



Gunners and loaders in traditional attire at Primland
(Photo courtesy of Primland)

Hunting Preserves

Where to Go When the Wild Birds Have Flown

Story and photos by John Shtogren

When bird hunters of a certain age get together, that age being defined by gray at the temples and deep creases at the corners of the eyes, their conversation is predictable. The most common phrase you're likely to hear is, "I remember when..."

I hear Virginia bird hunters remember, "When my Dad and I found five coveys of Bobs in a four-acre bean field.... When my grandfather's home covey was next to the barn...." I hear my old hunting buddies from Michigan do the same thing: "I remember when we had pheasants inside the city limits.... When I shot my limit, and my brother's, at the end of a cornfield...." I've forgotten a lot over the years, but I remember every Opening Day for pheasants from when I was eight to 18; my Dad in his tan Jones cap and old green hunting coat with a paper license safety pinned to his back, burgers for lunch in country bars, our Springer Spaniel full of burrs, wet feet—and every bird we ever flushed.

We bird hunters have warm memories, but the cold truth is that the wild birds of our youth are long gone. Virginia biologists say there are less than 60,000 wild quail left in the whole state. So what's a bird hunter to do? Option A) Pack it in. Ring the bell, sell the guns, break it gently to the dog. Option B) Save up your money, lots of it, for a once-a-year trip out West where wild birds still fly. Option C) Consider a local hunting preserve where, with a little imagination, you can have a hunt that is almost the way it used to be. I'm going for "C" and suggest you do, too.

Hunting Preserves in Virginia

Hunting preserves are licensed by the state to release pen-raised birds—ring-neck pheasants, bobwhite quail, chukar and Hungarian partridge—for hunters to pursue. How "sporting" is the hunt at a preserve? It all depends on the quality of the birds and the cover. Fortunately for



Left to right: Tony Sakowski, Skip Forest and Bill Meredith shooting quail at Orapax.

Virginia bird hunters, as wild birds have become fewer and fewer, hunting preserves have gotten better and better.

All hunting preserves have some common characteristics:

—The season runs from September 1 to April 30, seven full months. And you can hunt on Sunday.

—A one-person, half-day hunt is the usual minimum.

—Costs vary from preserve to preserve. \$30 per pheasant and \$10 per quail are good working numbers, with chukars and Huns somewhere in between.

—Bag limits are determined by the size of your wallet.

—You can bring your dog or arrange for a dog and handler for an extra fee.

All *good* hunting preserves have strong flying birds, great cover and make you feel welcome. They want you there and want you back. A nice change from all

those “Keep Out” signs. What distinguishes one good preserve from another good one is the different kinds of activities and amenities they offer. Some are simply good places to hunt for the day while others may offer overnight accommodations, or even resort-level luxury, along with other sporting activities.

Three Virginia Favorites

The Virginia hunting preserves described here are three of my favorites. They are not the only good places to hunt; they are just three I know well.

*Orapax Plantation, Goochland County
Est. 1987*

Acres: 700

Birds: Pheasants, Bobwhite quail

Birds released each season: 10,000

Types of hunting: Field and driven shoots

Accommodations: None, club house only

Owner: Andrew Dykers

*Contact: (866) 263-6695,
www.orapax.com*

Orapax is a place to hunt, pure and simple. It sits in the gently rolling hills along the James River a short drive west of Richmond. I found out years ago that I could be out of the Financial District and into the fields in less than an hour, even stopping to pick up Boomer, my Lab, along the way.

Andrew Dykers, owner of Orapax, has been an active member of the North American Gamebird Association for almost twenty years. It shows in the fast-flying pheasants and quail he has shipped up from North Carolina. Dykers has mastered a technique for setting out quail so that they burst skyward as a full covey just like in a classic sporting print. Most places scatter the quail so the hunting is like chasing down singles *after* busting a covey. In addition to field hunts in natural cover



Boomer with a mixed bag at Orapax

(Dykers sticks to native grasses and shrubs), Orapax offers Ring Shoots, which simulate European driven shoots. Pheasants are launched from a central stockade, and 10-20 shooters ringing the stockade take only overhead shots. It's a high volume affair with each shooter taking up to 100 shots. 'Apres le chasse refreshments are served in the new club house at the end of the day.

This season Orapax opened a special bird dog training field. Live pigeons are strategically placed so that the dog learns to quarter and scent the bird and hold steady to wing and shot. The pigeons are not really shot: they fly back to their coop to be part of other training days.

Orapax was my Lab Boomer's favorite place for "rehab" after each of his hip replacements. The scent of a pheasant worked wonders for him and still does.

Primland Resort, Patrick County

Est. 1987

Acres: 14,000

Birds: Pheasants, Bobwhite quail, chukars, Huns, ducks

Birds released each season: 30,000

Types of hunting: Field and driven shoots

Accommodations: For up to 100 guests

Manager: Stephen Helms

Contact: (276) 251-8244,

www.primland.com

Primland Resort is the only

Orvis-endorsed wing shooting lodge in the state and only one of two dozen in the country. To earn the coveted Orvis endorsement you have to score high marks on the quality of the hunt, courteous service, accommodations and cuisine.

The property is located just off the Blue Ridge Parkway in the southwestern part of the state. As you drive along the ridge road at 3,000 feet toward the main

gate, the word "spectacular" keeps coming to mind. On a clear day you can see Winston-Salem and Greensboro 60 miles away. The manicured shooting fields and ponds are laid out on the valley floor 1,500 feet below.

Primland releases birds throughout the season, not just on the day of the hunt. It is common to see pheasants strutting along the ridge road 1,500 feet above their original release point. Hunters will *always* find birds in Primland fields, lots of birds.

All upland hunts are fully guided. Forty pointers and setters are kept on site. Guests are welcome to bring their own dogs, but the price is the same. There are eight separate "courses," hunting areas, spread out along the valley floor. Each course has carefully maintained habitats of milo, sorghum and warm season grasses. No more than two or three hunters and their guide are on a course. Except for the sound of distant gunfire, hunters will not

Shooting fields in the valley at Primland





Joe and Hank on point at Hunter's Paradise

know other hunters are in the valley. Orvis has a strict rule that no lodge should try to accommodate more clients than it can personally attend to.

The European-style driven shoot at Primland is something to behold. Each gunner is paired with a loader so he is ready for the waves of pheasants flying off the mountain. Gunners and loaders alike are dressed in English shooting attire; caps, shooting coats, and below-the-knee breeks with matching long stockings—all provided by Primland.

With such limited space, it's hard to do justice to all that Primland offers in addition to hunting. A short list includes sporting clays, horseback riding, trout fishing, mountain biking, ATV safaris, trophy deer and spring turkey hunting. (Success on turkeys is an astounding 67%!) And the menu includes pecan crusted pheasant with a Granny Smith apple-black currant chutney, duck breast with a mixed berry demi-glace.... And a new mountaintop golf course is in the making.

Hunter's Paradise, Bath County

Est. 1990

Acres: 2,000

Birds: Pheasants, Bobwhite quail, chukars and Huns

Birds released each season: 10,000

Types of hunts: Field and driven shoots

Accommodations: For up to 35 guests

Manager: Lance Lyons

Contact: (540) 996-4134, www.greenvalleyhuntersparadise.com

On the opening day of black powder season 15 years ago, I took the first buck at Hunter's Paradise. It was the first day that Marvin Lyons opened his place to the public. After Marvin passed on, his widow, Laura, supported and encouraged their son, Lance, as he built a first-class hunting preserve. Quality and hospitality have driven all their efforts. I feel like I'm going home as I drive up to Green Valley, and other clients tell me they feel the same way.

There are seven different shooting fields at Hunter's Paradise, each with a different degree of difficulty for shooters and dogs. The open fields of milo and warm season grasses provide moderately difficult shooting, much like you'd find in the Midwest. The thinned oak flats offer more difficult shooting, like hunting Georgia quail or Minnesota ruffed grouse that know how to put a pine tree between themselves and a gun barrel. Down in the creek bottoms where the brush is head high, the dogs have to work hard to flush the birds, and the shooter has to work hard

just to see them.

Lance listens carefully to each of his clients so that he can put them in a field that's right for them. He'll put them in a position to be successful, but they'll have to do their part to make it so. Just as it should be.

On my last hunt I went for chukars up on the oak flats. I shot well, thanks to Lance's bird dogs, Joe and Hank, who pinned the birds until I moved in ready for the flush. It was a great hunt, but that wasn't what really made my day.

At the end of the day, just before dark, I took a walk for old times' sake. Lance has cornfields which I don't often see at other preserves. I think I spent half my youth in Michigan pushing cornfields for pheasants—young hunters push while fathers wait at the end of the field to block the running birds. The sound of dry corn stalks crackling underfoot on a frosty autumn evening took me back. I could hear pheasants running ahead of me in the corn, but I couldn't see well in the late day shadows. Near the end of the field there was a break in the corn, and in the fading light I was sure I saw an old man in a tan cap and faded green coat waiting for me as always. Who said you can't go home again?

For a listing of Virginia hunting preserves, contact www.dgif.virginia.gov, (804)367-1000.

The author is an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands. He welcomes comments at jshtogren@cs.com.