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Gamekeeper Tom Dyer is the man charged with impressing millionaires with high pheasants.



Sarah Barnes and her dog, Gunner. Many American dog handlers relish the opportunity to work their animals on a driven shoot.

Private Idaho

Who would have thought you'd find a traditional English driven pheasant shoot smack in the middle of the Wild West? By **Jonathan Green**.

Standing against a vast blue sky and a landscape that sweeps back towards the snow-capped peaks of the mighty Teton mountain range, Tom Dyer, a resolutely cheery British gamekeeper, is dressed incongruously with the Western setting in a forest green tweed jacket, matching waistcoat and a crisply knotted tie. He commands a rag tail line of unmistakably American men to his left in blaze orange baseball caps, one in Afghanistan digital camouflage. Slowly we walk forward abreast, and I heave a little at the 6,500-foot altitude. The men beat the undergrowth with nylon sacks attached to sticks. Unfurling beneath our feet is the expanse of the western state of Idaho in autumn: a quilted landscape of chrome, sun-kissed fields of sunflower,

barley and russet corses whose expanse masks the deep folds and 70-foot deep canyons thick with spruce that lie between.

I'm a walking gun, the other seven guns are waiting for the birds that we are driving. Within four paces a resplendent cock pheasant rises in the breeze, breaks right and then curls behind us. I swing, lead and pull the trigger. The cock tumbles to the ground. There is no time to stop. We continue marching. One or two birds sprint ahead of us in the sunflower before realising, first

Lars Magnusson: the Swede who has transplanted a slice of English sporting tradition to north-west America.





Photography: Andy Anderson

No bag limits and plenty of birds help to ensure the action is full-on and high octane.

in ones and twos, and then flurries, that they have no choice but to take flight. Soon the yawning expanse of sky is so full of birds that they look like a swarm of angry mosquitoes as hundreds fly west and over a precipitous canyon. There's the pop of guns, the smell of cordite as some of the birds crumple and tumble out of the sky.

Titans of American industry take aim

Following the line of beaters, we press to the edge and look down between the swirling, grey puffs of gun smoke. Standing at the pegs are some titans of American industry. Peter Beck III, CEO of the gargantuan Beck building group in Dallas, arrived by private jet

and now plucks birds from the sky with his beautifully engraved Piotti. Double gunning with twin Purdeys is John Morgan, CEO of Morgan's Foods, one of the three big food companies in the US. Next to him is Dave Hanlon, a casino guru and former CEO of Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, who fires his Holland & Holland with rapidity. And on the end, Leonard Logsdail, a British Savile Row tailor. We had driven out to the shoot together from the airport. While doing so he was on the telephone with his secretary booking fittings for both Colin Farrell and Samuel L. Jackson. Most of the men shooting are wearing his dapper tweed creations.

Welcome to a weekend at Blixt and Co's Lazy Triple Creek Property, the

only authentic driven shoot in America that is open to the public. Well, those who can afford the \$10,000 price tag for a weekend, anyway. The well-appointed lodge features a private chef serving four-course dinners, a well-stocked wine cellar, trophy bucks on the walls, and bedrooms with 300 thread count sheets. One evening we headed down past the large gun safe, as big as a small living room, to the Poacher's Pocket – a poolroom – where we drank brandy nightcaps.

Ubiquitous over the weekend is Lars Magnusson, an energetic former shooting coach from the West London Shooting School and later a shooting school in New York. Since he arrived in the US he dreamed of a place where >

LUXURY PHEASANTS

he could recreate the perfect authentic English driven shoot. A ruddy, ginger-headed Swede with a boyish side parting, his quest was in large part due to the disgust he felt at the ersatz form of driven shooting in the United States. "When I arrived in America a few years ago it was as if people were pulling birds out of boxes and tossing them over men with shotguns," declares Magnusson with horror. "That's not English driven shooting."

I have a dream...

He imagined a shoot that concentrated on etiquette, very different from American hunting. Lars explains: "It is the difference between a Piotti and a semi-automatic... The difference between fine tweed and blaze orange and camo... It is the difference between a bird tossed from a box or a tower and a true driven pheasant. It is the difference between taking only the highest birds and only being concerned with the bag total at the end of the experience. The great estates create opportunities for camaraderie, lasting memories and unforgettable shots."

Magnusson scoured America for a likely spot and ended up in Idaho, around 200 miles from Hemingway's Ketchum home. The fabled writer who loved hunting spent the last few years of his life in Idaho, a place he loved. Magnusson fell in love with it too, although most of the locals were confounded as to what driven shooting really was. "A lot of them thought it was driving around in a pick-up truck and shooting out the back at stuff," Tom Dyer told me in between drives one day. "They had no clue." And he had problems entering the country when he tried to explain what the term gamekeeper meant. "I still don't think they understand it," he says.

Magnusson descended on the famously wealthy and celebrity-studded town of Jackson Hole, Wyoming to enlist help. He approached Jen, who was running a branding and advertising agency at the time in March 2006. "He turned up in a tie and a Barbour going on about wanting to set up a

The stunning scenery is a far cry from Exmoor.



shooting estate," she recalls. "Here shooting is about waving the American flag, dressing in camo and blaze orange. At first I thought it was weird. I asked, 'What do you mean you dress up to go shooting?'" She showed Lars a few likely regions. At the time Lazy Triple Creek was used for clay and big game hunting. "He said, 'That looks great.

"Suddenly birds erupt out of the side of the hill, high and fast. It's thrilling and I make shots I never thought I would."

Now let's tear it all apart and start all over again." Two years later the pair were married and they opened for business the year after.

Their new shooting company was called Blixt and Co. It was named after Lars's great-grandfather, who was given the nickname Blixt – Swedish for lightning – when he was in the army. When Lars told Jen that he was going to invest everything they had into a driven shooting venture, Jen was concerned. "What happens if it fails?"

she asked him. "Then we lose the cars, the houses, the dogs, everything," he told her. They opened for business with 2,000 acres and 36 drives in 2009 when the Dow was at an all-time low of 6,500 and the sub-prime mortgage crisis hit. They sold eight shooting days. For 2013 they have already sold 39 out of their 46 total days for the season.

The Wild Western frontier is not so kind to pheasants. Lars and Jennifer released a large number of them just a few days before the first shoot. They were savaged by raptors. "We lost thousands," says Lars. "After they had finished eating them they just knocked them out of the sky for fun." Lars won't tell me how many birds he puts out because, "that's like asking a girl about her weight." Now he lets them acclimatise and get strong before releasing them. Still, though, as we drive around the estate, hawks and eagles circle. "Look at that bugger," he spits, pointing to a hawk with a freshly killed hen carcass that has been entirely stripped of meat.

Roaming elk eat the pheasants' cover and there is little rain in Idaho, which can be problematic. The mountain weather can be changeable, and the season much shorter before the bitter winter with its deep snow sets in.



Compared to English shooting, the season starts earlier in August and ends early as winter rolls arrives in October.

Better than working in McDonald's

Hiring a team of beaters and loaders was not without its challenges, either. "I told my grandmother that I had been offered a job driving birds to a load of people with shotguns," says Thomas Lindford, a 23-year-old local beater. "She said I was out of my mind." At \$80 a day he earns

far more than he would at his regular job at McDonald's, from which he takes a break while the shooting season is on. "She's a little more used to it now, but the first few times it scared me... and my grandmother." He walks 11 miles on steep terrain every day. "No need to join a gym anymore," he jokes.

The weekend starts with a personal shooting lesson with Lars on sporting clays, then a sumptuous dinner of pan-seared duck breast. The following morning we assemble at the back of

the lodge. We pull from playing cards to select our pegs. Lars reminds those who haven't shot with beaters before of some of the risks. "Make sure every bird has 360 degrees of sky around it before you shoot," he says. "If we have 20 beaters on a drive then we want all those beaters to come back. And in the case of dog handlers, please make sure that at least no dogs are hit." It raises a chuckle or two.

We head to the first drive, Twin Peaks, which is stocked with partridge. David Kaplan, an investment adviser in Boston, is here with his business partner David Shepherd on the recommendation of his tailor, Leonard Logsdail. Both are in their early 40s and neither has attended a driven shoot before. Both seem rather sceptical about the endeavour. "If Leonard says it is fun then it must be," says David Kaplan, somewhat dubiously.

Across from a low hill, the beaters drive a covey of birds and all of us drop several. "I would have shot more," says Dave Kaplan. "But I was worried about hitting the beaters." Behind us on a high bank are roughly two dog handlers for every gun. Some have driven more than 2,500 miles from every corner of America, from Mississippi and Boston, just to be here.

"There's nothing like the experience real working dogs can get with this many birds," says Rich Reigner, dog captain. "My dogs get more work than they do all year here," he adds, as they lunge into the woods retrieving bird after bird. He brings six to 10 dogs each shoot day, rotating them so they are always fresh. "I never thought I'd see this in Idaho of all places."

After three or four drives we head to a large, well appointed canvas tent set in a copse. Lars fills steel cups with 'aiming fluid', a warming sherry infused with jalapeño. The beaters meanwhile are 'blanking in' and marching the birds into the drive while we relax.

Then we press on to a creek with dense thickets at the bottom of a deep U-shaped canyon lined with sagebrush and clumps of aspens. The dogs and their handlers sit high on the hillside



Bringing a whole new meaning to the concept of driven game with dogs.

behind us. Suddenly birds erupt out of the side of the hill, high and fast. It's thrilling, and I make shots I never thought I would. The rest of the day passes in a blur as the beaters drive the birds off the top of high ridges for some of the most exciting shooting I have ever enjoyed. The birds fly high and fast, soaring like stealth bombers and gliding, some tantalisingly, out of reach. David Kaplan's early scepticism seems to evaporate with each drive. "You have to pick your bird," he says. "But then you do and then you think, oh that one looks pretty good too, and then that one, and that one... I wasn't hitting anything to begin with," he laughs.

A true taste of England in cowboy country

Before one drive, a bald eagle lazily circles overhead. That night, we swap wild tales of the shooting over a four-course dinner featuring seared rainbow trout, caught locally, and roasted beef tenderloin.

The day's shooting, the Englishness of it all and some of the beautiful guns were the apex for many of the men who have conquered the business world. Peter Beck recalls being in London some years ago and paying a visit to the Purdey shop, where he was horrified to learn the guns started at several thousand dollars. He handed one back to the assistant in the shop, offering that it seemed a little stiff when he closed it. "A gentleman never closes his own gun, Sir," sniffed the assistant. Peter laughs at the memory now.

The next day we jump onto the gunbus, a covered trailer pulled behind a Chevrolet Tahoe, with our loaders. Many are local police officers or somehow involved in local law enforcement. Holly Brian, 34, is a deputy at the local jail. "Here in Idaho you would never think that they would be into this," she says. "I'd never loaded beautiful \$100k shotguns like this before and was worried about dropping them," she admits. Now, though, she says, she has become a pro.

The day starts with birds flying above the tops of giant fir trees, virtually



The weekend guns (from left): David Kaplan, Jonathan Green, Peter Beck, David M. Shepherd, Lars Magnusson, David Corrigan, Dave Hanlon, John Morgan, Len Logsdail & Irene Gonzalez.

impossible to hit in my case. Yet John Morgan, double gunning, hits everything that flies his way: some shots look to be at least well over 100 feet. "You have to pull the gun to your cheek for only a second," he offers. "If you have time to look at your barrels you'll miss." He's right. Yet the pheasants are getting smart too. They've learned that beaters are driving them towards guns. A few wily birds curl back over the beater's heads and away.

No bag limits

Morgan has shot birds all over the world, from the Czech Republic to Spain and Argentina to England. So far he has done 20 days with Blixt and Co and will shoot out the season with them for a further 10 before moving on to shooting estates in England. "This is as good as anywhere I have shot in the world," he says. "The thing I most appreciate is there are no bag limits."

After a pheasant casserole for lunch and a quick doze by the fire, we head out for a few last drives. I'm firing so many shots that my loader can't get the shells in my Browning fast enough. The birds streak overhead, changing course abruptly as my shoulder grows sore.

No one wanted it to stop. With heavy hearts we head back to the lodge. There the gamekeepers lay out a small section of the total 506 birds we have shot with a total of 1,547 rounds. "We lay them on their side with the heart facing to heaven as a way of giving thanks for their lives," says Mattias Jonsson, assistant gamekeeper.

Shooting will never be the same again

Lars is extending his operation to include at least one other estate, more sumptuous accommodation and even the construction of a gun bus that has, what he terms, "a fully functioning pub on the back".

Heading to the airport, Dave Kaplan is in ruminative mood. "It's going to be hard going back to normal shooting again. Heading out, seeing nothing. Maybe coming home with the same two shells I had in my gun to begin with. I'm sometimes lucky if I manage to shoot 10 birds a year." He cracks a grin. "It's probably ruined me for any other hunting." By the time we leave he has already signed up for next year. 🦅

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