

The fiesta of sporting excellence

Partridge shooting in Spain is widely acknowledged as one of the most exciting opportunities in world shooting. Giles Catchpole, Mary Drysdale and Elizabeth Judson came back delighted.

GILES CATCHPOLE

As the suburbs of Madrid disappear into the distance one finds oneself looking at countryside rolling past the window, and wondering what sort of partridge country it will make.

There are all sorts of questions floating about actually. For a start it is March; but the season in Spain is a month longer than here in the UK, and indeed many sportsmen from the UK and other European countries extend their seasons with a late outing at the partridges. Then it is hot. Well, hotter than at home anyway. More



like a summer's day than the chilly March we left behind. What is the form in the field here? What is a cargador? And why should I want a secretario? Then there are the birds themselves. How will they acquit themselves on the scrubby Spanish escarpments? Tomorrow will reveal all.

Past Salamanca the flat fields begin to roll most agreeably and as we approach Las Veguillas the landscape is dotted with scrub and trees and criss-crossed by rocky gullies. In the shade of the trees amble cattle and sheep. Cows, calves and the young bulls. This is fighting bull country, and one look at those formidable hat-racks reminds me that the reminder to 'Please shut the gate' is best heeded in this part of the world.

Las Veguillas is the lodge of Alfonso Fabres, who manages HuntinSpain and who, besides his own estate, manages several thousands of hectares here for the benefit of various forms of hunting. There are several species of deer here, we saw fallow several times, and wild boar; goat and moufflon in the hills and, of course, the partridges. At the heart of the estate is the lodge itself, an airy and spacious house surrounded by individual cabins for the guests.

A brief departure here. The house is filled - and I do mean filled - with big game trophies. Alfonso Fabres has spent a lifetime in pursuit of game of all descriptions and the lodge is a vivid testament to his efforts. From boar to buffalo, warthog to wolverine and all kinds of



antelope and deer from every continent. It is a remarkable thing. I doubt if most natural history museums could boast such a collection.

The party contained a number of Guns who had hunted big game in Africa and elsewhere, and it was quite a while before we stopped moving from trophy to trophy with soft whistles to settle more comfortably with an aperitif before dinner.

As we sat amidst the debris of which, Alfonso Fabres himself joined us hot foot from meetings in Salamanca to brief us on the next day's sport. Which was in short partridges, red-legs, driven off the escarpments some forty kilometres from the lodge. There would be four drives only, two pre-lunch and two after. We would start at a deeply civilised 10.30am and break for lunch



Above left: Guns, cargadores and secretarios move off to begin the day's shooting. **Above right:** Between the flags are, from left; Nick Morris, Gordon Titterington, Hugh Paterson, Alfonso Fabres (host), David Hendry, Jim Paterson, Allan Crawford.

Opposite page top: Dining at Las Veguillas. **Opposite page bottom:** Much needed refreshment following some scintillating Spanish partridges.

◁ around 1.30pm. With the spring days lengthening once more there was no rush. The Guns would shoot with two guns and each would be equipped with a cargador, the loader; and a secretario whose role would be to watch and count the birds downed. After each drive the secretario would pick-up birds dead around the blind and inform the pickers-up and their dogs who would sweep behind the line. Guns should focus exclusively on the birds and their shooting. All of which being clear the party dispersed about the place, each to his own preparations for the morrow.

Thus it was that we found ourselves in the sunshine of the following morn at the foot of a modest bluff, dotted with Mediterranean oaks and grasses. Loaders and secretarios were in the process of erecting the simple canvas blinds for the shooters and laying out guns and cartridges. And we were underway.

One of the beauties of shooting over such a large area, Alfonso Fabres explained to me later, was that there were suitable drives for all Guns and all conditions. There was never a need to shoot into the sun for example; which is as well as I surveyed the cloudless sky and the high and

sparse horizon. The partridges flew well on the slight breeze, flushing across the line in useful bunches of three or four, and distinctly not the cloud-like coveys that might be expected late in the season when birds have been over the Guns a few times and are jittery on the ground.

And the Guns shot well too, keeping loaders and spotters alike well occupied as the drive progressed. After a hot half hour the horns and cries of the beaters sounded over the brow and the drive was complete. Secretarios scampered hither and yon, and while the Guns took on board much needed refreshment, the bag was formally laid out for inspection, as it would be after each drive. Alfonso Fabres considered the many ranks of paired birds and concluded that the next drive would be in a somewhat steeper gully than this. "The birds will be no higher there," said he, "but the Guns will be somewhat lower." And so it was, as we stood with our backs to what might have been a Hampshire chalkstream and contemplated the steepness to our fronts. It should have slowed up the Guns more than somewhat, but it didn't. They shot as well as before and the whoops and cries of the secretarios could be heard as their Guns pulled off spectacular right and lefts, or right and lefts and rights.

Lunch was taken in a commodious marquee and white coated waiters plied us with barbecued lamb and kid. Wine and talk flowed. After lunch these Guns would stand lower still and we would finish with the King's stand. Juan Carlos himself is a visitor here.

The third drive was indeed a steep one as we stood before what was almost a cliff, and the partridges soared above us, stretching the Guns at all angles, and tumbling way back into the rocks. And the King's drive? A royal treat indeed that left all the Guns hotter and more breathless than they had been all day. At the end there was a dazed pause before the secretarios began to pick-up and the Guns stretched tired backs and congregated to exchange excited commentaries.

There were some serious partridges at Las Vegasillas, no error, and some serious country too. Today there were some serious Guns to boot. The bag was 787 partridges. Tomorrow, I suspect, the Guns will be stood still lower. □

Giles Catchpole travelled with Hendry Ramsay & Wilcox. For more information - tel: 01738 443344 or fax: 01738 443327.



Hugh Paterson gets on to a fast moving red-legged partridge.