

HOW TO HUNT

ROCK PIGEONS



Rock pigeons are, thanks to the extensive research by Prof Kok of Bloemfontein University, one of our best researched gamebirds. Somebody should be taking a look at Rameron pigeons... Meanwhile, Michael J Hoy explains how to hunt rockies in this extract from our handbook 'WINGSHOOTING' – a 'must have' for every dedicated wingshooter in Southern Africa.

This wily, super-fast jinxer of the skies is arguably the most common quarry of the Southern African sporting gun. Flying in small groups or as a flock of several hundred birds, this sleek raider of the harvest presents an almost unrivalled target, a challenge to wingshooters of all ages. Indeed one is likely to see many a youngster out learning the ropes on 'rockies', mainly because such shooting is readily available, often free and permitted all year round in most provinces.

Have gun and game licence? Then off you go. Opportunities come mainly in autumn, as the crops ripen, with the birds drawn by the magnet of a feast on the likes of ripening sunflower. This can start as early as January and will continue until May. Does it matter where the rockies go after that? For several glorious months, one can enjoy some of the finest shooting that South Africa has to offer and not even have to venture far from the car – a special attraction for some. Naturally, a well-trained retriever, good company, good

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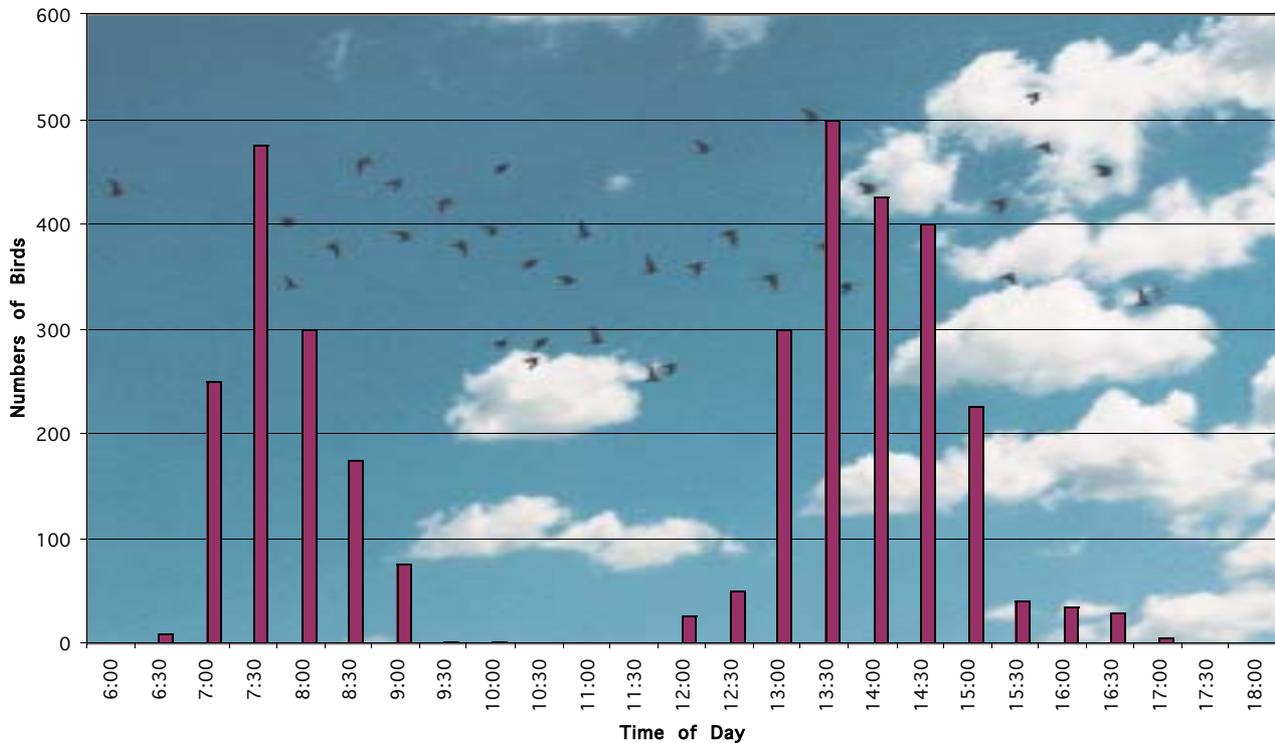
preparation and sun-screen all help. And what a pleasure to eat; whole birds casseroled or the breasts used in a pie or curry.

So, you've been invited to a rockie shoot or have booked one through SA Wingshooters; now what? Best you go check the venue out a day or two beforehand without your gun, if convenient. Otherwise, it's essential to obtain a report from someone who has been shooting within the last week or so. The reason? Rockies never linger in the same field or in the same part of it for long, as better food becomes available. Understanding the flight line and exactly where the birds are feeding helps enormously. They can be there in good numbers one day and decide to feed elsewhere the next – though often in the same vicinity.

If you're shooting over sunflower, get to the lands early – shortly after sunrise – even though you might have to bide your time before the rockies arrive. Park your car under trees if possible, several hundred metres from where you want to shoot, though its presence

Rock Pigeons Activity Chart

(From: Prof OB Kok, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein)



doesn't seem to make very much difference, but may upset your fellow shooters. Walk into the crop for cover, positioning yourself relative to the expected flight line so that you do not have the sun in your eyes. Best of all find a few taller plants, maybe still with leaves, behind which to conceal yourself. With keenness of sight and the advantage of altitude, rockies will see you from over a kilometre away unless you have taken the trouble to hide. Camouflage clothing minimises the likelihood of being seen, whilst decoy pigeons, including freshly shot birds affixed to the sunflower heads, do lure them.

Rockies can descend from great height, straight into the field, or surprise you in hedge-hopping style. Suppleness of neck as you scour the skyline is a distinct advantage; alternatively take a friend to cover your back. 32g No.7 shot are great but you can go as light as 28g No.7^{1/2} very successfully. Best that you stand still, gun closed, barrels up and ready to mount. Never, ever, shoot low over the crop. Your fellow wingshooters will be moving around in the field unbeknown to you – which is as good a reason as any to wear good quality shooting glasses with protective lenses.



The birds tend to feed in two shifts, the first between seven and nine in the morning and the second from one to three in the afternoon, depending on the month, the crop situation and the distance from the city or town (see the graph above). So, take your shots and chances when you can because, when the birds leave for their roosts, your opportunities will simply dry up very quickly. You'll know they have left when you have not had a bird in range

for a quarter of an hour. If you're lucky enough to be shooting under a known flight line, perhaps far away from their feeding grounds, you'll have the treat of the birds flying over you from their roost and back again, twice in a day.

One can read elsewhere in this book about shooting techniques but nothing will prepare you for the surprise with which most rockies come into range. Quickness of reaction and determination to select one bird as your target and another for the second barrel, irrespective of the outcome of the first, are paramount.

And you thought you knew something about leading the bird? Well, double it. A rockie can scythe through the air probably twice as fast as a clay target. And when you have brought a bird down, pick it up along with your empty cartridges. Don't leave anything in the field. Farmers don't have to give reasons for not inviting wingshooters back again and you don't want to be the yahoo who spoils it for everyone else, do you?

And finally, remember to thank your host and not to shoot more birds than your licence or sense of ethics permits, usually fourty per day. ▲