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HUNTING THE TROPHY SPRINGBOK, PART I

The Value of the Game

Ivan Carter

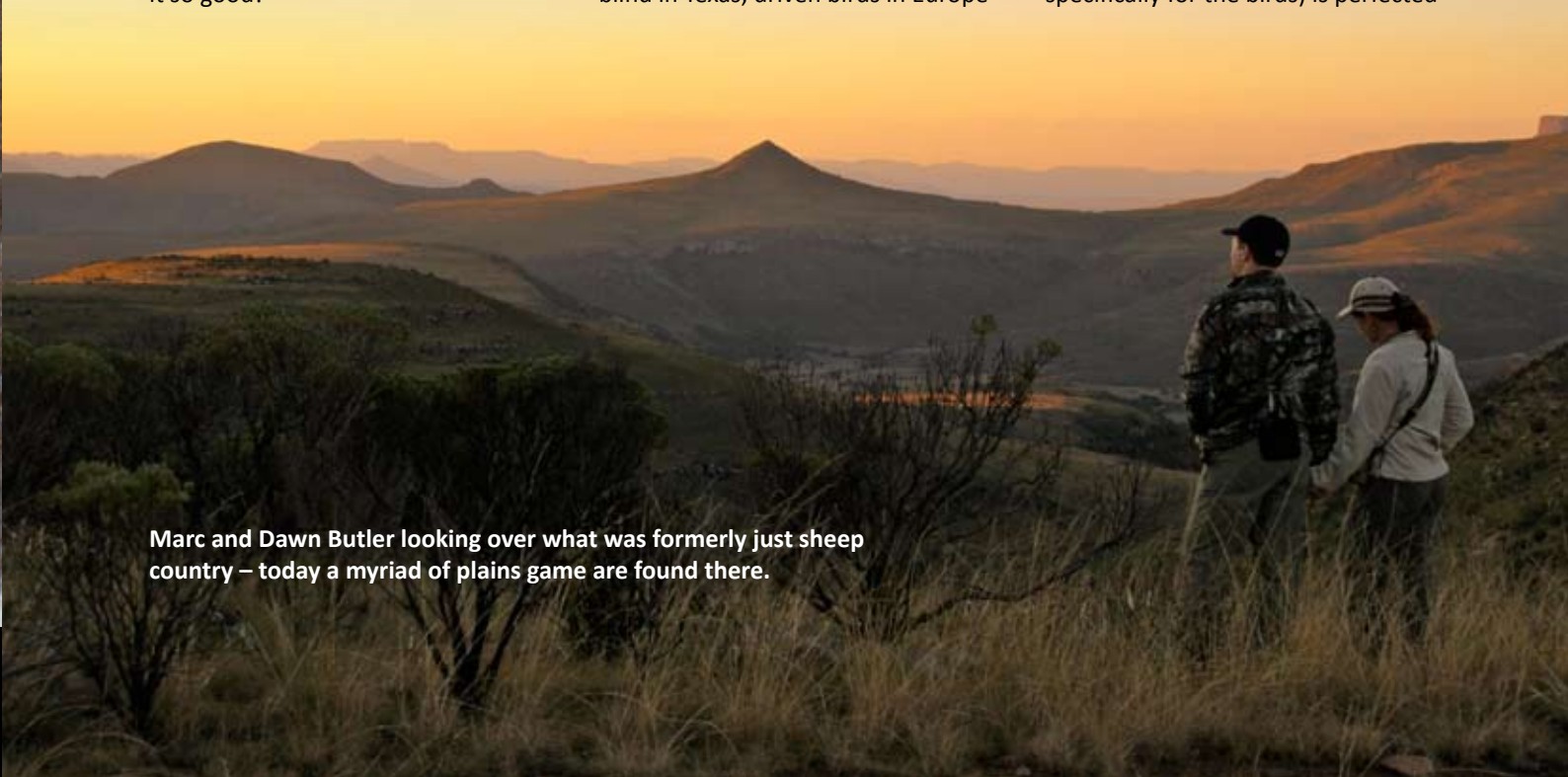
“*Muerte, double!*” came the excited shout from Rene, my bird boy, as a puff of feathers appeared and my second barrel went off. The smoke hung in the air for a second – the two doves folded – they were high birds and right behind them was another group, and behind them yet more. This was incredible! As much or as fast as you wanted to shoot, the birds kept coming. It was our first full day and I had arrived at my designated shooting spot an hour earlier. There was a large field of bright sunflowers in front of me and hills behind me, which harboured the largest roost in Cordoba Province, Argentina. Underfoot was a carpet of spent shells. Jerred Peterson, who was shooting with me that morning, looked across at me with a huge grin. “Wow! I never imagined it could be this good!” he said as his bird boy plopped two more shells into the waiting breech of his double. He raised up and yet two more birds folded out of the sky, landing nearby with a heavy thump. The February weather had most of the group hunting in short sleeves and shorts. The 10-minute drive from the lodge after a hearty breakfast was punctuated by everyone’s comments on the huge and seemingly never-ending stream of doves flying at every height and in every direction.

On our first shoot the previous evening, we had had an incredible time, at a completely different spot, also just a few minutes’ drive from the lodge. For the first-timers it was awe-inspiring, and those who had been to Cordoba before claimed they had never seen it so good!

Bird shooting is a very deep passion of mine; of course it is at the opposite end of the spectrum to big game. However, it is something that truly gets me going! It’s the social nature of a bird shoot, the quick windows of opportunity and the fast action that fascinates me – be it in the heart of Cordoba Province, a duck blind in Texas, driven birds in Europe

or rock pigeons in South Africa – a few days of bird shooting with friends is the ultimate camaraderie.

David Perez of Los Chanares and his team have worked for years to ensure that each season’s shooting is as good as, or better than the previous year, that the lodge will be improved upon, the crop rotation (planted specifically for the birds) is perfected



Marc and Dawn Butler looking over what was formerly just sheep country – today a myriad of plains game are found there.

and maximised – and that the guests will want for nothing. His operation is fine-tuned to the last detail, and the shooting and quality of bird presentation is superb.

The fact that Los Chanares own their land means that they are in control of their crops and roost. Never shooting at watering points, never shooting in the same place twice in a five-day period, and many other “stop losses” are in place to ensure great and sustainable shooting.

All too ominous is the story of the American passenger pigeon, from several billion birds, reduced through habitat loss, meat hunting and disease to the point where Martha, thought to be the last one, died on 1 September 1914 at the Cincinnati Zoo. How can the roosts of Cordoba possibly manage to survive with stories of group after group shooting tens of thousands of birds, stories of roosts being cut down for grazing and crop growing?

The truth is, they cannot; not without some sustainable management in place. Interestingly though, in a chat with Martin Carranza, the property’s wildlife manager, I learned that it will not be the volume of shooting that kills the birds, it will be insufficient food and water. They will starve to death, he tells me; that would be good for the grain farmers,



A sable on Ezulu – land where just a few years ago all the animals you would have seen would have been livestock

but not so good for the doves – and not so nice for the bird shooters and the lucrative industry that has grown up around the sport.

As with so many countries, Argentina has a wealth of tourist destinations, yet it is the hunting that draws folks from all over the world to Cordoba Province. The spread of wealth

and job creation benefits everybody, from lodge owners to bird boys, and right on down to factory workers in the shotgun shell business. Without the steady stream of high-volume bird hunters the industry, associated jobs and spread of First World wealth into the Third World would disappear. “Land that was valued at next to



The author in action. Photo: Marcus Furer

nothing 30 years ago, today commands hundreds of dollars an acre in spite of the thorny thickets and low agricultural value. These are the best areas for dove roosts," explains Martin. "It has given the land value and we hope that the people will continue coming – of course the roosts themselves are areas we never shoot and this is the crux of the population."

With a cycle that can repeat itself two, three and even four times a year, with the birds laying a clutch of two eggs each time, the population, food and water allowing, could triple each year. Great for hunters having such a fast renewing resource, not so great for farmers! That said, many farmers have turned to the bird shooter as an alternative to crop raising, and countless *estancias* with the foreign shooter in mind have sprung up, creating jobs and creating an unforeseen increase in the economy of the province.

Now let's fast forward to a spot closer to home . . . jumping across the Atlantic from Argentina to the Eastern Cape in South Africa.

The wind was thrashing the short grass in every direction as we sneaked up to the rocky outcrop overlooking the mountainside. Lolosh, affectionately called Lolly, had walked past on the far side of the mountain, some two miles distant, in the hopes of disturbing the small group of eland bulls and sending them in our direction. I hunkered down behind Marc and said, "They should come right over this hill." Marc and Dawn Butler were on their first African experience and if they were lucky they were about to see their first eland up close. At that moment, as if on cue, the tips of the huge animals' horns came into sight – growing steadily until there in front of us were seven enormous grey bulls, their distinctive trot carrying them closer every moment.

Marc, a seasoned hunter, had made himself comfortable on a rock. He was calm yet excited, confident yet nervous – the combination of emotions every hunter knows only too well. "When you are ready Marc, take the third one. No rush; they are just getting closer." He hunkered over his scope and I saw the tip of his rifle



This eland passed very close to us in our rocky shelter.

steadily – the first shot hit the bull perfectly. He jumped and continued trotting. "Shoot again!" Marc racked another round and fired again and then a third time. As he went to reload his rifle from his belt the bull staggered. The others by now were trotting past him and us, no more than 30 yards out from the small rocky outcrop.

As Marc fired his fourth round the bull staggered and fell, rolling down the steep, grassy slope to a standstill not 40 yards from where we stood. Marc leapt up, and beaming, he turned and hugged Dawn, his wife and hunting companion. To me it was a complete success, not just a success in the hunt, but looking back at the herd of eland fast disappearing over the horizon, taking in the breathtakingly beautiful scene in the highlands of the Eastern Cape, I was well aware that just a few decades earlier the only animals one would have seen would have been sheep.

Charles and Philip Price of Ezulu/Swartkei Safaris mirror what David Perez and his crew have done in Argentina. They have worked tirelessly with their game management, land improvements and marketing to ensure that the scene that was playing out in front of us, a man walking up to an incredible trophy, could be repeated time and time again, and each year better and better. There are critics who snipe at the ideas of "high fence" hunting, but on tracts of land the size of what we were on (in excess of 70 000 acres), it was certainly fair chase.

Glassing for eland on Bowers Hope ranch in the Eastern Cape, converted from sheep and cattle to wildlife





Los Chanares, Cordoba Province, Argentina – the hills in the background are a roost with over 25 million birds at any one time of year. Formerly a pest, these roosts now command some of the highest real estate dollars thanks to the value brought by dove hunters.

Restoring farmland is not a small undertaking, both physically and financially. In most cases the sheep have for years overgrazed the land, resulting in degradation. Step one is to remove the sheep and erect a perimeter fence. Step two is the very risky and expensive restocking process for all the species, then building up its populations. Building hunting lodges and marketing is a daunting task to say the least, yet one that is an excellent investment and a bargain from the perspective of the wildlife species.

Today, in South Africa, literally millions of acres of land have been restored back to wildlife. In the early 1900s it was seen as progress to eliminate the wildlife and farm cattle and sheep. Today the tables have turned, and thanks to the hunters' dollars that can be generated through wildlife, the land and the business of wildlife generates a far greater return than domestic livestock would.

I could change gears again and talk about Marco Polo sheep in Tajikistan, whitetail operations in the United States or red stag in Spain, all of which I have experienced and all of which owe their future and their bright business future to hunters' dollars.

The main point is that high-integrity, ethical hunters do more for wildlife with their dollars than any other body of people on the planet – and this is a very, very good reason for us all, as hunters, to watch what we say, watch what we do, and at all times understand that we are, each and every one of us, ambassadors for our sport. 🐾



Marc and Dawn Butler hunting eland with me and enjoying the years of hard work that the Price brothers have put into their land.



Bird shooting is a very deep passion of Ivan's, here seen on the left. Photo: Marcus Furer



Ivan Carter (right) with his "bird boy" Rene taking a much-needed break in the action



Ivan Carter was born and raised in Zimbabwe and began his professional hunting career in 1988. He received his PH licence in Zimbabwe in 1990. With his passion for elephants and other big game, today Ivan is licensed to hunt in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Botswana and spends over 180 days in the field each year in pursuit of dangerous game. He is the host of Dallas Safari Club's *Tracks Across Africa* TV show on the outdoor channel. Ivan is a great advocate for sustainable and ethical hunting and truly believes in hunting as a conservation tool.

Like or friend Ivan on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ivancartersafrica and follow him on his adventures in the field . . .

