

# Hunting In The Heartland

*Written and Photographed  
by Stuart M. Williams*

In a long and peripatetic career of wing shooting I have lost count of the number of wing-shooting excursions I have made. Certainly they must exceed two hundred and fifty. In the course of all that travel and all that shooting I have become increasingly demanding. A shoot has to be outstanding in every respect—quality of birds, quality of dogs, quality of food and accommodations and personnel, ease of gun entry, accessibility, and the quality of owner and/or manager—for me to consider a return visit.

Harpole's Heartland Lodge is one of these outstanding places. It is, however, not a club where one can shoot vast numbers of birds, as in Argentina and Slovakia and Spain. It does not accommodate its guests in castles nor does it serve foo-foo-cuisine. It does not serve rare vintage wines—at some meals it doesn't serve any wine at all. It does not have a cigar-smoking room. It does not attract the lords of creation and "kings and counselors of the earth," as do some of the renowned driven shoots in Europe. Yet for all that, it does have its undeniable appeal, an appeal so strong that it has drawn me back four times, so strong that I hope to return many more times. What is this appeal? It is a composite of many things. Let us start with my first visit, which was on Thanksgiving Day of 1998. Officially Harpole's Heartland Lodge is closed on Thanksgiving Day, but that was the only time I could fit it into my crowded schedule, so Gary Harpole, in his usual obliging manner, said to come ahead anyway.

I flew into the St. Louis airport, where I was met by Kenny Hubbs, a jolly fellow who operates a shuttle service between the St. Louis airport and Harpole's Heartland Lodge.

Kenny drove me north on the Missouri side of the river, along the edge of Mark Twain country. Along the way he pointed out many grandiose homes, which were built during the heyday of steamboat traffic on the river in the nineteenth century. Most of these were concentrated in an old town called Louisiana, Missouri. This town is built on a high bluff that commands a spectacular view far up and down the Mississippi River. It was certainly very easy to visualize Huck Finn and Jim floating down the river on their raft a hundred-plus years ago.

When I arrived at Harpole's, the place was almost deserted except for Gary Harpole, who had been waiting for me.

Immediately I transferred to Gary's car for the one-hour drive north to Quincy, Illinois, to the home where Gary grew up, where a magnificent Thanksgiving dinner awaited us.

This beautiful old home had high ceilings and lavish Christmas decorations. A huge Christmas tree reached almost to the ceiling, and under it many collectible dolls in lovely dresses constituted a gorgeous display. All the décor was decidedly feminine, showing the clear influence of Miss Wanda, Gary's mother.

Shortly we were invited to sit down to Thanksgiving dinner, a cornucopious spread of roast turkey, shrimp with red sauce, all the fixings with assorted homemade pies and cookies for dessert. It was a very warm, convivial occasion, attended by a large number of Gary's brothers and sisters and in-laws and cousins, to a total of 40 or more. They quickly made me feel like a member of the family.

Such was my introduction to the people who own and operate Harpole's Heartland Lodge and the pleasures they provide. The real reason for going to Harpole's, of course, is the bird shooting and I had an intensive introduction to it the very next morning. Gary Harpole took me out with his nine-year-old German shorthair, Ringo, who had had literally thousands of birds shot over him. We hunted in cornfields and sorghum fields, on ridgetops and down in the hollows of high hardwood hills. It was country that was very reminiscent of the area where I had grown up hunting, back in the hills of West Virginia. There were the same huge old oak trees, the same tangles of wild blackberry vines and honeysuckle and wild rosebushes and the stands of blood-red sumac, growing along old rusty fences in the pale sunlight of a waning winter afternoon. Indeed, the country was so similar that the whole experience was strongly nostalgic for me. It was almost like a homecoming.

On the very first action, Ringo pointed near the end of a long strip of sorghum, and Dolly, a young shorthair, honored and backed. Gary Harpole moved in to flush, and two pheasants ripped up and out of the sorghum, one going to the right and high and the other veering hard to the left. I quickly put down the bird to the right, swung well ahead of the other bird some 40 yards away, and put it down too. Almost immediately another pheasant ran out the end of



*Russell Pankey, dog handler, receives some affection from a star student. His gun is the elegant little Ithaca Classic Double, 6E in 20 bore.*





*Gary Harpole moves in for the flush behind Russell Pankey's superb setters with his beautiful little Rigby 20-bore side by side.*

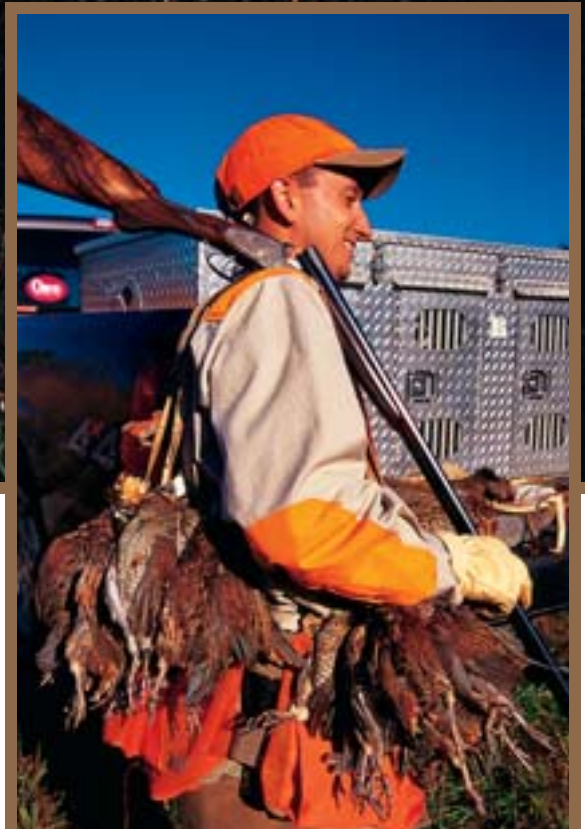
the strip of sorghum 35 yards away and took flight sharply to the left. I missed it at about 40 yards and then put it down most authoritatively at about 50 yards, courtesy of a Winchester Super XX load of No. 5s.

Soon both dogs pointed again at the edge of the forest. Gary moved in and flushed a quail that flew straight up and

I shot it. Then I enjoyed a long series of classic flushes of cock pheasants out of the sorghum, birds springing almost straight up, cackling with indignation, towering high up against a turquoise sky. An unforgettable day!

The following year I shot with two long-time comrades in the far-flung bird-shooting venues of the world, namely





*Gary poses with a nice bag of birds and the 20-bore Rigby.*

“Little John” Boeger, a prominent attorney from St. Louis, and “Big John” Venter, a physician from Joplin, Missouri, who is also the owner of an impressive collection of side-by-side and over-under shotguns, of which he is inordinately proud.

One of those guns is a much-modified Parker 16 gauge. It has been so much altered from the original that it is impossible to say for sure what



grade it is. John Venter has had the gun restocked in a magnificent XXX Exhibition Grade piece of marble-cake California English walnut by master stockmaker Al Lind of Tacoma, Washington, and he has had a new set of 20-inch barrels made for it. He has had the engraving recut and the color case-hardening redone. It would be of little interest to Parker purists, but I am not one of those, so I had no bias against the gun. The first time I shouldered and swung the gun I detected that it fit me to perfection and that it balanced perfectly between my hands and that I was looking squarely down the rib. I thought: *I can shoot a bird with this gun!*

At this point I must make a confession. I had my first experience of upland shooting, hunting quail and ruffed grouse in the hills of West Virginia, with two 16 gauge side-by-side guns, my father's Ithaca Lefever and an uncle's Fox Sterlingworth, but in the four decades that passed since then I had not killed a single bird of any kind with a side-by-side shotgun. Early on I became enamored of over-unders and quickly became convinced of their superiority for shooting. I still hold that opinion, but at the same time retain a love for fine side-by-sides inherited from those distant days. They just look nicer and feel better. So when I set out that morning with the illustrious Parker 16 gauge in hand, it was as if I had come full circle.

Dr. John Venter is totally convinced that the 16 gauge is the best gauge for upland shooting and that the side-by-side is the best gun for upland shooting. He has three 16-gauge side by sides. In addition to the Parker, he has a much-modified Remington 1894 and a Westley Richards.

The first morning out, the head dog handler had three pointing dogs on the ground at any time. Backing them up was a springer spaniel called "Beans," who went in to rout out the birds after they had been pointed, and then retrieved the downed birds. It was a deadly efficient team. Not a single bird was able to run away without flushing, and not a single shot bird was lost.

The dogs pointed over fifty times that day, and we shot about forty quail and a dozen pheasants. The birds ripped up and away from the cover and rocketed off at terrific speed, due largely to the fact that they were being pursued by that relentless spaniel. They were some of the best liberated birds I had ever seen. What a revelation that Parker was! Firing Winchester Super-X 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> ounce loads of No. 6, I couldn't miss!

That afternoon we shot about thirty more quail and another dozen pheasants. The dogwork was impeccable—I really love to watch a well-trained dog at work.

The next day was one of the best days of upland shooting I have ever enjoyed. The previous day, John Venter, John Boeger, and I shot 78 birds picked up, but on this day we shot 95. Our total kill certainly exceeded 100. We were shooting on Gary Harpole's Double Premium Package, which essentially permits unlimited birds.

Out of thirty-two shooting opportunities with the Parker, I missed just two, and they were not good opportunities—distant quail against a dark forest background just at the close of day.

On one point, a bird flew up at the edge of the forest. John Venter fired with his Westley Richards 16 and missed cleanly. The dogs quickly pointed again at the edge of the forest. John Boeger moved in to the right, I to the left, and Beans plunged through the brush between us. A grand cock catapulted straight up, heading towards the treetops, cackling with outrage. John unleashed the lead at it but in vain. I sent out a hot lead summons and it cascaded to the forest floor.

After a luncheon, John Boeger's pointer, Lady, and another pointer, called "Dan," made game staunchly and elegantly at the edge of a strip of milo that ran parallel to the edge of the woods. John eased in to the right and I to the left, and eight quail exploded in our faces and rocketed straight towards the forest. We each put down a bird. In the meantime, Dan was holding point solidly. I took a step forward, two birds flew away from John in the same direction, and he shot one while I put down the other with finality. John Venter, who had been too far away to get in on the action, finally arrived on the scene and put down a double to end the day. This little flurry of sport was the high point of the three-day hunt.

That evening we celebrated with a festive dinner: huge slabs of rare roast beef *au jus* with

creamy horseradish, tossed salad with crumbled blue cheese, and apple cobbler with the *à-propos* vanilla ice cream for dessert, and some very nice Chianti that "Big John" Venter had brought. It was as fine a day of upland shooting as I had enjoyed in a long, long time.

Now we fast-forward to October 2002, my most recent visit to Harpole's. Gary Harpole had hired a new chief dog handler, Russell Pankey, who is a retired law enforcement officer. Russell specializes in English setters, and some mighty fine dogs he has. He loves his dogs as if they were his children. When he calls them he shouts, "Come to daddy; come to daddy!" and they leap and bound in immediate response.

Once again I hunted with my long-time companion-in-



*John Venter's elegant Westley Richards sidelock and handsome Parker 16 gauge (below) preside over some of the day's harvest.*







*In the coverts of Harpole's Heartland Lodge and on the front porch, Gary Harpole and John Boeger (below) both demonstrate and expound upon their guns. Today, John's happens to be a very high grade Krieghoff.*

arms, John Boeger. This time, however, I set forth with a very special gun, namely, an elegant Ithaca Classic Double Model 6E 20 bore that Steven Lamboy, president and owner of S.R. Lamboy and Co., had generously made available for me. This little gun is a lithe and incisive instrument of bird dispatch. It comes precisely to the shoulder and is on the bird instantly and delivers its shot exactly where it needs to go, almost as if it had a mind of its own. Add to the wonderful handling qualities the sumptuous feather-crotch American black walnut stock and the engraving and gold inlays and it is a very appealing little package. Paired with B&P 28-grain loads of No. 7½, it was absolutely deadly.

Well do I remember the circumstances of that afternoon. It had been drizzling all morning, and the moisture had turned the



colors luminous and magical—the bright orange of hunters' vests, and red and orange and yellow of dog collars, the purple of thistle blossoms, the red of weed stalks and sumac leaves. With all that moisture on the ground and a gentle breeze, scenting conditions were perfect.

We hunted three long strips of dense, waist-high sorghum through which avenues and walkways had been cut. Surrounding much of the sorghum was a thick stand of native prairie grasses that included bluestem and Indian grass.

The birds' feathers were damp from the morning rain but that didn't seem to affect their ability to fly. They ripped up and out of the sorghum and the tall grass and invariably headed toward the adjoining forest, providing some terrific high shots as they cleared the treetops.

We accounted for every bird that flew: thirty-four quail, twelve





*The Rigby 20 bore was Gary's choice for the weekend; and with it he was most efficient and comfortable, as it fit him well and carried effortlessly. Its style and grace were more than a match for the gorgeous ringnecks.*

pheasant, and one Hungarian partridge. The little Ithaca again and again barked out its peremptory summons, and when it spoke, birds fell.

To end a perfect day we celebrated with a grand





*The end of a perfect day at Harpole's and it is time to appreciate the fine guns and the game brought to bag. The handsome Ithaca Classic Double 6E fit the author very well and was a pleasure to both shoot and admire.*

dinner: huge platters of southern fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, freshly baked biscuits, beautiful salads, and a scrumptious homemade chocolate walnut cake. The finest in southern fare.





The next day John Boeger left, so I shot by myself. Once again I used the little Ithaca which was a joy to carry as well as shoot.

A large part of the pleasure at Harpole's was shooting over an extraordinary 14-year-old setter by the name of "Buzzy." The winner of many field trials, Buzzy has hunted quail in Florida, Georgia, Texas, Kansas, and Missouri; pheasants in Illinois and the Dakotas; chukars, prairie chickens, and Hungarian partridges all across the plains states and Canadian prairie provinces and the Pacific Northwest. How many great days Buzzy must have seen! If he could speak what tales he could tell! At 14 he can still run with much younger dogs for about an hour. Russell Pankey says that Buzzy is the best quail dog he has ever seen—by far—and I can certainly believe it.

On the final day I shot with another dog handler/guide, Ron Phelan—a whole new crew of dogs, a new shooting area, and a chilly, brilliant day. Like all the other days at Harpole's, it was wonderful. I savored it especially because it was my last hoorah for that trip. I put down 15

birds, and every shot is etched indelibly in my memory.

As I indicated earlier, the flying qualities of Gary Harpole's birds are outstanding. Gary has a unique liberation program for both pheasant and quail. This, along with his native bird population, provides for excellent wing shooting for upland birds. Heartland uses superior genetic quail and Manchurian blueback pheasants in their liberation program. The excellent habitat provides great cover for these birds.

The Harpole Lodge is a handsome log construction that just oozes old-time rustic atmosphere, even though it is only about eight years old. The interior is distinguished by lots of exposed beams and rough-hewn wood, many impressive mounted trophies and paintings of hunting scenes on the walls, and animal skin rugs and Navajo rugs on the floors. Rooms have similar décor. The atmosphere is warm and welcoming. Whenever you arrive Miss Wanda will have a pot of hot coffee and a big platter of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies awaiting you. Indeed, Harpole's Heartland Lodge is the kind of place that you can't go to just once.



*Harpole's*  
**HEARTLAND**  
**L**ODGE

*Harpole's*  
**HEARTLAND**  
**H**WATERFOWL

*Harpole's*  
**HEARTLAND**  
**H**TOWA

Nestled between the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers is a veritable wingshooter's heaven, Harpole's Heartland Lodge. For generations, the Mississippi River flyway has offered the most discriminating waterfowl hunters an opportunity to challenge themselves with all of the diving ducks that fly down the great Mississippi flyway, wary mallards who can't resist the flooded corn, milo and bean fields, and large Canadian geese taking advantage of the two large rest lakes. Over 20 blinds and pits make this wild waterfowl spot unmatched anywhere. But you'll find much more than waterfowl at Harpole's. Enjoy hunting Bobwhite quail and pheasants behind some of the finest German Shorthair Pointers and English Pointers in the country on an upland game hunt. Friendly guides will work the dogs, carry the birds, and dress the game. Five star accommodations await you when you return from the field. In the finest tradition of hunting, relax next to the large fireplace in our great room, or enjoy a game of pool. Gourmet country dining completes your experience at Harpole's Heartland Lodge.

Specializing in Waterfowl, Upland Game, Whitetail, and Turkey Hunts.

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