

Redlegs on the Green

MICHAEL McINTOSH

Spanish partridge where sheep safely graze



Heading east from Madrid, you climb the tall scarp of the Sierra de Guadarrama and eventually come down the other side into an exceptionally beautiful world.

The province of Salamanca is the southeastern edge of a great basin embraced by the Guadarrama in the west and the Cantabrian Mountains far to the north, hemmed to the south by the Sierra de Gata. Other than "female cat," I'm not sure what gata denotes in European Spanish, but in the Spanish spoken in the Western Hemisphere, it means "trigger"—which is appropriate, because of all the various places in Spain where you can exercise your trigger I don't know of any more beautiful than Salamanca.

It's agricultural country in part, cattle country as well—although on some estancias you will do well not to fool around with the picturesque herds of grazing kine because this is one of the areas in Spain where livestock is bred for the plaza de toros. I read that Spanish fighting bulls are near relatives to African Cape buffalo, and although I don't know if it's true, I do know that el toro looks at you with the same level, piercing, malevolent gaze.

Salamanca is sheep country too, and the ranch where

Alfonso Fabres hosts his shooting guests once was a station where lambs were segregated for weaning. In fact, the guestrooms—all connected in a horseshoe-shape structure that faces the main lodge across a beautifully manicured and cobbled courtyard—originally were the shelters where the lambs were kept. You'd never know it now, of course, but it sort of explains something I'll get to later.

What is apparent the moment you walk into the newly built lodge is that your host is a hunter. There are trophies everywhere—European game from roe deer to red stag to wild boar to great bustard and African game of every sort. When I complimented Alfonso on his collection, he said, "Oh, this is just the overflow. My house got too full."

You can hunt red stag from this ranch if you want, and when I was there one of our party went off early one morning with his sister, my wife, Vicky, and a guide and came in with a magnificent trophy bull. Vicky told me later that watching the stalk from the vantage of a tall rock outcrop was as exciting as anything she saw on the whole trip.

Me, I get excited about birds, especially when they

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AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPHS



Setting off



Setting up

COURTESY OF PATRICK & CATHERINE GIBSON



A stony bluff that the partridge launch from

COURTESY OF PATRICK & CATHERINE GIBSON

REDLEGS ON THE GREEN

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come winging over my stand in waves, hammering fast and high; and as driven game, red-legged partridge are hard to beat. They look like chukars, although slightly larger; they hang out in coveys like quail and gray partridge; and once prompted to take wing, they fly like bloody hell. I've shot them in England and twice in Spain, and even though they can't quite match either the altitude or the top speed of pheasants under certain conditions, they're small and nimble enough to be every bit as demanding.

Once in a while I like to skip a drive and walk around watching my colleagues



COURTESY OF WINGSHOOTING ADVENTURES

Wingshooting Adventures' Jack Jansma (inset) with a pair of redlegs taken from the sheep country around Alfonso Fabres' ranch.

at work. For one thing, driven birds are the best spectator sport in all of shooting—even more fun to watch than *columbaire*, or box-bird pigeons—and for another, I can learn some things about the shooting that I can't see as well when I'm behind the gun.

Most of the misses I see at partridge are shots passing well behind the birds. Redlegs' speed is deceptive because they're small, which means they're almost always flying faster than they appear to be. But they don't always fly in nice straight lines, and here again, size affects perception. You can easily see that a curling pheasant is... well, a curling pheasant. They're big and perform their chandeliers gliding on cupped wings, so it's not hard to see that they're deviating from the straight and narrow. You may not always be able to track them with a gun, but at least you know what they're doing. Redlegs glide too, but they can also curl and turn in full flight, even rock a bit from side to side while tracing

a basically straight course. With a dozen or two in the air at any given time, each bird making its own way according to whatever it feels moved to do at the moment, there are lots of ways to miss.

Which of course is why you'd travel a quarter of the way around the world to shoot at them in the first place—that and the wonderful atmos-

phere of Spain.

I have not seen all of Spain, but I have yet to see any of its countryside I didn't love, whether it's the mountainous Basque region in the north; the arid, rocky central plain; the rugged eastern coast; or the lovely, rolling landscape of Salamanca. Parts of Salamanca are wooded, like the part where Alfonso's ranch is, and they remind me of certain regions of Texas—trees round and green with leaves, standing in lush, green grass. There's no understory of brush—thanks mainly, I suspect, to a few hundred years of grazing cattle—and it all looks as inviting as a park. The morning drive on the way from ranch to shooting grounds, through miles of country like this, is about as good a way as I know to kick off a day that began with high-octane coffee and the assorted meats and cheeses of a Spanish breakfast.

I imagine Salamanca gets pretty dry in the summer, but it's wonderfully green during the rainy season, in January, with

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COURTESY OF WINGSHOOTING ADVENTURES

the brooks running swift and full. Little gorges rimmed with sharp, stony bluffs and grass-banked streams that loop around rock ledges are the common denominator of Alfonso's shooting grounds—places where the guns can stand way down below the birds as they come rocketing off the high ground. You need something, after all, to get your mind off such lovely surroundings.

Three or four drives in the morning are a good diversion, as during each of which you might shoot anywhere from 10 to 40 partridge, depending on where you're located and how the birds choose to fly. Then you hand over your gun to your *secretario* and head for the tent canopy, where Alfonso's crew has set up the lunch tables, sip a glass or two of blood-red *vino tinto* and eat yourself half to death.

I don't know about you, but I do not shoot my best immediately after lunch. Something about a food-induced stupor just doesn't get me on my gun. Merciful-

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Jack Jansma, of Wingshooting Adventures, organizes wonderful trips to Salamanca—three days of shooting, with time or "for a day poking around in the province's lovely old capital city and a day in Madrid. If the art collection in the Prado, especially the El Greco holdings, doesn't send shivers up your spine, the partridge shooting will. For details, contact Wingshooting Adventures, 0-1845 W. Leonard, Grand Rapids, MI 49544; 616-677-1980, fax -1986.

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