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Dateline: Wisconsin

Grouse and Woodcock in the Badger State

- Classic, upper Great Lakes grouse coverts
- Hunt as hard or as easy as you want
- **Accommodations:** Clean, cozy lodge
- **Food:** Home-style
- **Hunt:** Moderate to difficult

Park City, Wis., bills itself as the "Grouse Capital of the World," but the hunting is also pretty good about 20 miles south near Phillips. Ruffed grouse and woodcock hunters will find plenty of room to roam, plenty of places to hunt and plenty of birds.

Guests of Peter G. Jesunas at the Back Forty Guide Service near Phillips find themselves hunting grouse and woodcock on a combination of private and public lands. The public lands or pri-

vate lands open to the public come in many variations: county, state, national forest lands, and paper company property. The Wisconsin Dept. of Natural



Resources has done a nice job creating hunting trails on state lands so that hunters don't have to crawl through the thick nasty stuff that usually produces good

bird numbers. On the other hand, one guest of Jesunas refuses to hunt along the trails. Last September, Jesunas took the shooter and his pal to the thickest places he could find, and in three days they flushed 87 grouse and 42 woodcock.

Jesunas also has access to 1600 acres of private land including 760 acres owned by his family. It is here that his commitment to providing a solid grouse and woodcock hunting experience is most evident. He spends the off season doing some planned cuttings and selective plantings to make the habitat more appealing to grouse and woodcock. And it looks as natural as can be.

At one point during our hunt last fall, my setter Belle drifted down an incline and stepped into some mixed cover along a tiny stream. The words "classic cover" had barely slipped from

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Dateline: Mexico

Mixed bag South of the Border

- Exotic locale with businessman's amenities
- Hot-barrel action for two kinds of doves
- **Accommodations:** Plush downtown inn
- **Food:** Excellent restaurant menu
- **Hunt:** Easy to moderate

Sinalopato Duck and Dove Club is located in Los Mochis in the state of Sinaloa on the Sea of Cortez. Sinalopato sits below Baja, Calif.; Los Mochis — population 300,000 — lies about 400 miles south of Nogales, Ariz. The gregari-

ous Roberto Balderrama, Jr., better known as "Bobby," owns the 20-year-old club. Educated at Cornell and the University of Monterey, the 40-something businessman and avid hunter speaks fluent English and fully understands the needs and expectations of American wingshooters. He has put together a first-rate business for white-winged and mourning dove shooting and duck hunting for 14 possible species of puddlers.

In two trips here five years apart, I found the superlative accommodations and good-to-excellent gunning to be surprisingly consistent. Many of Balderrama's large support staff — drivers, guides, restaurant servers, office

people and others — have worked for him for years. Most speak some English; all are well trained and industrious.

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and the other, grilled pork loin. Nothing super fancy. But very, very good. Stick-to-the-ribs fare done well. Additionally, Mary will do her best to honor any special requests or special dietary needs.

Other than one bit of spontaneous interaction when Mary wanted me to teach her how to make a special dessert, she and Peter made themselves scarce after dinner, so as not to intrude on the clients.

Jesunas charges \$1800 per person for 3 days/4 nights. That includes full service with a guide and dogs all day — until dusk if clients so desire; cleaning, packing and freezing of birds; three meals a day (lunch is taken in the field), and sleeping accommodations.

Hunters are welcome to bring their own dogs, but might decide against it

for two reasons. First, there is little room in the kennels for extra dogs, and guests often have to lodge their dogs in either their vehicles or travel kennels set in the lodge's lobby. Second, this area could also be called the "Tick Capital of the World," and even dogs taking tick medication are susceptible.

The lodge is open year-round and Jesunas offers released pheasant and quail during the closed seasons on grouse and woodcock. Those seasons run from the Saturday closest to Sept. 15 to Dec. 31 for grouse and variable dates, set at the federal level, for woodcock. Though woodcock are migratory, hunters do not need a federal or state migratory bird stamp to hunt them. Like waterfowlers, though, hunters must install magazine plugs in shotguns capable of holding more than

three shells. A five-day non-resident small game license cost \$55 in 2006.

The nearest sizable airport is in Rhinelander, 65 miles away, and for an extra fee Jesunas will arrange pick-ups and returns. But because it's easier to get connecting flights to Minneapolis/St. Paul 180 miles away, he recommends clients fly into there, rent a vehicle and drive to Phillips. The nearby Price County Airport can handle private aircraft.

For more info: Peter G. Jesunas, **Back Forty Guide Service, N11055 Bandy Rd., Phillips, WI 54555; 715-339-2823; peter@backfortywi.com; www.backfortywi.com.**

For license and season info: **Wisconsin DNR, 608-266-2621, www.dnr.wi.gov.**

—Tom Carney

Mexico ... (from page 1)

Much of Balderrama's business is from repeat customers. For example, the key reason that a father-son team comes from Colorado each month during the Nov. 1 – early March hunting season is because their expectations are always met, trip after trip.

Upon arrival at the gated Plaza Inn, a 15-minute shuttle from Los Mochis International Airport, each guest is greeted with a margarita. Hunting parties returning at noon or after dark also receive hors d'oeuvres. A typical day begins at 5 a.m. with a buffet breakfast at Mr. Owens, one of two restaurants within the sprawling complex containing 125 rooms, a convention center, nightclubs and the quiet Sugar Cane Company Lobby and Video Bar. Guides soon arrive to escort hunters to Suburbans or other SUVs already loaded with guns, ammo and beverage coolers. A drive of 30 to 60 minutes brings dove hunters to picked grain fields or mesquite groves in the fertile farming valleys of Los Mochis and El Fuerte for pass-shooting the morning flights. An hour's drive puts duck hunters into either the Lagoon de Ohuira or Estero de Capoa, lake/marsh matrixes totaling nearly 40,000 acres. There is no limit on doves. Duck limits vary year to year but are always generous.

Returning at midday, shooters enjoy a bountiful lunch from the full-service menu, nap for an hour or two, and then head out

for an afternoon duck or dove hunt. **The packages always allow for two hunts spread over a long, full day.** The luxurious rooms and suites are especially inviting after evening drinks and a fine meal, which — if requested — will include birds shot that morning or the day before. Local



cuisine runs heavy to seafood, and regional dishes such as Pescado Sarandeado and Ceviche are popular. Guests frequently fall asleep with the vibrant music from the mariachi band in their ears.

Ask for dove guide **Jose "Joe" Moreno**, who worked for Bobby's father and — at 81 years old — hunts hard every day, accompanied by one or more of his sons. Moreno positions shooters in picked sorghum fields where mourning doves feed early and late in the day. White-winged doves, enroute to water or returning from roosts in foothills of the Cerro del Oro, San Miguel or

Barobampo mountains, arrive later in the morning than do mourning doves. Sometimes a field produces mixed bag shooting. Gunners wanting to kill only whitewings, which fly higher and are typically harder to hit, will find themselves in mesquite cover which the birds favor for loafing. For either species, a hunter can expect to shoot four to 10 boxes of shells, depending on his/her stand location in the line of shooters.

The head waterfowl guide is **Leoncio**, who was Bobby's personal bodyguard on my first visit. Leoncio's team of airboat drivers, bird boys (there are no dogs for retrieving) and others know their business and do it well. The mazelike marshes are full of bird life; on the half-hour ride to the blinds (woven marsh grass and pallet floors), hunters should expect to see rafts of teal, pintail, shovelers and pichiguila (Mexican tree ducks). It's not uncommon to shoot a teal grand slam (blue-winged, green-winged and cinnamon) along with wigeon, gadwall, mottled ducks, and black-bellied and fulvous whistling ducks.

According to promotional literature, the Wildlife Dept. of Mexico and DUMAC estimate the **annual population of migrant waterfowl in the Los Mochis region numbers more than 4 million birds.** Who can argue? There are plenty of ducks.

If this sounds like a bird shooter's

Shangri-La, it is. But even paradise has its limits. On my second trip, two California hunters were unhappy to learn they would not be going home with the cleaned birds they were promised. A follow-up phone interview a month later revealed that neither FedEx nor UPS had brought a much-desired package from Mexico. Bobby's personal secretary, however, assured me that every effort had been made.

Although both Gambel and the elusive and rare elegant (or Douglass quail) are available, Balderrama is not set up for hunting them. There are no dogs and no experienced guides. At best, the quail hunting is a go-it-alone, hit-or-miss opportunity.

Each year some of Sinalopato's 200 guests arrive in their own airplanes.

Most, however, board one of several daily flights from the U.S. on **Aero California** and **Aero Mexico** airlines.

Club firearms are autoloaders in 12-gauge and pumps in 12- and 20-gauges. Most hunters rent guns for \$35 per day. Shells cost \$14 per box, and a Mexico hunting license is \$190.

Package prices for the 2006-07 hunting season have changed little, if at all, over the past five years. They range from \$1,495 for four dove hunts (three nights/two days) to \$2,495 for three duck and three dove hunts (four nights/three days). A six-hunt dove package (four nights/three days) is \$1,975. Two-hunt extra days for doves are \$575 each; for duck and dove the cost is \$695. Nonhunters pay \$165 daily. The charge for a youth under

16 hunting with his or her father is \$400.

The prices include double-occupancy lodging at the Plaza Inn, airport shuttles and hunting transfers, bird boy retrieval, and complimentary beer and soft drinks in the field. Bird boys and lodge tips are not included.

The hotel has full-size beds, direct Internet access, satellite television, daily maid service and fitness and business centers. Single-room supplements are \$180 for three nights and \$240 for four nights.

For more info: **Sinalopato Duck & Dove Club**, 011-52-668-816-08-00 ext. 1700, or from the U.S. 800-862-9026, fax 011-52-668-818-15-90 and 011-52-668-816-+08-02; bookings@plazainnhotel.com.mx; www.sinalopato.net.

—Tom Huggler

Dateline: Kansas

Prairie Chickens — The "Other" Grouse

- Prime location for early season hunts
- Top-notch staff, dogs, facility
- **Accommodations:** Bunkhouse or restored 19th Century lodge.
- **Food:** Home-style
- **Hunt:** Easy to difficult

Ravenwood Lodge, a private hunting estate located 15 minutes southwest of Topeka, Kan., offers 2,000 acres of prime upland habitat and some of the only guided prairie chicken hunting in the state. A sub-species of the familiar ruffed grouse, *Tympanuchus cupido* — the Greater Prairie Chicken — prefers the rolling grasslands and limitless vistas of western states, terrain that Ravenwood, situated on the eastern edge of the Flint Hills, has in abundance.

Kansas has two main chicken seasons, covering both the greater and lesser prairie chickens. We opted for an early season hunt in mid-September.

Our guide took us two hunters and four dogs over high grasslands punctuated with several long draws. We covered a lot of ground and a series of small rolling hills over the span of several hours before a group of seven birds flushed 50 yards ahead and right. A tightly choked barrel with a good lead

dropped the trailing bird, and the other birds glided 200 yards or so into the wind and disappeared in the short grass.

In the vicinity of the chickens' last known address — some short dry grass at the base of a hill — our lead dog



pointed up fast and two birds popped up in an awful hurry. My hunting partner swung to take the lead bird and brought it down nicely with a snap shot as it hugged the ground, an inch of blue sky under its tail. The other bird went high and wide, and a fair wind and a decent lead put the bird in my bag.

For sheer knowledge and experience the Ravenwood staff was without parallel: friendly, courteous, thoroughly professional, and the house dogs were first rate.

In addition to wild chickens, Ravenwood offers the **full spectrum of shooting and hunting related sports**. Prime upland hunting terrain, including beautiful creek bottoms and feed fields,

are at guests' disposal for released quail, partridge and pheasant. Both driven bird and plantation-style hunts are also available. Other onsite features include a full English sporting clays course with 11 challenging stations, a nine-station tower course and a five-stand practice area. Ravenwood's Orvis-endorsed pro shop can meet any last minute needs for gear or even guns, and it is fully stocked with ammunition for all gauges.

The refurbished, Civil War-era Stone Creek Lodge, built of native stone, has been in proprietor **Ken Corbet's** family since 1863. It features tasteful and intimate accommodations for four. Larger parties up to 10 persons can stay in Ravenwood's bunkhouse. The kennels can accommodate guests' dogs.

Ravenwood's regional cuisine is hearty fare: delicious home-style cooking with entrées of pork chops, steaks or salmon among the choices on the menu. The food is tastefully prepared and more than adequate for a hungry hunter.

Ravenwood's field hunting packages range from \$135/half-day to \$270/day per gun. A driven bird hunt costs \$500/day per gun. Big game and corporate packages are also available.

The early prairie chicken season for that part of the state east of U.S. 281 starts in mid-September and runs for a month, while regular chicken season corre-