Illustration by CG Finch-Davies from *The Gamebirds and Waterfowl of South Africa* by Boyd Horsbrugh

Kelkiewyn

How to hunt sandgrouse

This article was written by Fanus Greyling for the new 'WINGSHOOTING' handbook. It was included in the book after substantial shortening, but the full-length article was so informative that it was decided to publish it here in full. It is written from the point of view of a professional hunter preparing a shoot for clients. Fanus has been there, done that, got the T-shirt... and the ulcers!

The two species of sandgrouse of concern to wingshooters in South Africa, and more specifically in the Northern Cape where most of the sandgrouse shooting action takes place, are the Namaqua Sandgrouse (*Pterocles namaqua*) and Burchell's sandgrouse (*Pterocles burchelli*). The other two species occurring in Southern Africa are the Doublebanded Sandgrouse (*P. bicinctus*) and the Yellowthroated Sandgrouse (*P. gutturalis*). The latter two do not even appear on the list of shootable species of birds of the Northern Cape.

General information

The shoot takes place around a waterhole, where the birds come in to drink during the mornings. This might not seem very ethical, but is the only viable way of utilising this excellent sporting bird. Experience and research have shown that, done correctly, shooting them in this manner has a negligible impact on the population and its well-being.

The Namaqua Sandgrouse habitat consists of areas with a stony and gravel soil surface in open desert and semi-desert areas like Bushmanland and the Karoo, while the Burchell's Sandgrouse favours more sandy areas and dry savanna like the Kalahari. The Kuruman area seems to be more or less the dividing line — the further west of Kuruman your shoot takes place, the more Namaqua Sandgrouse your day will deliver, while the further north-east of Kuruman you shoot, the more Burchell's Sandgrouse will show.

It is almost inevitable that both species will show up on the shoot, and as their shooting seasons differ, it is of vital importance to be able to distinguish between the two during flight. The shooting season for Namaqua Sandgrouse in the Northern Cape is 1 April to 15 July with a bag limit of 10 birds per gun. For Burchell's Sandgrouse it is 1 January to 31 March with a bag limit of 5.

Sandgrouse is the only bird known where the male bird's belly feathers act as a sponge, soaking up water which he then carries to his chicks and lets them suck from his feathers. A typical sign of breeding behaviour is when you see the male birds dipping their breasts into the water, an act known as "bellywetting". Nothing is more sickening than feeling a light spray of water coming down on you after you've shot a bird.

Normally Namaqua sandgrouse is the quarry, because their season falls within the "normal" shooting season. The Burchell's will be breeding when shooting the Namaquas. That is why your friends or clients and the butt assistants must also know the difference, or you must stop the shoot as soon as the first Burchell's sandgrouse shows (it goes without saying that you, as the organiser, at least, must be able to spot the difference). Bird shooters will understand. This is normally two-thirds into the two hours a sandgrouse shoot lasts. If you have done your homework, everybody should have had enough shooting by then anyway.

The Burchell's sandgrouse are a bit bigger, fly a bit slower and just make a soft "kek-kek" sound instead of the Namaqua's

Photos by Fanus Greyling

Burchell's sandgrouse

beautiful nasal "kelkiewyn". If you're lucky you can see the grey head and neck of the males. The best way, however, is to look for white flashes on the wings as they come in. This is difficult for the inexperienced sandgrouse shot, but it's the best way to distinguish between them in my opinion. Always remember that you are the one person chosen to stand between two small chicks in a desert environment and an agonising thirsty death. Do not let the lure of a bigger bag deter you from your stewardship.

Homework

The more time you spend in nature monitoring your bird population all year round, the sooner you will realise how little we actually know, and that sandgrouse do not read scientific journals. They are too busy surviving and adapting to nature's erratic ways in their desert home. For yourself or for a couple of good friends, checking on a good dependable waterhole the morning or even late afternoon before you want to shoot will do fine. If there are birds coming in during the afternoon, there will definitely be more coming in the next morning.

If you charge money, however, you have to be able to tell a client how many birds will come over his butt, how many shots he is likely to fire, how many birds he may kill, of which species. There may be fifteen guns on the day around a big waterhole with sufficient birds. All of them want that info. That means one thing — hours and hours for weeks on end spent around that waterhole checking flight lines, building butts, checking prevailing winds and counting, counting and counting. What effect do different environmental conditions have on the birds' behaviour? The most important thing is to know the number of birds you have. So much so that you must be able to realise it immediately if there is a 15 - 20 % drop in numbers one morning, which means they are shifting flight lines to another waterhole you don't know about, or something else has happened. Migration? Breeding setting in? A trough or dam has started to overflow somewhere? A thunderstorm during the night has created puddles? You had better find out quickly, because Murphy dictates that this normally happens two or three days before a shoot. People think you work hard during a shooting day and you are a little over-paid. The work on a shooting day is nothing. It's a pleasure. I enjoy the day of the shoot even more than the clients, because then I know that the hard, strenuous, boring work for the two months before this day is over. You don't get paid for a day's work. You get paid for two to three months of intensive preparation and for a year-round monitoring of your birds. That is if you do it for the love of the bird and the sport, and not for a quick buck.

Butts

A good shoot needs butts. Proper butts, numbered, dug into the rock plates of the Northern Cape by hand, or built from natural vegetation; built at least three weeks before the shoot so the birds can get used to it. Sandgrouse are not as sensitive to human sightings as other gamebirds, so building your butt in the open will not deter the birds from flying over it. A bush to stand behind will do only for yourself and a few friends you know very well, especially as far as their safety manners are concerned.

Butts look more professional, but their real function is simply to create order and safety in the heat of the action. The most experienced guns sometimes get carried away on a decent sandgrouse shoot. Build them higher than the normal shoulder height; say neck height to keep the guns from shooting low. Be sure it is big enough for one to open and reload a gun in it. It must also be able to contain the following all-necessary requirements if you charge money for your birds: a client with a gun; a small folding table in front of him to keep his extra ammo, camera and belongings

->

out of the sand; a chair to sit on if he has bagged out, and his friends not, or for the spouses to sit on should they decide to join the guns that day; a butt assistant, sometimes two, each with two bags — one for empty shells, and one for the birds he must run for and pick. A square or a circle with a diameter of 1,5 - 2 metres usually does it for me.

If you have done your homework, you will know the prevailing wind direction. And you will have seen that the birds come in to land against the wind. That is where you put the guns if you have only two or three, or the leading client if you have a big group and they don't want to draw butt numbers like they're supposed to. Space the butts about 40 to 50 metres apart, depending on the size of your waterhole. Build a few extra butts on other places in case the wind changes on the day of the shoot. Place the butts anything from 50 to 100 metres from the waterhole. The rationale is to ensure that birds not shot still come in to drink, and that the birds are still high and wider spaced when flying over the guns, thus offering good, sporting shots and avoiding flock shooting. Time spent at the waterhole beforehand will dictate how far the butt should be from the water. It is more a gut feel than a black and white norm, as each waterhole differs in its characteristics.

The waterhole

It is vital to remember that sandgrouse habitat also has a certain carrying capacity for sandgrouse, just as any cattle farm can only carry a certain number of cattle. A given area can only sustain so many sandgrouse, some years more than others. It is determined by available water, legume seeds (their prime food), rainfall and subsequent breeding. The shooting during dry spells will be better.

When you see all the thousands of birds coming in, it doesn't mean there are so many birds. It means there is so little water.

Like all creatures in nature, dansgrouse are focused on energy saving. Although they can fly up to 80 km for water in a morning, they will not fly over available water to a "better" waterhole. They do, however, seem to favour natural pans over artificial waterholes. Before building an artificial waterhole a few kilometres from a dry pan, rather seal the bottom of the pan with bentonite and pump the water there. Pans are also usually devoid of vegetation and trees, which act as perching sites for raptors feeding on the sandgrouse.

It is no use putting in more waterholes in an effort to enlarge your population. You will only disperse the birds you have. One waterhole per 1,000 hectares is a good rule of thumb. Make your waterhole as natural as possible. Remember a sandgrouse's legs are only a few centimetres long. They land a couple of metres from the edge of the water, and walk in to drink. So if you use concrete, the concrete's edge must be below the ground level, with no edge. A concrete waterhole must have a very shallow increment to allow the birds to walk into the water, a radius of at least two metres and a ball valve to ensure a constant water level throughout the year and not only during the shooting season.

Do not build the waterhole on high ground, a hill or a dune, but rather in the valley below or 'street' between the dunes, in a clearing which allows for low incoming trajectories during windy days.

The shoot

A good sandgrouse shoot produces some of the highest adrenaline rushes and barrel temperatures in the shooting world. The shoot starts about an hour and a half after sunrise, determined more by rising temperature than by time, as you would have learnt when doing your homework. A little rain or dew during the night is not as bad as some people make it out to be. As long as the rain has stopped and puddles haven't formed from which they can drink closer to home, the birds will eventually arrive, albeit an hour or two late. Wonderful for stomach ulcers and smoking habits on a commercial shoot.

The shoot starts soon after the 'spotter' is over. The spotter is the first bird of the morning, flying high and straight over the waterhole, uttering the crystal-clear 'kelkiewyn' call that gave these birds their Afrikaans name. Sometimes you can't even see it. You just hear that melancholic sound from the crisp blue desert sky, and the first shiver runs down your spine. Soon afterwards they start arriving, flocks numbering hundreds, jinking and dashing over your butt. Fantastic sport; the stronger the wind, the better. In the briefing before the shoot, tell your clients or friends to steer clear of flock shooting. Pick a single bird to the side or to the end of the flock. Pick the front one and inevitably one, two or more from the middle of the flock will fall. This is good for establishing how much lead they in fact need, but very bad for bird wounding and human ethics.

A 20% yearly cull from a population is widely considered to be a good rule of thumb for sustainability. With consistently good homework you will not even reach 15%. But never shoot the same waterhole more than once a season, twice at the most with the shoots spaced at least 4 weeks apart. Only a lunatic will shoot the same waterhole twice on consecutive days.

Use number 6 shot. The number 7,5 clay cartridges commonly used are not good enough for a compact little bird with a skin which human fingers cannot tear, apart from wounding other non-target birds. The long-term average from my commercial sandgrouse shoots is 1: 5,5. Work out your ammunition budget based on that. With good homework you can also see to it that the ammunition runs out as soon as the Burchell's Sandgrouse start arriving. If you or your clients better the 1:5,5 average, make things a little more difficult by moving the butts further from the waterhole.

It is not about the killing, is it?

Conclusion

You've heard that there's money in this bird-shooting thing. So you've read up on the shooting seasons, counted the amount of weekends within them, done your calculations, placed your ad and ordered the new 4 x 4.

Go ahead. If greed makes you break the rules, within two years you will be there no more. That's one vital characteristic gamebirds and their pursuers share — they shall not be exploited. Δ