

# The Hunter's Heartland

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Photographs by LORI BIEHL

*A late-season hunt at Harpole's Heartland Lodge*



**W**hen steel shot started to become mandatory in the 1980s, my grandfather's Parker fowler suffered a forced retirement lasting three decades. It stood alone near the back of the gun rack, as elegant and aloof as a deposed monarch. My father shot his first ducks with that gun in the 1940s—red-heads on the Texas coast—and I shot my first ducks, deer and turkeys with it in Georgia in the 1970s. It seemed such a shame to see its outings limited to the range or the occasional dove shoot.

When I discovered HEVI-Shot's Classic Doubles ammunition, including 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" loads designed for fine doubles, I thought maybe the Parker's best days weren't all behind it! I ordered a selection of shot sizes for the 2013 waterfowl season.

The new shotshells performed well in our wood-duck swamp, but I really wanted to try them on bigger ducks at longer ranges. Then, as luck would have

it, my wife, Daphne, and I received an invitation to a weekend of upland and waterfowl hunting at Harpole's Heartland Lodge, in the hills adjoining the Mississippi River in central Illinois. Hmm, pheasants, quail, big ducks . . . The old Parker certainly would work, but why not save its 30" barrels for the waterfowl and take something smaller as well, like a sweet little 20-gauge Parker Reproduction, to see what Classic Doubles could do on upland birds?

Gary Harpole, who founded Heartland Lodge in 1995 near land farmed by his grandparents, called several times in advance of the hunt to verify plans and arrange for professional photographer Lori Biehl to join us. I've since learned from others that this level of attention is typical of Gary and his staff. They measure success by



Heartland Lodge offers hunting for upland birds and waterfowl in central Illinois. The rolling country provides constantly changing scenery and plenty of anticipation of what's over the next rise.

the number of guests who return year after year, and they believe that the key to developing this kind of loyalty is to deliver plenty of personal attention. As Gary put it, "In the end, the success of Heartland Lodge depends



The lodge's upland habitat is mostly former cropland converted to a mix of food plots and native grasses bounded by brushy fencerows. Waterfowling takes place in several locales, including small impoundments not far from the Big Muddy.

more than anything on our ability to create traditions that become an important part of people's lives."

A traditionalist himself, Gary was enthusiastic about putting a brace of Parkers to work, but he cautioned that weather and the vagaries of the duck migration would factor heavily in any waterfowl success. "I can pretty much guarantee you'll have great shooting at wild pheasants," he said, "but I can't guarantee what the ducks will be doing that week. So come for upland birds, let ducks be a bonus and you won't be disappointed."

This turned out to be excellent advice. When December rolled around and the hunt was upon us, we found we'd booked three bluebird days when the ducks were on vacation. The Big Muddy had been covered in ducks the week before we arrived, and a storm that moved in as we were leaving brought another sky-full the week after, but while we were there the ducks were doing their duck thing elsewhere. Such are ducks.

We weren't exactly skunked, I'm happy to say. Our pit blind was located on a small impoundment next to the river and directly on a flyway between two waterfowl refuges. It was a great setup, and we did see numerous high flights of mallards, gadwalls and geese, but all save a few birds stayed in the stratosphere. In two mornings we got shots at only one flight of mallards, from which we dropped a nice greenhead.



It wasn't as much shooting as we'd hoped to have, but at least the old Parker had a chance to speak. It felt good to hold the gun under a lovely sunrise and to see it leaning once again against the wall of a duck blind.

And although the ducks proved uncooperative, the upland birds, as Gary had promised, more than made up for them. After returning from the river each morning we would grab a quick lunch, change guns and head for the fields.

Heartland Lodge owns or leases roughly 2,000 acres of prime upland habitat, which is divided into eight hunting areas within a short drive of the lodge. Most of the areas consist of former cropland that has been placed in the Conservation Reserve Program and planted specifically for wildlife. Gary and his wingshooting manager, Terry Abney, are justifiably proud of their extensive replanting program of native prairie grasses, including big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass and Illinois bundle flower. The terrain is typical of the rolling farm country between the Mississippi and Illinois River basins: small fields separated by brushy fencerows and patches of woodlands. I especially like this kind of upland hunting, where the view changes every few steps, the hunt unrolls in shifting scenes and there's a constant sense of anticipation about what lies over the rise or around the corner.

On our first afternoon we



were met by Pete Brenneman, one of Heartland's eight upland guides and a professional dog trainer. Pete specializes in German shorthaired pointers and has earned a strong regional reputation for developing superb hunting dogs. On our drive to the field we talked about the qualities we like best in dogs. Manners, a good attitude and style, pretty much in that order, are the qualities that make a dog memorable to me. On the other hand, nothing undermines the aesthetics of a hunt faster than a lot of fuss between dog and handler. Pete smiled and assured me I was in for a treat.

When we got to the hunting area and unloaded the first pair of dogs, Pete looked up at me with a wink, slipped the collars off of both dogs, and said, "I don't believe we'll be needing these." It takes a lot of confidence to do that with a \$5,000-plus, prized bird dog, and Pete's confidence wasn't misplaced.

For the next three hours Pete and his dogs put on one of the finest displays of practical dog handling I've seen in years. Let me start by confessing my prejudices: I'm not much of a fan of field-trial techniques in which dogs range huge distances under the precise and constant control of their master. Much better, to me, is a dog-human-dog team that communicates no more than it must to get the job done—something that necessarily requires mutual trust and good sense in the dogs. These shorthairs covered a lot of ground but never lost their sense of what we wanted, so that when we shifted direction, it required only a gesture or a word from Pete in a conversational tone to put them back in front of us again.

With wild birds, you never

know for sure whether the dogs have missed any as you move through thick cover, but we certainly didn't flush any they'd missed. More than once when a cagey old rooster tried to double back or circle instead of hold, I saw the dogs team up unbidden to flank and block and hold him until we arrived. And, finally, at sunset, when everyone was tired and the pheasants were ready to tuck themselves in for the night, Pete gave a short whistle and called "Kennel up!" and a perfect afternoon came to a perfect end. A treat, indeed.

Not all of the dogs at Heartland Lodge are German shorthairs. Each guide uses his own dogs, and these include English pointers, Brittanys and a pointing Lab. You can, of course, express a preference when you book, and the lodge will try to accommodate it.

The birds, too, can be customized to some extent. A traditional hunt, which suited me best, allows up to four cock pheasants and eight quail daily. These birds will be "wild" in the sense that the hunting areas are not stocked with re-

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leased birds. It is possible, as you'd expect, for some birds released in another area to migrate to a wild-bird area, but by the time that occurs the birds are functionally wild in their behavior and difficult to distinguish from the native population. The pheasants we found were certainly as challenging as any I've hunted. With excellent dogwork and a little persistence, we bagged limits of pheasants and quail each day.

For hunters who wish to shoot a larger volume of birds, Heartland manages some of its areas expressly for that by supplementing native birds with others throughout the season. I didn't hunt these areas, but the guests at the lodge who did spoke enthusiastically.

Most of the upland hunting is done with 12- and 20-gauge guns, but a 28 would be fun to try. My 20-gauge Parker Repro loaded with Classic Doubles No. 7s performed well. Some shots were as long as 40 to 45 yards, and it was satisfying to see roosters drop like rocks at that distance. I don't think those loads offered much advantage on the quail, but on wild roosters with a tailwind you'd have needed some heavy lead loads to equal their performance. I wouldn't hesitate to use them in a 20-bore on ducks.


At the end of a day that began at 4 AM for ducks and continued more or less nonstop until dark, it was nice to return to the lodge for a good dinner. Meals, which are served family-style in the main dining room, offer an opportunity to share stories of the day's hunting with other guests. The food is of two main types: hearty and heartier. Heartland Lodge is, after all, located in the heartland, and the abundant portions of prime rib, pork loin, potatoes, vegetables, salad and dessert are entirely consistent with the culinary ethos of America's breadbasket. Do not go to Heartland to lose weight.

Perhaps our most memorable meals, though, were the hot breakfasts that our duck guide, Derek Bough, cooked midmorning in the blind. Our blind was a meticulously constructed, buried and camouflaged section of seven-foot-diameter culvert in which Derek,

when he wasn't calling ducks, presided over a complete stainless-steel galley kitchen. Eggs, French toast, blueberry pancakes, bacon and sausage, hot coffee and orange juice made for a very happy blind, with or without cooperation from the ducks.

And each evening after a big dinner we went early to bed. We were staying in the main lodge building, called Prairie Ridge Cabin, and our room was actually more like a suite: big comfortable beds, a sitting area with a fireplace, and a huge bathroom replete with a Jacuzzi tub. The décor was in keeping with the building's pine-log-and-vaulted-ceiling architecture: sporting prints, abundant books and magazines, and interesting pieces of regional arts and crafts that you know Gary and his staff had fun collecting through the years.

A number of the other guests that week were hunting deer. Heartland Lodge has approximately 5,000 acres of deer hunting areas near the southern edge of Pike County, a legendary area for truly enormous whitetails. At other times of the year guests come to hunt for morel mushrooms in the hardwood forests, fish the Mississippi for big catfish, and use the lodge's facilities for corporate retreats and wedding receptions.

For me, though, the essence of Heartland Lodge was captured in the final image of our last day's hunt, a perfect blue-sky December day spent in the field with guide Terry Abney: the sudden blaze of sunset on a cackling rooster's wings, the gun's thump against my shoulder, and out there beyond the dogs, right where the hillside falls away, the sight of golden feathers bursting like a firecracker and the big bird tumbling, tumbling down. 

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*Author's Note:* For more information on mixed-bag hunting at Orvis-endorsed Heartland Lodge, contact Harpole's Heartland Lodge, 800-717-4868; [www.heartlandlodge.com](http://www.heartlandlodge.com).

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