considered abundant, nor capable of withstanding significant shooting. The reproductive rate does not even compare with gallinaceous birds, and most sportsmen familiar with the facts would not consider them suitable game birds. I must say that I cringe when I hear accounts of gringos who say that they had excellent partridge shooting in Uruguay, Paraguay, or Argentina. In this instance, I am inclined to take a conservationist position and say that great restraint—or abstinence—should be employed.

Having made this case, I must say that it was an interesting experience to turn historical description into an actual episode. It's too bad the brush of South Texas, or the absence of comparable grassland anywhere else in North America, make this dragged-chain technique unworkable on real gallinaceous birds. Besides, can you imagine the consternation of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the dragged-chain technique?

Aside from the rare privilege of being the guest of Don Federico, we have been fortunate to shoot in a variety of other settings in Argentina, including the topographically interesting stage near Córdoba in the north, where the Eared Dove (*Zenaida auriculata*) abounds. It is difficult to overstate the bird-hunting opportunities available in this marvelous country, or the pleasant reception that awaits the *norteamericano* shooter. Nowhere is there better food or a more agreeable climate, or a season that does not conflict with our own. Even the wine is exceptional.

