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8DOVEF001
2179016
8/53188(ch)
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008414

SYSTEM 1 202

SLUG: 8DOVEFST
JOB NO: 2179016
GALLEY NO: 1

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Call collect with corrections ASAP.

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PHOTO BY HANSON CARROLL

BY DATUS C. PROPER

ALIBIS

The only good thing about September is dove hunting. The world smells like compost, but with the first whiff of powder there is hope. Gunpowder does for rotten weather what pepper does for old meat: hides the flavor. Then, after the shooting, when you sit around plucking the first fluffy dove feathers and watching them drift over a green landscape, you notice that a dogwood leaf is trying to change color, the crows are flying somewhere in flocks, and a distant harvester is turning corn into silage.

We're all out of practice in September. Fortunately, doves are easy to hit. This will take some explaining, or you'll invite me to a dove hunt and then stand around laughing while I miss. We've all read about what fast, tricky targets doves are. Maybe so. We certainly use up a lot of shells shooting at them, but then there are a lot of doves to shoot at. (One thing they are indisputably good at is reproducing.) On the occasional good day, though, the first box of shells might get a dozen birds. For me there aren't many days that good with doves, but there aren't *any* times that good after the other gamebirds come in season.

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SLUG: 8DOVEFST
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Doves are moderately fast birds at which we take leisurely shots. Contrast them with woodcock, which are moderately slow but require fast work with a shotgun. The difference is trees. A bird drifting along in the sky is easier than one wriggling through the branches. If the bird happens to be a little careless, so much the better—and no one claims that the dove is a fast learner. His main trick is that he is smaller than he looks. That's true of all birds—as you know after plucking a few—but the dove carries the matter of feathers to excess. And since he looks bigger than he is, he also looks closer than he is. This struck me one day last September when I plucked a dozen and found that most had only one pellet of shot in them. None had been hit hard. There was one, in particular, that I was worrying about, because the bird came down to my first barrel, then flew up when I got close. The second barrel caught the dove at what seemed like a very close range, blowing out a billow of feathers. *Doveburger*, I feared. Wrong. The bird contained only three pellets of shot.

Birds with few shot in them were splendid for my wife's soup of doves, leeks, wild rice, and sherry. But what was good for the table was not as good for my ego. Could I have aimed so badly that I hit every bird on the fringe of my pattern? And if my shooting was that bad, why didn't I miss more doves completely? It just didn't seem to add up, so I preferred the alternative explanation: my shooting was great, but my pattern was full of holes.

And thus an alibi emerged.

Here it is: *I didn't miss that bird. It flew right through my pattern.* This could undeniably be true, in any given case. Most shot patterns have holes through which a dove could fly, except at the closest range. If most birds that fall to the gun contain only one or two pellets, then there must, on the odds, be others who get luckier and take no hits at all. But how often can the alibi be used? Can it explain why, on the bad days, a box of shells produces only six birds? Or four? Or a nice bowl of leek and wild rice soup without doves? What we need is facts.

judging from the number of pellet-holes covered by the silhouette,

BE IT noted that an alibi, when proven, is not some feeble excuse that a jury can disregard. It means that the defendant was elsewhere when the crime in question was committed. You see, therefore, that my defense is weighty—my shot pellets were elsewhere then a large number of birds flew through my pattern.

There is also the matter of flinching. I shoot 20 feet low when I start flinching. Mastering the flinch took years of practice and reverent concentration, but today you could say that my shoulder flinches itself.

According to some tests I've run using cardboard dove silhouettes placed on paper targets (30-inch circles) at which I fired 7½ shot through the modified barrel of my old 12-gauge, I shoot at a lot of doves that are 40 yards away. That's a surprise; I thought I was waiting for easier shots. Seems that birds crossing against a blue sky aren't as close as they look.

The silhouette tests also prove that I miss almost half the going-away doves at 40 yards, even if I aim perfectly, as, of course, I always do. All doves are small. Going-away doves are *very* small.

I think you will conclude that this is also a solid alibi. I think I will stop shooting at going-away doves unless they seem to be in BB-gun range. I think I will stop taking 40-yard shots at all doves—because doves that look 40, to me, are really 50. Or so.

A good alibi is not good hunting. Whether I blame my misses on the pattern or the aim, or the flinching, the responsibility still belongs to the guy who pulls the trigger. At least we've learned how doves got their reputation for being difficult targets: I shoot at them when I shouldn't, then try to blame the bird's supernatural speed.

Maybe you are better than me at guessing ranges. You probably have different kinds of guns, because mine was made in 1896. You don't use my handloads. You may prefer hunting mallards or quail or cassowaries. It doesn't matter, because the alibi test is easy enough to duplicate in half an hour for any bird, any range, any load. You save one average pattern, trace one average bird. Then carry on.

AFTER the alibi tests, when I got out dove hunting again, I used smaller shot at closer ranges. Seemed as if I did a little better. I would like to be more specific, but there was a . . . well, let's call it a variable that my demonstration had not taken into account.

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The hills were alive with the sound of music. Bluegrass music. Somebody had decided to hold a country arts, crafts, and music festival four fields away. From our higher ground, we could see the red-and-white-striped marquee under which the Travelin' Twangs were playing, and I'll say this for them: those folks had great amplifiers. We spread out—Bill Howard settling down where a dry run skirted an abandoned barn, Ben Schley fleeing to the cornfields farthest from the guitars, and me seeking refuge under a leafy oak at the top of the hill. It wasn't a bad day, for September—hardly over 90 in the shade, and with the humidity a point or two lower than you'd expect at the bottom of Dismal Swamp. The Twangs' laments drew bursts of applause from the audience and puffs of pollen from the ragweed. Doves rowed through the haze, and if they were unambitious, well, you'd be lazy too when the crickets are chirping faster than the banjo players.

Down at the festival, a fellow was roading his pointer in the field beside the parking lot. We didn't drop any doves within a quarter-mile of the marquee, but if we had, I'll bet he would have brought the birds to us—which is more than I'd expect from the average ballet audience during the last act of *Swan Lake*.

We hunters could have suggested some improvements in the day—starting with less amplification and more doves—but there was nowhere we'd actually have preferred to be, because we didn't know of anyplace else with any doves at all. Here we could at least watch them: doves zigging over the oaks and zagging over the Twangs, but not many doves zipping over us.

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Doves seem to have trouble remembering what party they were heading for when they got dressed up and left the roost. You try to find where a few of them are consistently wandering by mistake. Then you take a stand, hide, persuade your dog not to run in circles with his tongue hanging out, and try to wish the birds down. The first is the toughest. After that there is a sure-fire method. You start dressing (alias undressing) the dove. You pluck the whole bird, because wings and back add flavor to the soup. When each of your hands is covered by a layer of fluff a couple of inches deep, another dove will come over from behind and you can throw some feathers at him. You may not hit anything, but you have another alibi now, supported by statistics. Furthermore, another bird always comes along eventually.

And so does October. Thank goodness.

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E.D
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Dove article

one or 2 shots in each dove - usu. one - showing how critical pattern is. Give me 2 triggers. (Unless a Miller Single)

Doves + pressure: recall So. Pa.

They can be awfully stupid, but they can be chased off, + quickly. Suggest twice a week is max - maybe too much.

Spring: Thank goodness for something I can shoot at in Oct. Really want to hunt by then, even if it's a good fishing time, too. These days we can fish most/much of the year, ~~but hunting~~ + there's always something that's not spawning - but all game bred in spring, more or less, so there's very limited hunting we can do then (turkeys, Redbacks). Has to be a fall + winter sport. and in mid-Oct, Sept/Oct can be pretty dry except for doves.

Steel helps, but must be swivel - one leg. E.g., shooting chicken my colleague Spanish one.

- 1 open choke
- 1 tight.

flavor/recipes. Dove soup.

Doves are also easy. During season as a Shale, easiest I get - easier than pheasants, woodcock, grouse, & ducks. & I don't mind so much ~~if I~~ than I mind.

Easy because:

- good visibility against sky. Unlike snipe (forget I), other birds that go out low.
- NOT really fast, like some ducks or even partridge pheasants. Too much fatter & too little weight. (actually, I miss the slow one more.)
- One shot brings them down, thanks goodness.
- most important, you can pick the easy ones.

How to hit: point out & aim almost like a rifle.

- one choke for the easy ones: cyl or imp cyl. Modified makes it tough at close range.
- one for the ~~harder~~ ones. Don't use a cyl. then.
- 2 triggers, or Miller single.

equipt

- 3 -

- 2 chokes
- 2 triggers, w/ milder sample.
- steel w/ one bg. avoid fidgets
- clothes that won't flare them.

atmosphere:

- Humid smell
- Green leaves
- Shivering.
- Lifting in land here.
- Dog Shining + panting.
- Looking for corn! Birds in corn while others fly over.
- Country music?

close w/ receiver.