



*dressed to kill*

BY BRONWEN HRUSKA

Photographs by Jessica Craig-Martin

HUNTING IS ON THE RISE AMONG THE WEALTHIEST NEW YORKERS. ARE THEY CHARMED BY THE INTRICATE RITUALS OF THE SPORT? OR TEMPTED BY THE SCENT OF BLOOD?



HERE'S NO COORS OR CAMO at the invitation-only Beretta-Horn Family Shoot. The 30 well-groomed hunters gathered at the private Mashomack Preserve Club, in Pine Plains, New York, know that a civilized day of shooting birds requires a civilized outfit, and so they've turned out for the yearly event in their Merchant-Ivory best: Holland & Holland breeks cuffed at the knee, bespoke tweed jackets, James Lock caps, colorful tasseled knee-highs. Carrying Beretta shotguns by their polished walnut stocks, they disappear into the roofless stands sprinkled across a grassy mountain ridge while I park myself nervously out of range. The shoot master toots a brass horn, and the business ends of those shotguns peek up over the stands. Mashomack's gamekeepers, working behind the scenes on the tree-covered hilltop, reach into wooden crates and pull out the intricately patterned pheasants and shiny black ducks that have been bred in the wild for this very moment, then fling them into the air, one at a time, like feathered torpedoes.

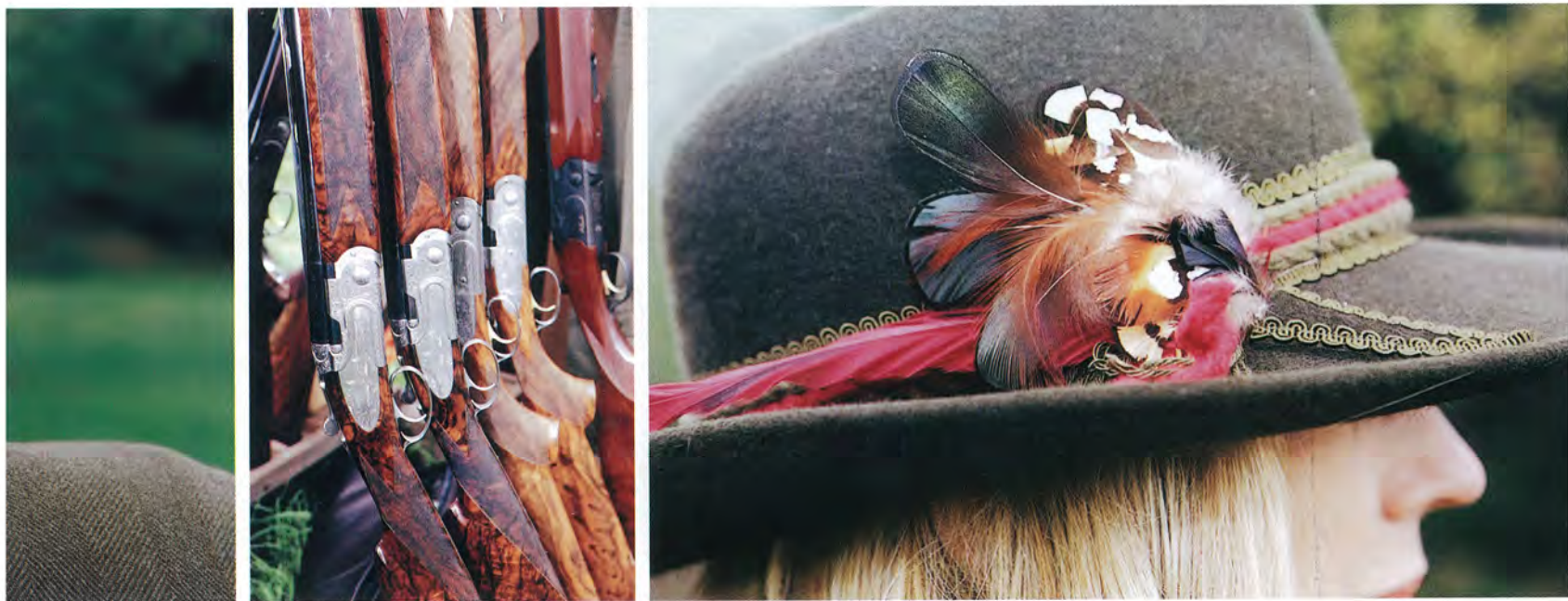
It's quiet for a moment as the birds emerge from behind the trees. Then sharp, high cracks erupt from the half-dozen stands on my side of the hill. The birds flinch and jerk. Some keep flying for a while after they're hit. Others spin midair and spiral down in free-fall. One by one, they thud to the ground around me like sacks of flour. It's hard not to think of that scene in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* in which frogs rain from the sky.

THE NUMBERS MAY SUGGEST that hunting is a dying sport: in New York State, for example, 40 percent fewer licenses are being sold than 20 years ago. But among the rich, hunting is on the rise. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of

hunters with household incomes of \$100,000 or more rose more than 25 percent. High-end hunting retailers report a 10 percent increase in sales. Beretta, which has been making premium guns for five centuries, recognized the trend 10 years ago and opened its first American boutique—now its highest-grossing store—on Madison Avenue. And private shooting clubs—Mashomack and a handful of others within two hours of the city—are doing a booming business with the most affluent of the 20,000 New York City residents who have a rifle or shotgun permit. The well-heeled group at the Beretta-Horn shindig is a dead-on sampling of this pistol-packing subspecies: the Manhattan gentleman hunter.

The gentleman hunter rises at 4:30 a.m. to shoot pheasant, duck, and turkey at his private club before heading in to his corner office. He stalks elephant and kudu in Africa and wild boar in Europe. Or perhaps he mounts for one of the traditional (gun-free) fox hunts at Rombout, Millbrook, Old Chatham, and half a dozen other nearby spots. "It's really very back-in-the-day," says Chip Fisher, an entrepreneur (and the son of Charles Avery Fisher) who, after learning to ride at 40, boned up on the rules of the hunt and searched out specialty shops here and abroad for a perfect kit—black melton frock coat, white stock shirt, canary britches and waistcoat, and spurs (the straps depend on which color boots he's wearing). "You have to enjoy the ritual of preparation and anticipation," he explains, "if you're going to enjoy fox hunting."

The gentleman hunters are alpha-male, top-of-the-food-chain New Yorkers. They perform open-heart surgery, shape the skyline, manage billions of dollars in investments, run the government, and deliver the nightly news. Yet in Man-



Peter, Lee, and Debbie Horn (also far right) at the Beretta-Horn Family Shoot. Engraved Beretta shotguns can go for as much as \$200,000.

hattan their passion is a problem. “I can understand why people don’t like hunting,” says Peter Horn, the affable vice president of Beretta USA’s retail division and the host of the annual Mashomack shoot. “And they shouldn’t have to do it. But as long as it’s not illegal, they should allow other people to do what they want.”

THOUGH WOMEN CAN AND DO hunt right alongside their male counterparts, I get the feeling that they’ll never be full-fledged members of this hale, Cuban-cigar-chomping group. At the Mashomack event, several of the gun-savvy wives forgo the shooting for dog handling, directing their pups with high-pitched whistles and stern hand signals. The indescribably happy labs, spaniels—even a pair of poodles—race for the downed birds and trot proudly back, plopping them on cue onto designated piles.

On closer inspection, many of the birds are still twitching. I kneel and stare into the eyes of one duck; the duck stares back. “Excuse me,” says a solidly built dog handler. She leans over, picks up the bird, and twirls it by the neck like a wet towel—once, twice, three times. That does the trick. The soup-and-sherry break scheduled for midmorning had sounded so appealing. Now I’m not so sure.

“It’s a little weird your first time,” allows Debbie Horn, Peter’s wife of 24 years. “Hunting wasn’t our idea, you know,” she continues. “It’s been part of life from the beginning.” She wears a moss-green field jacket, a huntsy silk

scarf, and feathers in her felt chapeau. Slim and blond, with perfectly applied makeup and manicured hands that sparkle with diamonds, she is a former model and three-time All-American Sporting Clay Shooter who reigned 10 years ago as the first-ever Beretta Girl. She holds her own on the exotic hunting excursions her husband leads in Hungary, Romania, and Argentina for such above-the-fold friends as the king of Spain, Norman Schwartzkopf, George H. W. Bush, and Eric Trump and his brother Donald Jr.

I join Debbie and her son Lee, a Wharton senior, in the stand and clear away a few dozen of the red and yellow lipstick-size shell cases. I’m not as queasy here as I was in the open field. First, there’s less chance that a bird will fall on my head. And the smaller enclosed space helps keep the focus on the *sport* of the thing. As Lee, an excellent shot, pulls the trigger over and over, his view is limited to the tiny screen of sky above him, as though he’s operating an extremely lifelike PlayStation game—only much, much louder.

Some can’t quite fathom this kind of shooting. The former personal assistant of a well-known New York society figure, an Austrian who used to accompany his boss to the Hamptons for similar bird shoots, told me, “In Europe you walk for 10 miles. You’re very tired by the end, and you’re happy if you’ve gotten two or three ducks. Here, maybe your trigger finger is tired by the end of the day. It’s hunting for lazy people.”

Alex Brant, who wrote *The Complete Guide to Wing Shooting* and divides his time between his East 71st Street apartment and his castle in County Wicklow, Ireland (and who killed at least 100 birds at his friend Horn’s Mashomack party), says that modern man needs an outlet for his primal



Scenes from the shoot. By the end of the day, nearly 1,800 specially bred pheasants and ducks had been released into the air as targets.

urges. “Genetically, man is a hunter,” he insists. “Sometimes those instincts are channeled elsewhere, but they don’t go away.” In fact, hunting is a much larger part of the mainstream—even in New York—than most people imagine. “It’s used a lot by CEOs and presidents of banks and law firms to entertain important corporate clients,” says Brant, whose company, Driven Shooting, leads high-end hunting excursions overseas. “They take important guys to England for pheasant shooting or to Spain for partridge shooting. It works better than golf, because you’re in a lodge with the people you want to be selling to; you have every meal with them. Besides, not everyone likes golf.”

What bird shooting doesn’t deliver is the Hemingway-esque rush of blasting the heads off charging animals. “Fifty years ago there were a few hundred people—if that—from America who went on safaris to shoot big game in Africa,” Brant says. “Now thousands of people go every year.” The safari camps at the super-high end—the Ivory Camp in Botswana’s Okavango Delta, Bower’s Hope Camp in South Africa, the Mwatisi Camp in Tanzania—go all-out with trained chefs and the finest wines. When your target audience includes the commodities trader Paul Tudor Jones II, the hedge-fund genius Lewis Bacon, and Jim Clark, the founder of Netscape, you’d better be able to offer five-star accommodations. And privacy: since just one family stays at a time, it has the camp’s staff all to itself.

Some New Yorkers approach safaris in uniquely New York ways. Jeff Neal, whose Tulsa company arranges big-game expeditions in Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific as much as three years in advance, recalls booking an entire 14-day trip to Botswana for a New York City doctor in one

phone call. That trip cost \$55,000; others Neal has organized have gone as high as \$280,000. Plane fare, gear, clothing, and guns all pump up the price.

Neal’s client Tom Kunz, a partner at Skadden Arps, is one New Yorker who feels no need to hide his jones for the sport. Lying on the carpet of his 29th-floor office is a pair of 60-pound tusks from an elephant he shot in Botswana. Above his desk, a leopard rests languidly on a branch; on an adjoining wall, another leopard guards a limp, lifeless pygmy antelope. “Leopard hunting is fascinating,” says Kunz, a chatty father of seven in tortoise-shell glasses. “The way you hunt them is a mind game—40 hours of boredom, then 30 seconds of the most intense excitement in your life.” But what about the act of killing itself? “Any hunter who says he doesn’t enjoy it,” Kunz answers unhesitatingly, “is lying. I mean, it’s *fun*. It’s truly fun. It *is*. And, yes, it does involve killing something. *But it’s fun to do it.*”

Kunz can live with differing opinions. “My wife is a city girl—born and raised here. She couldn’t care less if she saw a cheetah or anything else. God bless her, that’s just the way she is. She’s a Democrat, too. I’ve forgiven that, so I guess I can forgive the fact that she has no interest in nature.”

People don’t understand, Kunz goes on, that hunters are the ones actually *preserving* the animals: built into the cost of the trips are fees that go directly to the local communities. “Hunting is essential for conservation,” he declares, with lawyerly conviction. “Without the revenues from



hunting, the local communities would just kill all the animals. The only reason they don't is the money." So by killing the oldest, biggest animals, who would die soon anyway, hunters are making sure the sport will still be around for their children. "The people who love the animals the most are the hunters," he insists. "If you have a passion for something, the thing you most fear is for it to disappear."

But purists like the private investor Jim Hudgins—who grew up in Jamaica, Queens, in a family that hunted—dismiss such reasoning as self-justification. "Something's missing in the equation," Hudgins says. "Write a check for \$20,000 to the community; it will probably be used more efficiently. They're not doing it to feed people. They're doing it for the killing and the bragging rights."

Hudgins, who's tall and lanky, with close-cropped hair and a salt-and-pepper fringe above his upper lip, is the only African American I encountered during my forays into this WASPY world, and he has little respect for most of his peers there. "I'm a snob," he says. "Most people who are affluent and live on the island of Manhattan and say they're hunters are not really hunters. They go to a private duck reserve in Texas for three days with great cuisine and French wine. Or they release pheasants, or go to deer farms. That's not hunting—it's *killing*. You go on safari, you're *killing*. You've got two backup shooters saying, 'Which gun do you want, sir?' That's a high-end consumer paying to shoot and kill."

One thing hunting shouldn't be, Hudgins maintains, is easy. So he hunts with bow and arrow, killing between one and three bucks a season, and then dines on the meat for the rest of the year. The hands-on reality check that comes with skinning, cleaning, and butchering the animal is a big

part of hunting for him. "Once you've killed the animal," he says, "you have a responsibility to respect it, to take care of it. It's just like when you pursue a woman. If you have sex with her, you have to have a relationship for a while, even if you want to get rid of her. It's the act of *hunting* that's beautiful. It's not the killing."

BACK AT THE MASHOMACK bird shoot, a \$14,000 Beretta Jubilee 20 Gage rests on my right shoulder. The shoot is just about over, and Peter Horn has agreed to let me see what all the fuss is about. I aim away from people and birds and into an open field. Horn arranges me in something close to a proper stance: feet apart, hip out, gun pressed against my cheek. "OK," he says, "*squeeze*." I try to pull the trigger slowly, but the shot rips out of the barrel faster and lower and louder than I'd anticipated. Suddenly my pulse is racing—probably from the kung fu kick of recoil vibrating in my chest, shoulder, and cheek.

This is the moment I'm supposed to become addicted to the adrenaline, the power, the primalness of it all. But, like Tom Kunz's wife, I was born and bred in New York, and the sound of gunfire still makes me jump—even after four hours and many thousands of rounds. It's just not in me. I hand back the gun.

Horn, meanwhile, has spotted a lone duck that's somehow dodged the 30 guns trailing him. "Look at him go!" he says, thrilled at the escape. "Brilliant bird!" Then one last crack catches it in the chest. The duck loses altitude slowly, then nosedives into the tall grass.

"Oh well," Horn says, disappointed. "Not so brilliant after all." ■