

Wingshooting & Natural Wonders

Ladies in Conservation Dove Hunt Also Offers Western Oklahoma's Inspirational Vistas

It's next to impossible for me to miss an opportunity to hunt with other women. So when my invitation to the Second Annual Ladies in Conservation Dove Hunt arrived in the mail, I was on the phone to R.S.V.P. before the mailman got to the end of the driveway.

The event was organized by Stephanie Harmon of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and invitees for the season opener included women employed by various conservation agencies, owners and operators of ranches, and those involved in outdoor recreation arenas.

Before the hunt, I had asked Stephanie if I could bring a friend – Rebel, my Labrador Retriever. A well-trained retriever is the ultimate conservation tool, ensuring more recovered birds.

Rebel and I were experienced waterfowlers with hundreds of ducks to our credit, but had only occasionally hunted dove. Stephanie agreed and said that she was bringing a hunting dog also - Cotton, her German Shorthair.

John and Juanita Miller of Arnett, Oklahoma hosted the hunt and the ladies arrived at their ranch the night before to get acquainted. We shared hunting stories on the steps of the bunkhouse and marveled at the Milky Way swathed across the night sky. As the citronella candle flames dimmed, we retired to our sleeping bags, eager for the next day.

At dawn, we divided up into hunting groups. I was paired with Stephanie and Ellen Tejan, an aquatic biologist with The Nature Conservancy. With dogs loaded, we followed our guide to a rye field dotted with mottes, or clumps of hybrid post oaks and sand shinnery.

Stephanie and Ellen were excellent field guides, explaining that the area was the largest intact parcel of shinnery remaining in the country. Derived from the French word *chenneire*, shinnery is an oak that is literally shin-high and produces a large acorn favored by the many whitetail deer inhabiting the Miller ranch.

While the shinnery was abundant, the dove had yet to make an appearance in the cool morning air, so we amused ourselves by counting the more plentiful migrating Monarch butterflies.

Soon the air warmed with the sound of cicadas and we picked up our dove stools to move to another hunting site. We found a small watering hole and set up along its edge.

As the temperature rose, we began to see dove, but none flew anywhere near gun range. Lunch time beckoned and we abandoned the watering hole for sandwiches and cool drinks back at the bunkhouse.

With the afternoon at hand, Stephanie and I decided to join Ellen and her Conservancy colleague, Chris Hise, for a trip to the neighboring Four Canyon Preserve.

A long bumpy drive through the preserve's colorful canyons led us to the banks of the Canadian river, where we rolled up our pant legs and waded in while Ellen and Chris set stakes to monitor the movement of the ever-changing river.

The afternoon sun began to fade and Stephanie and I headed back to the ranch for our evening hunt. Our host led us to another watering hole, where we set up a small portable blind.

Hunting now with our dogs, Stephanie and Cotton settled in the blind and Rebel and I sat beside it in a small depression. Soon, thirsty dove began to swoop about the muddy edges.

Stephanie and I had agreed to take turns shooting and she easily downed the first bird. Cotton was not as experienced as Rebel with dove, so I suggested that she take her dog downwind of the bird and work her up into the scent.

Cotton's instincts kicked into high gear when she scented the bird and to Stephanie's delight proudly carried it all the way back to the blind. Taking the bird from Cotton, I let Rebel hold it for a moment, refreshing his memory with the smell. Soon another group of dove arrived.

Following the closest bird, I pulled the trigger and my gun's load of 7 ½'s exploded in a puff of feathers. For a moment, I sat in disbelief until Stephanie came out of her blind to congratulate me for dropping one of the small speedsters.

In the midst of our high-fives, I realized I had forgotten my other hunting companion. But Rebel was still on the job – he had marked the fall and was ready to retrieve.

With only a sharp call of his name, he bounded across the water, snatched up the bird, and wheeled back towards me. As he returned to my side, I reminded the dripping dog to "hold".

Then on command, Rebel softly released the bird into my hand and I told him to sit as I stepped back. "Rebel, shake!" I barely got the words out before he let loose with a wild spray of water. I tucked the dove in my game bag and turned back towards my dog. I patted his heaving shoulder and praised him, "Good boy, Rebel, good boy!"

As the evening progressed, our foursome accumulated a stack of the coveted prey. Stephanie and I heard numerous shots off in the distance and surmised that the other group was doing well, too.

All too soon, shooting hours were over and we headed back to the bunkhouse for dinner. Illuminated by the headlights of Stephanie's truck, the ladies stood around the grill, eager for a taste of the day's work. Laughter filled the night air as new friends made plans for the next year's hunt.

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