

hunt pheasants both morning and afternoon. In the morning, we enjoyed eight driven hunts in mostly milo fields. **Typical of most driven hunts, most guns line up at the end of the field as blockers while the bird boys acting as beaters start at the other end, with two more guns on each side acting as flankers just ahead of the beaters.** Being one that likes to be on the move, I frequently volunteered to walk the flank, allowing most of Arturo's other guests to block. After several sessions of this, the mostly Spanish-speaking bird boys began calling me "Johnny Walker." I liked the nickname, and it stuck with them and the other guests for the rest of the trip. We repeated a similar routine in about eight more fields in the afternoon. **A couple of fields seemed to be devoid of pheasants, but at other times the shooting was fast and furious with most drives providing shooting opportunities for everyone.** By the time we arrived back at the lodge in late afternoon, this "walker" was one tired hombre and after libations and dinner, I was in bed early and slept very comfortably all night long.

Day Two had us shooting more driven pheasants in the morning with similar results as the day before. After another delightful lunch at the lodge, we headed out to shoot doves and took positions around a grain storage facility. For some reason, this particular hot spot was frequented mostly by Eurasian collared doves and they were there in droves. This dove species is nonmigratory and so when you find them, they are usually and quite predictably still there when you return. Again, everyone got in plenty of shooting.

Higbee Beach WMA Do-It-Yourself Woodcock Hunting

- **Timetable:** Usually mid-December through Jan. 1
- **Accommodations:** Various hotels/motels/bed and breakfast facilities
- **Food:** Various restaurants
- **Hunt:** Easy to extremely difficult

Most hardcore woodcock hunters (and even many novice timberdoodlers) know about **the Holy Grail of United States woodcock hunting — Cape May,**

On the third day, we again opted for driven pheasants in the morning and then mostly mourning doves over milo in the afternoon although two rooster pheasants also happened along, gliding in over the milo, and were taken by the dove shooters. This took place in late November, and so most of the white-winged doves had migrated south by that time.

Arturo will usually conduct these hunts without the aid of dogs. However,



his bird boys are incredibly diligent in getting the birds flying and also finding dead birds.

Although our group did not opt for any Gambel's quail hunts, it is interesting to note that with Baja Hunting, even these birds are hunted in driven fashion, and hunts typically take place in the thick, brushy margins along the edges of agricultural fields.

Pheasant season runs from mid-October to early January. **Outfitter enforced limits are five per day for roosters only.** Gambel's quail season goes from early October to mid-February with a daily limit of 10. All species of doves may be taken from late August to mid-February with liberal limits on each.

Baja Hunting also offers Califor-

Dateline: New Jersey

N.J. Considered by knowledgeable bird hunters, dog trainers, biologists and birdwatchers alike to be a magic magnet that attracts magnificent numbers of woodcocks during the birds' southward migrations each autumn, **Cape May offers woodcock hunters scenic, memorable hunts that can be unbelievably fast, relatively simple, uncharacteristically crowded, surprisingly difficult and intensely frustrating.**

Situated at New Jersey's southernmost tip, Cape May is New Jersey's curious, dangling appendage bordered by

nia valley quail hunts in Ojos Negros which is located 20 miles southeast of Ensenada and 35 miles east of the Pacific coast, an area which is also considered to be Mexico's wine country. There is excellent quail cover to be found in the area. In addition, Arturo provides some world-class brant shooting at San Quintin Bay, about 200 miles south of the U.S. border along the Pacific side of the Baja Peninsula.

Ejido Qunitana Roo is located about an hour southwest of Yuma, Ariz., 30 miles southeast of Calexico, Calif., and an hour 20 minutes southeast of San Diego, Calif. Baja Hunting personnel will meet guests at the airport or, if driving, at a designated border crossing point and escort them to the lodge. Guns are provided if needed. Firearms may be transported into and out of Mexico, but it is not without the hassle and expense of applications and permits that must be filled out well ahead of time. Arturo can assist with the required paperwork if necessary. **Ammunition must be purchased inside of Mexico and is provided by Baja Hunting as well.** A valid passport is mandatory to re-enter the U.S. If driving, expect long lines and waiting times in excess of one hour when passing back into the U.S.

One need not travel very far south of the border to enjoy some of the best wing shooting to be found in North America.

For more information: **Arturo Malo, Baja Hunting, 011 52 686 557 0070 or toll free 866-241-6405, www.bajahunting.com, arturomalo@me.com.**

—John C. Gosselin

the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Delaware Bay to the west. Cape May is in the enviable position of sitting in the middle of the eastern seaboard and the Atlantic flyway, so the naturally-occurring and human-managed woodlands, thickets, early successional fields, dunes and shores found within its wildlife refuges and wildlife management areas provide excellent habitat, forage and resting areas for migrating woodcocks.

Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area, located near the southwestern tip of Cape May (about a two-hour

drive from Philadelphia International Airport or a 50-minute drive from Atlantic City International Airport), consists of nearly 1,100 acres of prime, public-access woodcock hunting location for the do-it-yourself woodcock hunter. Higbee Beach provides eye-popping, head-spinning, fast-shooting woodcock action when migratory and weather patterns cooperate, but it can also disappoint and frustrate hunters when conditions are less than optimal.

New Jersey woodcock hunting seasons vary each year and are set according to two zones: a North Zone and a South Zone (which includes Cape May and Higbee Beach). The annual season typically consists of two segments (one from mid- to late-November and another in mid- to late-December), but special hunting regulations are in effect for Higbee Beach. It is important for Cape May-bound woodcock hunters to note that the first woodcock hunting season segment is typically not in play at Higbee Beach. For tourism and conservation reasons, hunting at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area is typically not allowed “until the Monday after the six-day firearm deer season each year,” according to The New Jersey Div. of Fish and Wildlife website. In 2013, for example, Higbee Beach was closed to hunting from Sept. 1 to Dec. 15. The second segment of New Jersey’s woodcock season was open Dec. 19 through Jan. 1, so only late season hunting was permitted. **Additionally, New Jersey woodcock hunting is only permitted Mondays through Saturdays.**

Woodcocks begin their migrations in early fall prior to the opening of hunting at Higbee Beach and continue migrating through December. They tend to opportunistically fly southward when favorable weather conditions aid their journeys or when freezing conditions force them to find readily available food sources. The waters that surround Cape May contribute to relatively warmer, above-freezing temperatures that lead to late-season availability of woodcock food sources, but they also present a challenging obstacle to woodcocks. **Since woodcocks prefer short flights, they tend to congregate on the lands of Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area to rest and feed before embarking on long flights across the Delaware Bay.** The woodcocks will

oftentimes wait in Cape May until optimal traveling windows open, such as when precipitation ends and/or when prevailing north winds can carry them across the bay. If hunters use weather patterns to their advantage, they can encounter dizzying numbers of birds on the ground at Higbee Beach during the second woodcock hunting season segment.

Weather-watching woodcock hunters look for cold fronts to pass through Cape May and plan their hunts accordingly. The strong winds and rain or snow that typically accompany an approaching cold front will drive more birds into Higbee Beach and will prevent birds already there from leaving. When hunters’ timing is just



right, they could encounter hundreds of woodcocks on the ground and could conceivably harvest their three-bird limits in less than 30 minutes. Hunters can expect to find singles, small groups and large groups of birds just about everywhere, including thickets, hedgerows, segmented woodlots and fields. When conditions are at their peak, it is not uncommon to see timberdoodles walking on roadways leading to Higbee Beach, feeding next to parking areas, and flushing at the sound of slamming car doors. **When the perfect storm of weather and migratory conditions comes together just right, hunting at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area is fast and simple.**

A drawback to hunting the perfect storm of woodcock conditions at Higbee Beach, however, is relatively large crowds of woodcock hunters. Don’t get me wrong: the crowds are not unbearable; they are just unusual. In many cases woodcock hunters go entire seasons encountering few, if any, other hunters at their woodcock hunting spots, so sharing hunting grounds with 10, 20 or 30 other hunters presents

some challenges. Other hunters and hunting guides also know to follow weather and migration patterns, so open parking spaces and untouched thickets are hard to come by for those who choose to sleep in. To increase chances of harvest success — and really, to have the most enjoyable hunts — hunters should arrive for first light or delay their arrivals to the afternoon (after most hunters have left the area).

To truly beat the crowds, hunters might want to go against the grain and hunt Higbee Beach on days that most other hunters find undesirable. Hunting on warm days, rainy days or even snowy days can still lead to moderate success. The limit is only three birds, after all. Hunters who hunt these “off” days might not encounter hundreds of birds, but the nose of a good dog will usually find enough birds to present shooting opportunities.

When conditions are less than optimal, however, woodcock hunting at Higbee Beach becomes more difficult. In fact, when few woodcocks are sparsely dispersed throughout the 1,100-acre area, hunting conditions can be classified as extreme because of woodcocks’ penchant to hide in the ridiculously thick, thorn-filled underbrush that tears dogs’ feet and trips even the nimblest hunters. (On a personal note, I have to say that the thorny underbrush at Higbee Beach is the worst I have encountered anywhere.) Fewer birds on the ground means more actual hunting, and more actual hunting means dogs and their humans have to cover more ground and search the thickest, nastiest areas. While much of the hunting (for humans) can be conducted from worn trails and from the edges of woodlots and fields, hunters should be prepared to enter tangles of thorns and vines to flush pointed birds or to aid in retrieving downed birds. Therefore, heavy-duty brush pants or hunting chaps along with sturdy, ankle-supporting boots are recommended.

Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area, located off Mile 0 (Exit 109 North) of the Garden State Parkway, is in close proximity to multiple Jersey Shore resort towns (including Atlantic City), so hotels, motels, bed and breakfast facilities, restaurants, casinos and nightlife venues abound. Hunters traveling with dogs should contact area hotels and motels before traveling to check on pet policies, since some policies change

after the summer tourist season.

For New Jersey residents, 2013-2014 firearm hunting licenses were \$27.50 per year. Full 2013-2014 non-

resident firearm hunting licenses were \$135.50 per year, although New Jersey offered a two-day nonresident small game firearm license for \$36.50.

For more information about do-it-yourself woodcock hunting in New Jersey: <http://www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/hunting.htm>.

—Steven M. Kendus

Dateline: Oregon

Classic Western Oregon Pheasant

- **Timetable:** August - April
- **Accommodations:** Hotel
- **Food:** Restaurants
- **Hunt:** Easy

Chinese ring-necked pheasants gained a foothold in western Oregon in the late 1880s, and populations blossomed throughout the Willamette Valley and were transported from there throughout the rest of the country. During the Great Depression, many a struggling family made regular meals out of wild birds hunted up in nearby fields.

For most of the last century, pheasants were common throughout the state of Oregon. As urban sprawl and efficient farming practices took over and as raptors increased in abundance, the pheasant lost, and **today a wild rooster is a rare sight indeed in western Oregon.**

Out Interstate 5, east of Brownsville, at the foot of the Cascades on the upper Calapooia River is a wetland and timber property that preserves the flavor of the heyday of Willamette Valley pheasant.

George and Mary Jo Dern purchased the 150-acre property in May 1994 and began to rehabilitate the land, which had been clear-cut in the early '90s. To establish baseline data and gauge the advancement of their efforts, they began a bird survey to document avian changes as habitat improved.

Slash piles were burned, large areas of blackberry brambles and Scotch broom were cleared, soil was smoothed and shaped; snags and desirable vegetation was left for wildlife habitat.

Two years of data showed that bird species richness increased 32.5 percent from Year 1 to Year 2 while bird abundance increased 137 percent. Twenty years later, the property retains a natural character, shaped by the Dernos with multiple shelterbelts of native cover for wildlife and for hunting.

Today, the property is characterized by the riparian vegetation, Douglas firs, alders, cottonwood, small patches of blackberry, Oregon grape, native grasses and Scotch broom.

"We try to work with what nature gave us," George Dern says.

Pugh Creek, a perennial stream, flows along the western edge of the property; the Calapooia River cuts through



the northeast corner. The property is licensed for a preserve and the Dernos' focus is on pheasants. Birds that have "gone native" nest and raise broods in the thick cover, but the Dernos buy pheasants from a breeder in nearby Scio, Ore., and are proud of the birds' flying prowess.

The Dernos limit hunts to one group at a time for exclusive use of the property. There is no livestock on the property and no farming other than for the birds and wildlife habitat. For those who want a clay pigeon warm-up, the Dernos will throw targets.

For the hunts, the George recommends no. 7 1/2 shot. Hunts start in a secluded glen at the end of the road where a couple of outbuildings and a covered picnic area provide a natural orientation area. George begins with a safety discussion and bird hunting philosophy speech wherein he assures hunters that no birds should be missed. Then he makes the hunters step inside the outhouse for a "shooting from the shitter" session. Clay pigeons are

thrown through the trees and only after a bird is broken is the shooter allowed to step out of the crapper.

Hunters and dogs start along the trail down Pugh Creek through the alders and fir trees. **This is George's "grouse walk" where he plants hen pheasants to replicate a traditional hunt for ruffed and blue grouse.**

The trail leads out of the timber and across a bridge, into a field of Scotch broom and shelterbelts.

We brought a French Brittany with us and George supplied two vizslas and a pudelpointer. Our group of five made a half-day hunt. We stopped halfway through for coffee and homemade cookies. **The birds were wary and strong fliers.**

Dependent on temperature and conditions, the Dernos begin booking hunts in August, and the season continues through the end of March. A calendar on the website gives a quick idea of open dates left in the season. Thanks to new rules put in place by ODFW, the Wildlife Ranch will book dog "training" sessions through April 30.

A full-day unguided hunt costs \$675 per person (up to four hunters) and includes release of 15 roosters and 10 hens.

A half-day unguided hunt costs \$280 for up to four hunters and a release of four roosters and six hens. Extra birds may be purchased at the rate of \$20 per hen and \$25 per rooster.

Hunters can request a dog and handler for an additional \$150. Bird processing costs \$2 per bird.

Upon request, the Dernos will arrange a European style half-day shoot for \$300 per shooter, a minimum of five guns and a maximum of 10, 20 hens per shooter. The event runs from 8 a.m. till noon and includes clay target shooting before the hunt, bird release, retrieval of birds by dog and handler, hunt-up of liberated birds (unguided) and bird processing.

Hunters can fly into the nearest