



CAMP TALK

Candy and Codorniz in Mexico
By: Curt Frisbie

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 buffleggrass, a plant so dense and thick 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 "Huuunt De-ad" 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 December 17, 2008. We left Dallas on a grey and cold day with low overcast. The flight was pleasant in John's Bonanza while we were at 10,000 feet and high above the clouds. The weather reports were indicating a fairly low ceiling at Harlingen but nothing to worry about. That situation changed rapidly as we neared Harlingen and received reports of less than 300 foot ceilings. John wrote 230 in white chalk on his altimeter to remind himself that Harlingen was 230 feet above sea level and so he could read the altimeter correctly. We started down and nothing was visible outside the plane except the wings as we passed 1000' --then 500' --then 400' --then 300' --then 250' --then 200' --then 150 and---finally---we could barely see the highway and some telephone or power lines through the mist at 120' but, more importantly, we were relieved to see we were on a perfect course and could see the runway lights directly ahead. John put the plane down smoothly, and we were all glad to have our feet on the ground.

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 while disembarking 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 8 people. A new wing across from the Lodge added three new, spacious room housing three beds each. A huge gun room was new. It held about 60 guns, mostly Beretta's, automatics and over/unders, sufficient that you could easily find one that "fitted" you. Next door to the gun room were two new massage rooms, and outside that area a large above-ground fire pit waited for the evening crowd and drinks and story-telling.

Perhaps the most startling change was to add a second story above the main Lodge. That second story held the bar, a pool table, a video shooting game, multiple TV screens with one being 120", and it led out to an extension of the upstairs porch which made a perfect dining location for the evening meals. The gift shop was 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 4-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 1 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.

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 8 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, John and I using our Turtleskin chaps and Mike having a different brand. This Turtleskin is tough stuff, as I never felt a single thorn or cactus penetration. We did not need to test if they worked against a rattlesnake bite but Jose did spot one rattler lurking in the weeds under a fence we were travelling 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 fence rows, 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 real hot day when the dogs could not be very effective. The day ended with 25 coveys haven 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 (one hour the second day, 45 minutes the third day), 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 bad as it was). When it was close to 5:00 PM 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, and 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 of 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 real 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. Three days was just enough for this trip. We saw great countryside, a red fox, some javalina, a group of 18 turkeys, one possum, and a coyote. We calculated that we each shot between 2 and 2 ½ boxes of shells each day. It was cold and windy back in Dallas this week right before Christmas and we were enjoying 80 plus degree weather. 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. If you want to go on this trip go to www.ranhocaracol.com for information and you can sign up on-line. The cost was \$3495 for 4 nights/6 shoots. Try it, you will love it! And you will fall in love with Candy who is sure to find your lost codorniz.