

Pen-Raised 'Wild' Birds

Expect a hot rooster shoot at Ringneck Ranch.

By Joel Vance (Published in Gun Dog Magazine August 2014)

Close counts in horseshoes, hand grenades...and pheasant.

The first two are self-explanatory, but with pheasants "close" is how you hope pen-raised birds will act compared to wild ones. At Ringneck Ranch you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference.

"I like to equate our pheasants with opening day wild birds," says Keith Houghton, who has been at the shooting preserve game a long time and whose Tipton, Kan., ranch has been in the family for five generations.

For the old-time hardcore bird hunter, preserve hunting is a bit tainted, like old sandwich meat with a greenish tinge, but that's a bum rap. If the place is run properly, it's right up there with wild bird hunting. I remember days when you could stop at any farmstead and get permission to hunt and find quail and pheasants. Most bird hunters either lived on the land or emigrated from it recently enough that they had direct ties to family and neighbors.

No more. Wild bird populations have shrunk dramatically, as have the places to hunt them. Former bastions of quail and pheasants are pale shadows of themselves. Not to say preserve hunting is *the* answer, but it has become increasingly important...and as such, it's increasingly important it be as close to horse shoe ringer as possible.

Come fly away

I remember a Ringneck Ranch rooster that ran ahead of us for a quarter-mile until he reached the property line beyond which was sere shortgrass prairie and then flushed many yards out of the gun range and crossed the horizon, a tiny dot headed for distant galaxy. When I said I thought it might be a wild bird, our guide just shook his head. I was in the middle of a two-day hunt in the last week of pheasant season. Wild birds were as rare by then as warm temperatures.

In fact, parts of Kansas have been plagued by drought, dropping pheasant and quail populations over the past several years. But with 12,000 acres of controlled shooting preserve to roam (ideal ringneck habitat), Ringneck Ranch is close to the way it used to be.

Keith and Debra Houghton started the business in 1983. Keith was an airline pilot, Debra a flight attendant. Ringneck became a retirement activity well before retirement. At first it was Keith, his father and brother, but his father died and Keith bought out his brother. "It was painfully slow at first," Keith says, "But most of our hunters now have been here before and bring others."

The ranch philosophy is light years from the party hunting atmosphere of many Midwest pheasant lodges where there is an army of shooters and blockers.

"We have shooting parties of four to six hunters, with five being ideal," Keith says. Each party has a guide who will furnish dogs, or hunters can use their own. There is a sag wagon for those hunters who wind down toward the end of a cover strip and want to warm up and rest."

Hunts start about 8:30 a.m. and there is a mid-morning break with hot chocolate, coffee or soft drinks. Lunch is back at the lodge—no baloney sandwiches on the tailgate—and dinner is to die for. There is a marinated pork chop thick as Texas toast, side dishes and dessert that will negate your morning walks for many birds.

“One of our hunters told me Ringneck was as close as you can get to going out on your uncle’s farm. There are just darn few shooting lodges where you feel as comfortable,” Keith says.

Cash Impact

Ringneck is more than a family business—it’s an important economic boon to a part of Kansas where economic boons are hard to come by. Nearby Tipton peaked in population about 1910 and has been slipping ever since.

So Ringneck’s staff of 50 to 55 is a considerable chunk of the local job market. “We worry about our older cooks training younger ones to make our apple pie,” Keith says. Having eaten it, so do I.

Ringneck and other shooting preserves may be the wave of the upland bird hunting future. There still are huge public acreages, especially in the West, where hunters can find birds and not be trampled by the mob, but those areas are shrinking. Walk-in hunting programs exist in a few states and are a definite plus. The state wildlife agency pays landowners to allow bird hunting and the land must be inspected before money changes hands to make sure they have hunting potential, but that doesn’t automatically mean you will kill birds. Some states opt to stock pheasants. Quail stocking isn’t an option other than on a shooting preserve.

Pheasants are not what they used to be, although they have not experienced the dramatic nosedive quail have taken. Those of us in the Heartland still can find private places, often just by asking, where there is a good chance of finding roosters. But many areas simply don’t have wild birds or if they do, the places are locked up, either closed entirely for hunting, leased or reserved for family and friends.

A major difference in preserve hunting is you are encouraged to shoot hens as well as roosters. It feels like committing a particularly egregious sin to do it, and I have to wrestle my conscience to the mat every time a preserve hen flushes, but it didn’t stop me from shooting three straight at Ringneck over my dog’s points.

When in Rome...