





High PERFECTION

*At High Lonesome Ranch, after a few busy days of gunning birds and catching trout, you'll probably need a vacation from your vacation. *By Tom Keer**

Dinner at the High Lonesome Ranch in Debeque, Colorado, is typically served following a brief wine-tasting. Lucky for me, I arrived at the ranch just when a selection of cabernets, red zinfandels and merlots were being poured, each produced and bottled from one of the 18 Grand Junction-area vineyards.

While savoring a vintage wine, I learned that two men from a group of Texans had opted to hunt some fields of wheat, sudan grass and milo, where they gunned a mixed bag of pheasants, chukars and Huns, along with scaled and Gambel's quail. Midway through a milo field one of the ranch's pointers locked up, and as the hunters moved into position, three pheasants and a single quail flushed at the same time. A pheasant/quail double doesn't happen all that often.

Their companions, meanwhile, headed to more rugged terrain covered in scraggly sagebrush where they pursued native sage grouse. But before the dogs found any grouse, they pointed two coveys of chukars and two of the gunners doubled on the hard-flying birds.

The stories continued when we sat down for dinner prepared by Chef Jordan Asher. He was an up-and-coming chef in Houston when he decided to scrap big city life for the opportunity to refine the ranch's culinary program. Asher favors locally grown ingredients, many

of which are harvested from the ranch's Victory Garden. From wood-fired, cowboy ribeyes with red chili steak butter, to oak-roasted pheasant breast with habanero-peach chutney, Asher's presentations are extraordinary.

I had timed my visit in October so I could run a full day of both hunting and fishing. Hunting season at the ranch runs from September 1-March 31, and the fishing is good through the end of November. The western slope of Colorado doesn't get nearly as much snow as the rest of the state, and December through February is a perfect time if you don't get enough bird hunting during your local season.

My second choice would have been September. Afternoon temperatures can be quite warm, so the guides run their hunts in the morning and take clients fishing in the afternoon. The cooler morning temperatures make for better scenting conditions and the dogs don't overheat. After lunch, an afternoon breeze typically shakes hoppers from the hay and grass into the water. There are so many hoppers that after a strong gust of wind the fish will start rising aggressively.

The Texans had filled up both the Guest House and Pond House, so I stayed in a cabin at the upper end of Dry Fork Valley. On my drive up the mesa I could see the cabin tucked into the mountainside where it



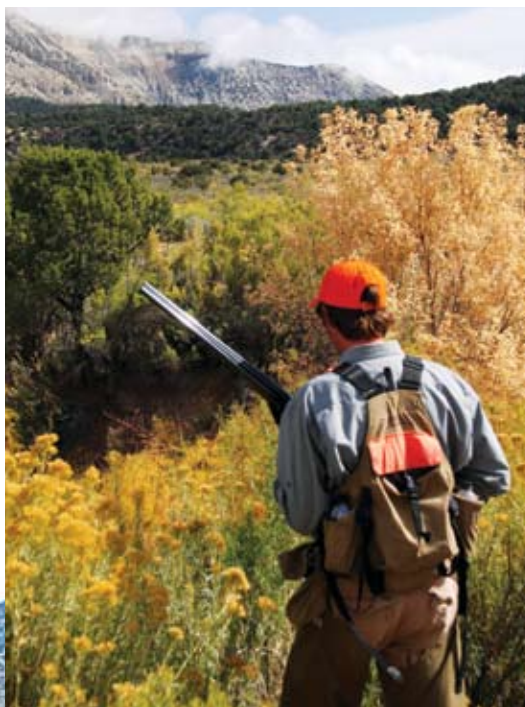
overlooked three big ponds. With a trout pond in my front yard and a bull elk bugling in back, falling asleep was becoming increasingly difficult.

My wake-up call came in the form of high-pitched yelps from a flock of Merriam's turkeys, and it wasn't long before the sun's yellow and purple hues washed over the valley. From the living room I could see a few trout rising, and despite my lack of sleep, I was tempted to sneak in a few casts before heading down to breakfast.

I made a strong pot of coffee, then sat back to survey my digs. The ranch staff refers to the authentic log cabin as the Homestead House, which I assumed was in honor of the original settlers. I doubt they had a three-bed/three-bath cabin with a full kitchen, dining room and living room, but I'm sure they enjoyed the stellar views of the valley and the mountains embracing it.

I finished my coffee and headed down a graded dirt road through a series of smaller valleys. Scattered throughout the nearly 300-square-mile ranch are wild horses, elk, mule deer and untold numbers of gamebirds. A woman named Marty Felix is the Jane Goodall of wild mustangs that still survive in the Book Cliff mountains. Her search for the horses – buckskins, paints and duns – began in 1969, and she didn't find them until 1973.

The normally ten-minute ride to the ranch headquarters took me nearly a half-hour, mostly because I kept stopping to gaze at either the



L-R: Mark Weaver, Robbie Arnold and Lori Michels relax on the porch of the old schoolhouse, one of the original buildings on 300-square-mile High Lonesome Ranch. Below and Opposite: Arnold heads to the Schoolhouse Cover where he dusts a big ringneck. Previous pages: Parker (in front) and Cool are rock-steady performers. • The spacious Guest House provides a comfortable retreat for up to 18 guests.



breathhtaking scenery or the wildlife. At one point I watched a pair of bald eagles riding the air currents above the mountaintops. Then, rounding a sharp curve I came upon several brightly colored pheasants busily pecking for gravel.

Finally, I pulled up in front of the second pioneer homestead, complete with a long porch, hitching post and tin roof. I wondered what Aunt Linda had in store for breakfast. The Louisiana native can whip up a Southern breakfast of biscuits and gravy just as easy as she can make French toast, blueberry pancakes, homemade muffins and pastries, all from scratch, of course. Top off the wonderful breakfast with a cup of High Lonesome's special-blend coffee and you'll be set until lunch.

If you love to shoot clays like I do, a quick warm-up is definitely in order before your hunt, and the 5-stand course at High Lonesome is possibly the prettiest I've seen. The clays ranged from high-incomers launched from the top of the ridge to crossing pairs that exploded from the sagebrush. It's a great combination of technical

and hunting shots, and odds are that once you've shot a round, you'll want to do it again.

We continued on to the Quail and Pheasant Walk, which replicates a walk-up hunt. A report double that broke to my right made me want to get the dogs and head straight to the bird fields, but we still had to shoot the Flurry. This series of high overhead shots is launched from a hilltop trap. Between 20 and 60 clays per minute come off the hill, just like a driven pheasant hunt. By the time you're done with the Flurry, you'll be as sharp as you're going to get.

After lunch I joined Brett Arnold of High Lonesome Ranch Kennels, who drove me to the Schoolhouse Cover, just a stone's throw from the breakfast table. The field comes by its name honestly as it's situated by the remains of an old school.

Brett began working a pair of pointers named Cool and Parker.



When a pointer gets a snootful of feathers and locks up, it's always a pretty sight. When a second one backs, it's picture perfect. The two gundogs did exactly that, time after time.

As we stepped in front of Cool, two chukars flushed. I swung on the first bird and dropped him with the snow-capped mountains as a backdrop. Brett released Cool and he fetched up the dead bird, then went on point with the chukar still in his mouth. Parker repositioned and backed, and as I walked forward a cock pheasant erupted and I took him going straight away. Cool dropped the chukar and fetched the ringneck. All was good with the world.

We hunted a wide variety of bird cover that day – grassy fields, oak and aspen stands, and creek bottoms. Some of the bottomlands were open, but much of our shooting was in tight cover. The fall colors were just starting to pop, and if you didn't snap-shoot quickly, then you'd wind up cussin'.

After my hunt I went back to the cabin for a shower. There was a good brown rising under a willow tree overhanging the pond and I couldn't resist throwing a Goddard Caddis his way. When he rose to the fly, I thought of a comment I'd read in the guest book. Sandy Moret, permit angler extraordinaire and owner of Florida Keys Outfitters in Islamorada, had written: "Over-fished and over-fed to perfection."

At breakfast the next morning, I sat down with Buzz Cox, my fishing guide and manager of the K-T Ranch, and he suggested we try a few of the 18 ponds scattered throughout the ranch, each with a different feel, but all addictive. There were plenty of blow-downs, weedbeds and overhangs to challenge even the most experienced angler.

My favorite was an O-shaped pond cut in half by a dirtbank. In mornings and evenings trout would move out of the darker water and into the shallows adjacent to the

bank. These fish, mostly rainbows but some browns, were big, and when they rolled I could see the sun flashing off their sides. For a moment I thought they were bonefish.

While we were rigging up, Buzz spotted a big rainbow cruising the bank.

"I think that's a two-footer," he said.

"That's a nice fish," I agreed.

"Yeah, but look at the brown just underneath him!"

I could easily see the brown's kipe, a good indication of an old fish. He had broad shoulders laced with bright red spots that looked as big as silver dollars. It's tough to guesstimate a fish's size when it's underwater, but this brown looked all of 28, maybe even 30 inches.

I tied on a small bead-head damselfly nymph, waited for the brown to get ahead of the rainbow, then dropped the fly about four feet ahead of him. But it was the rainbow who darted ahead, picked up the nymph and headed for a fallen pine. The water was so clear I could see his every move, which enabled me to keep him out of the branches. About the time he came to hand, the big brown started to feed.

On my third day I was scheduled to fish the White River, about an hour away in Meeker, where I'd be staying at the High Lonesome's sister property, the K-T. Situated a few hundred yards from the river, the K-T is an 1880's ranch house that can accommodate eight anglers. Some say fall is the best time to visit Meeker and to fish the White because dramatic temperature changes cause a thick mist to rise from the water. More than a century ago the Ute Indians called this misty stretch the "Smoking Earth River."

Lots of seeps in the fields made for perfect haying and grazing, but it was too wet to get a truck through. Instead, Buzz and guide Ted Relihan pulled up in a 4-wheeler to zip me to the river. It would have been enough to start fishing the White, for there were rising trout in nearly every feeding lane. Instead, we violated the "never leave fish to find fish" rule and waded past them. We hiked through a cottonwood grove for about 20 minutes before arriving at a medium-sized spring creek, where big browns and rainbows were drifting in and out of the watercress.

Trout in the spring creek were big and bold. I suppose they knew winter was approaching and they were rising all across the surface to feed. When the wind gusted, hoppers would drop into the river, drift downstream a bit, and the trout would rise to eat them. The water was so slow-moving the trout would create big wakes as they inhaled the insects.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCY ANSFIELD

Robbie Arnold and Lori Michels celebrate after she drops a ringneck that had flushed from the edge of a trout pond.

• *Mark Weaver's thumbs-up reveals his feelings about the bird-hunting at High Lonesome.*

With all eyes on one huge brown and the pressure on, I got lucky and floated a good-enough cast into range. The brown veered away when it landed, but quickly came back and hit the fly like a percussionist crashes a cymbal.

Hooking fish was easy on this spring creek, but landing them . . . well, that was a different matter. The brown made a snook-like beeline for the weeds. If he got in them, I'd probably have so much lettuce on my leader that either the hook would come out or I'd break him off. I pulled as hard as I dared on the 6-pound tippet and gradually steered him into deeper water. He thrashed wildly on the surface, then turned and ripped right at me. I stepped backward to keep the hook in his mouth, but then he darted toward the bank where I couldn't see him.

Ted called out the next series of moves: "Rod to the left,

less pressure, rod up, more pressure." It was like driving while blind, but soon enough we got the 26-inch fish in the net.

I didn't know how I could possibly upstage a fight that dramatic, so we returned to the main river. There, I worked the foam-lines along back-eddies fringing small pools. I drifted a Stimulator in the faster riffles, with the aspens along the edge and the mountains behind. Soon, maybe only a month from now, it would all be frozen and cold. The trout would still feed, but not aggressively.

For now, I'd savor the green hayfields and listen to the geese honking as they landed in the winter rye. I'd catch a few more fish and then get ready for another day of bird hunting. I'd probably need a vacation from my vacation, but getting over-fished and over-fed? Add hot upland hunting and you get perfection. Just as Sandy Moret said. ✨



HIGH COUNTRY KENNELS

Brett and Robbie Arnold of High Country Kennels are the father-son team brought in to manage the ranch's dog-training program. With a new kennel that houses 46 dogs, they train English pointers, pointing labs and flushing labs. The Arnolds also spend some of their time guiding hunters. Guests can bring their own dogs, and a new kennel was built behind the Pond House to make sure each guest's dog is also given 5-star treatment.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Most hunters who visit the ranch shoot 12 and 20 gauges. If you don't want to travel with your own gun, the ranch has Rugers and Brownings for rent. Chaps or brush pants are recommended.

For more information contact The High Lonesome Ranch at (970) 283-9420 or visit www.thehighlonesomeranch.com.

