

Subscriber Field Notes

Candy and Codorniz in Mexico

Candy was a brown-eyed yellow lab. She rode expectantly in one of the dog cages on our quail rig, knowing that she would be released as soon as we needed her. The fields where we hunted were thick with what appeared to be bufflegass, a plant so dense when laid over, it was virtually impossible to find a wounded bird that hunkered down and hid in that foliage. That was when Candy was needed.

Once the pointers gave up looking, and once the hunters and dog handlers gave up looking, the whistle was sounded and Candy literally flew out of her cage headed to the spot where the codorniz was last seen. She ran aggressively, leaping over rocks and bounding high to be able to see in the tall grass. Upon reaching the handlers and being told to “*Hunnnt Deaaad*,” Candy’s nose started to work energetically. She would circle the spot, find a faint smell leading in another direction and follow it, zigging and zagging with no apparent purpose. Suddenly Candy stopped and stuck her nose under the thick, matted grass, lifting her head to move the grass aside, and with a sudden swoop forward she caught the hapless codorniz in her mouth and proudly brought it back to us. **It would have been impossible to find that bird, or many others we encountered on our three-day quail trip at Rancho Caracol, without Candy, the wonder-dog retriever. It was worth the price of the whole trip just to watch Candy work.**

John Sample, Mike Richardson and I started out for **Rancho Caracol** on Dec. 17, 2008, by flying John’s Bonanza from Dallas into Harlingen. The Rancho Caracol personnel were there to greet us and take our bags within minutes. Our

van pointed itself south with a cooler full of beer, water and soft drinks, and we headed across the border for our three-hour trip to **Tamaulipas**. The last



time I had been there was in 2004.

As usual when we arrived, a waiter was standing right outside the van door to hand us whatever drink we had ordered in advance. While our bags were being collected and sent to our rooms, we took a tour. A lot of major changes had taken place in the intervening four years: the pool was completely changed so that it now had a swim-up bar and a large hot tub that would accommodate at least eight people. A new wing across from the Lodge added three new, spacious rooms that held three beds each. A huge gunroom was new. It held about 60 guns, mostly Berettas, automatics and over/unders, sufficient that you could easily find one that fit you. Next door to the gun room were two new massage rooms; outside that area a large aboveground fire pit waited for the evening crowd and drinks and storytelling.

Perhaps the most startling change was the addition of a second story above the main lodge. That second story held

the bar, a pool table, a video shooting game, multiple TVs including one with a 120-inch screen, and it led out to an extension of the upstairs porch, which made a perfect dining location for the evening meals. The gift shop had been enlarged and took up most of the place where the old living room was. This lodge was, in my opinion, an A++ lodge when I visited four years ago; now it was clearly the definition of what a four-star lodge would look like.

After a hearty breakfast the first morning, we went to our quail rig waiting outside the front door before first light. We met our head guide, Jose Angel, and his two helpers, Humberto Roque and Ivan “Grasshopper” Barrientos. The pointers were in their cages, Candy sharing space with one of them. The drive was long — they always seem long the first morning — at one hour 15 minutes, but that was the longest drive we had the whole trip. Upon arriving at the ranch, we got out of the trucks, got our shotguns out and put them in holsters provided at the top of the rigs and let two pointers out to do their stuff, following along closely behind in thick grass. **Rainfall had been good earlier in the year, promising plenty of codorniz.** It was not long before the lead dog locked up, and the second dog honored the point and froze in its tracks. We quickly walked up to and through the dogs until the familiar whirring sound of feathers and wings trying to make their escape assaulted our ears. Each of our eyes strained to pick out one bird on each of our sides, and then shots rang out. **Four birds on the ground. A great start on what was to turn out to be another spectacular trip.**

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Place after place in the early morning with the dew on the ground and a misty low sky, the dogs would find covey after covey. For us, this was paradise: hunting all wild birds in places where we could expect eight to 12 birds per covey. The ground was occasionally thick with knee-high buffleggrass making walking difficult, but more often the ground was reasonably clear and the walking was not demanding.

We all wore snake protection. We did not need to test if it worked against a rattlesnake bite, but Jose did spot one rattler lurking in the weeds under a fence we were traveling by, and Jose decided to stop long enough to dispatch the four-foot long creature.

We broke for lunch at a quiet spot along a broad, clear river with tall trees providing plenty of shade for our after-lunch naps. Chacho came from the lodge and already had our steaks and K-bob meals on the grill when we arrived. Lounge chairs appeared from nowhere to make our napping more comfortable. But, this too, had to end and we had to get back to "work" finding the codorniz.

The afternoon sun dried out the grass and made it more difficult for the dogs to smell and do their job. At certain points it became obvious that the lack of moisture was making it impossible for the dogs to smell anything. At that point, Jose told Humberto and Grasshopper to get out and walk parallel to the truck on the other side of fencerows, using sticks to thrash at the brush and make noise. More often than not, they would spot the quail on the ground ahead of us and we would get out and flush the quail ourselves. If the quail were not spotted ahead of time, the walkers would flush them and then mark with their eyes where they set down so that we could follow. This is a great method of locating birds on a really hot day when the dogs could not be very effective. The day ended with 25 coveys having taken to the air, and we had 45 birds in our bag. Not the best of averages, I must admit, but we were the ones missing the shots and we had no one to blame but ourselves.

Each day was a repeat of the first. The drives from the lodge were shorter, and the number of coveys were fairly consistent with 26 coveys the second day and 21 on

the third. On the second day we asked Jose how many birds were the most he had seen taken on a single day hunt, and he said 60. We noted that we had taken 45 birds the first day and 50 the second day, so our goal on the third day was 61. Jose took the challenge, and we wasted no time getting after the birds, each of us hoping for improved shooting (although we were not doing so badly as it was).

When it was close to 5 p.m. on that last day, we had gone through a long dry spell and knew it was going to get dark before long. A covey was spotted on the ground and we got out and spread out behind them and started moving slowly forward, without any dogs. Here, the ground was covered in cactus, thorns seemed to be on every bush, and the going was very slow. I guess this worked to our advantage as one flushed on the right, headed high to the left right in front of me, and I dropped him. Whoever was on the right flank flushed another with an identical ending. A couple more were taken, one on the right and one in front of us. Miraculously, two more whizzed by going right to left and high, and I got them both. Jose said that the last one was number 61 and it was time to call it a day, a really good day!

It turns out that we counted wrong on that last day and actually shot 62 birds. More than enough for the 15 each we could take back to the States with us. We calculated that we each shot between 2 and 2 1/2 boxes of shells each day.

Three days was just enough for this trip. It was cold and windy back in Dallas this week before Christmas, and we were enjoying 80-plus degree weather. We saw great countryside, a red fox, some javelina, a group of 18 turkeys, one possum and a coyote.

The cost per hunter was \$3,495 for four nights/six shoots.

I have said many times that I think **Rancho Caracol is the best quail hunting operation in the world**, and once again Rancho Caracol fulfilled all my expectations. Try it, you will love it! And you will fall in love with Candy who is sure to find your lost codorniz.

For more information: **www.rancho-caracol.com**.

—Curt Frisbie



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