

Gunning for partridges

at Cobaw Sporting

by John McDougall

Jon Thomas watches over his Brittany spaniel, hot on the scent of a partridge.

Located about an hour and a half's drive from Melbourne, settled in mountainous and undulating countryside not far from Seymour can be found the Cobaw Sporting preserve. I have shot on many hunting preserves around Victoria, organising pheasant hunts and similar outings for a close group of friends, and it was with some enthusiasm that I approached Jon Thomas, of Cobaw Sporting, to set up

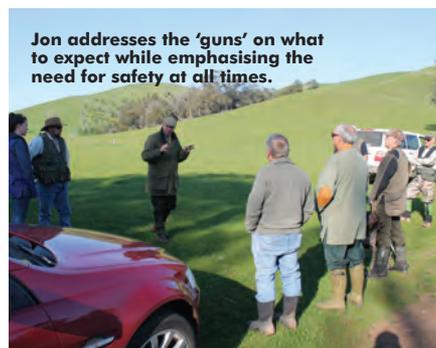
some partridge shooting. The price of pheasants had climbed since our previous excursion at another preserve, so the idea of sharing the cost of a 100-bird partridge shoot with eight shooters held great appeal.

The arrangement for the 100-bird day would cost each of the eight shooters (known as 'guns') \$500, which placed the birds around \$40 apiece. This suited everyone and a phone call and email to Jon followed to confirm our date. A half-payment deposit was transferred to the Cobaw Sporting account and we were soon travelling from our respective homes in Phillip Island, Geelong, Melbourne and Ballarat for the hunt.

Upon arrival, Jon introduced himself and discussed what was expected of us and what we could look forward to regarding the presentation of the birds. Safety was stressed as

paramount and we moved to where we would have our first 'drive'. To say the birds were 'driven' is probably not quite accurate, as Cobaw partridges are preplaced in heavy bracken fern cover well before the 'guns' get to the area. Jon then carefully and strategically places the 'guns' around the undulating terrain.

It was crucial that all shots be taken safely. This meant that as we were all circled about the large patches of bracken fern with around 50 to 100m between us, we would most often be required to wait until the birds had broken from the circle before shooting. That was unless they were high-flying and the shot could be taken safely. Once they were in place, Jon would raise the staff he carried for 'beating' and sound a whistle to indicate to us that we could load our firearms, for the beaters would then



Jon addresses the 'guns' on what to expect while emphasising the need for safety at all times.

move into the inner circle and flush the birds for us. The dogs selected for flushing and retrieving were Brittany spaniels, while the introduced birds used were red-legged partridges, often called French partridges to differentiate them from their English cousins.

I had elected to take my cameras and also shoot. As luck would have it, the first bird that broke cover headed straight towards me. Undecided whether to take a photo or shoot the bird, I made ready with my chosen gun for the day, a new Browning B725 Sporter that I was reviewing. Having shot quite a few pheasants over several decades, from wild pheasants on King Island and others on several hunting preserves in Victoria, I was ready for the challenge. The bird came quite low at the end of its flight and landed before I could safely get a shot off. I figured that the party would pick it up on a later drive.

The tension mounted as bird after bird was flushed, with shooters having no idea where they would alight from. The aim was to remain alert, focus on flushing birds and be prepared if they headed in your direction. The anticipation was great and watching the dogs and beaters work was invigorating, for you knew at any moment a partridge could flush and come barrelling towards you.



Jon gives last-minute instructions to Tess.

As the morning proceeded, we were blessed with a mounting tally of partridges. Jon and his beaters worked hard and the dogs were brilliant; fortunate to be 'worked' on a regular basis, they certainly knew what was required of them. They

were not only well-honed at locating, pointing and flushing the birds, but they were also exceptional retrievers, displaying excellent noses for finding our downed game in the thickest of bracken fern. Jon was adamant that we were not to retrieve our own



Jon gives the signal for 'guns' to load their shotguns in readiness for the flushing birds.



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game, as there could be an ensuing flush of birds and shots at any time.

It was interesting to watch the many birds that broke cover and there appeared to be no set flight

pattern. I was happy to have chosen to take more photographs during the early session before morning tea, as there were not many birds passing by me. Shooting by the others was

fast and the birds chose to fly down the gullies from where they were flushed, instead of disappearing over the shoulders of the area.



That is the luck of the day.

Shooting either pheasants or quail under natural conditions means the birds will have an advantage and will seek all avenues of escape. Many of the flushed birds flew around treetop height, which made shooting safe. At all times, we 'guns' had to be well aware of where others were placed to ensure they were not in anybody's firing line as we encircled the various patches of bracken fern cover. It



Jon hastens 'guns' to be ready as three Brittany spaniels hold point on a partridge.



Nick reloads in readiness for another bird as a partridge clears the fence before landing.

was often exhilarating when a bird approached. It was a case of waiting and then hoping that it would not change direction and disappear out of range at the last moment. With others placed opposite you, and often on the sides or ridges of the gully, it was a test to wait patiently for a safe shot to be taken. Because of this, quite a few of the birds managed to find freedom.

Our morning tea break, three hours into the shoot, saw a welcome interlude from the walking. My mate Danny, who had attended Cobaw shoots several times previously, had brought a folding English three-legged seat to rest while waiting for a shooting opportunity. In contrast, all others in the party



Henryk and Casper move to the next shooting area.



Tess waits patiently as Jon is about to beat bracken ferns, where Maurice the dog has gone on point.

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Danny, with gun broken, proudly displays two birds taken in an early drive that fell in close proximity.

had walked or stood for most of the morning, so we certainly appreciated the sit-down and cuppa with a freshly cooked muffin, out in the middle of nowhere, tableclothed and with all frills included. Some 45 minutes later, we were back at the same patches of bracken fern on the way back to our starting point, thereby doing a loop. Jon had done a great job in preparing a very professional package with excellent shooting and gundog work.

I have to concede that I was distracted from a great deal of photography due to the amount of shooting that was going on - it was just spectacular! At other times, I was also in the wrong place, as distant birds disappeared behind trees as they were shot. Fortunately, I managed to record some of the day's events during the first session. Hopefully, the afternoon would prove to be my turn to take a few birds!

The various shoots on the way back to the vehicles were not at all the same as the action from the morning, for the birds behaved completely differently. The weather had turned on

a treat with ideal shooting conditions, the birds were quite sprightly and as Jon had suggested, the best shooting was when they were in full flight. This provided the most challenging shooting for all 'guns'.

I had taken the high ground for the morning's shoot and decided to switch to the low area to try my luck at the first bracken fern patch on the way back. I bagged another five birds from the first two patches covered well before we returned to the last bracken fern clumps to end the shoot. The Browning swung beautifully on passing shots as the birds broke the shooters' circle, and several birds were bagged without having to use a second-barrel shot. The cylinder and improved chokes certainly came into their own with most shots being taken at less than 30m. Mind you, on several occasions, the birds were a little cranked up with their speed. The flushing birds were quite energetic as they sought freedom, some having run the gauntlet of several 'guns' and made their escape.

After I had taken what I believed



Nicholas and Tess Lloyd show off some of the partridges taken on the day at Cobaw Sporting.



Jon Thomas's dog Maurice retrieves a partridge to hand. The dogs were magnificent.

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Jon Thomas is congratulated by John McDougall on an excellent shoot up to morning tea.

to be a reasonable tally, I reverted to the camera. The father and daughter hunting team of Nicholas and Tess took some great longer distance second-barrel shots that dropped birds amazingly. Meanwhile, my mate Henryk completed a classic turn-and-shoot at one high-flying bird, which from my vantage point way up on the hill looked magnificent. Mark took an overhead bird that came blistering out of nowhere, having passed several 'guns' before meeting its demise.

Jon organised a bit of a spectacle on the last shooting patch with several birds breaking at once. This placed the 'guns' under pressure and at least one of the birds escaped unscathed before shooting finished. By the end



Danny at the ready. All 'guns' were poised to take a shot, for there were no set paths the birds followed when flushed.

of the day, of 100 or so birds presented, 75 were taken in total. It was obvious that more than a few partridges found their way to freedom, though I'm told our bag ratio was quite acceptable when compared to

other groups that had shot at Cobaw previously. We took a selection of photographs before heading back to our vehicles.

While we may have thought the day had ended, there was cause to think

This partridge is well on its way, almost in full flight and heading towards the 'gun' perimeter.



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again. Jon, along with his helpers, had a full roast lunch prepared for us back at the hunting shack, which was a corrugated, iron-clad, four-sided, roofed venue with a long table and chairs on an earth floor. With tablecloths, napkins and everything else in place, it was a comfortable venue to share our favourite shots for the day and discuss the overall success of the outing. Plenty of conversation ensued, complemented with a glass of red wine and dessert to support the feast.

On evaluating the day, the choice of guns was interesting. We were all instructed that No. 6 size shot was the maximum that could be used for the event in preferred 30g weight as maximum. Robert had chosen to use a favourite 12-gauge sidelock double gun, while Danny, who has an extensive collection of double guns, chose a 20-gauge Kemen. Tess used a nice Beretta DT-10, while her father used his Perazzi MX8, and Mark had his Renato Gamba 12-gauge. There appeared to be a higher percentage of over-and-under shotguns, with better Italian grades preferred.

As for me, I was well pleased with the Browning B725 Sporter and my

personal strike ratio was also very acceptable, as I shot less than a box of cartridges. Danny used the most with his 20-gauge, as evidenced by the many empty yellow cartridges in the rubbish bag at the end. He had certainly had some good shooting with the 'little' gun.

The shoot cost \$4000 for a 100-bird day with all provided: birds, dogs, beaters, pluckers for each shooter's takings, as well as the wonderful morning tea and the lovely roast luncheon with nibbles beforehand. This is certainly excellent value for a great day's shooting with friends.

Jon and Cate Thomas can offer other options for rough shoots with reduced numbers of birds or hunters who choose to use their own dogs, and they also have regular clay target events for the coveted Cobaw Cup team event. Jon can even organise overseas shooting of game in the motherland or other options and events to suit your interests.

Judging by the smiles of my companions, and not just the bag of birds, everyone enjoyed the shoot immensely. I have no reservations in referring other hunters to Cobaw Sporting and trust that Jon Thomas



Jon and all the 'guns' enjoy a well-earned roast lunch and beverages to celebrate a great day out shooting.

and his crew will work just as diligently for you as he did for us. For more information, contact Cobaw Sporting on 03 5423 7146 or shoot@cobaw.com

As a postscript, two of the partridges I took, later marinated for several days and roasted slowly at moderate temperature in an oven bag, were delicious! I am wondering with whom I can share the remaining birds - no doubt other hunting friends who will appreciate the delicate taste of oven-roasted partridge à la McDougall. ●



A group photo of the day's bag after hunting released partridges at Cobaw Sporting.