

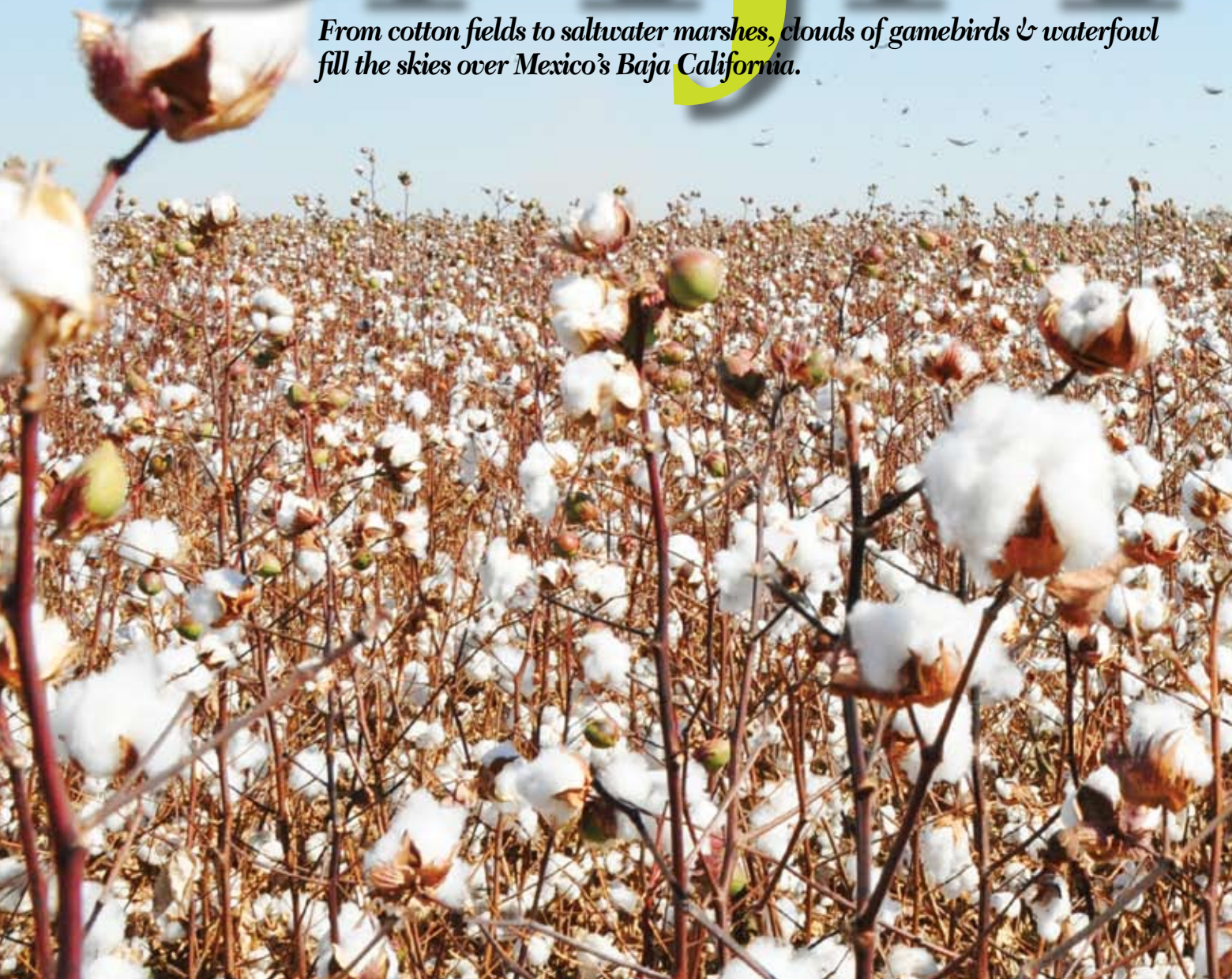
DATA

Hey-oh!

Best of the

by Gayne C. Young

From cotton fields to saltwater marshes, clouds of gamebirds & waterfowl fill the skies over Mexico's Baja California.



Gallo! Gallo! Oh! Hey-oh!

The cries were muffled at first, muted by distance and the thickness of the shoulder-high vegetation. Sweat beaded along my forehead and snailed down the back of my neck and back. My grip tightened on the shotgun while my finger tapped nervously on the trigger guard.

“Gallo! Hey-oh! Gallo! Gallo!”

The shouting grew louder and louder and was joined by piercing whistles, catcalls and the sounds of snapping stalks and swishing leaves. Flashes of fluorescent orange and sun-dried skin jerked and bobbed below the uneven landscape of green, yellow and umber. Soon I could see bright red pieces of cloth waving and sword-like sticks slicing the air as the din grew louder and louder.

“HEY-OH! GALLO! GALLO! OH! HEY-OH-AH!”

Gorillas with nets are gonna bust out of that field. I'm on The Planet of the Apes and the “damn dirty apes” are coming to get me.

Suddenly the field before me exploded as 30 pheasants vaulted from the thick milo. The air thundered with the claps of guns firing, men screaming and cheering, and dogs tearing through the crops in hot pursuit.

When the heavy valley air settled, the boys gathered up 20 pheasants and laid them breast to breast in celebration of our shoot. Head bird boy Carlos slapped my shoulder, grinned from ear to ear and gestured at the birds. *“Not bad, no? Many gallos. Muy buenos faisánes.”*

Very good pheasants indeed.



Located just below the California border in the state of Baja California Norte, the Mexicali Valley is blessed with an abundance of deep river sediment that's ideal for growing milo, cotton, asparagus, barley, wheat and green onions. This extremely fine dirt, known locally as *limo*, was of little agricultural use until the 1920s when the American owned Colorado River Land Company purchased vast tracts, and employing Chinese immigrant labor, dug an intricate series of canals.

In addition to their strong work ethic, the Chinese brought a great many pheasants, which they released in the fields as a food source. Thanks to a temperate climate and a wealth of food and cover, the birds flourished to such an extent that today's liberal harvest quotas hardly put a dent in the population.

I first learned of what some maintain is North America's best pheasant hunting (Yes, some sportsmen find the shooting in Mexicali better than that in South Dakota!) when outfitter Baja Hunting invited me to join Mark Buchanan, Richard Sanders and Joe Smithson on a four-day hunt. Mark's Big Bore Productions was filming a bird-hunting DVD and I couldn't pass up the chance of missing easy shots on film.

After a short drive from San Diego, we arrived at Arturo V. Malo's beautiful lodge on the outskirts of the capital city of Mexicali. The walled, hacienda-style lodge has 12 bedrooms, a large courtyard, outdoor cooking and dining areas, and a well-appointed bar, all much appreciated after a long day afield.

The best hunting takes place in milo and cotton fields, though overgrown asparagus and wheat also hold birds. Each hunt begins with the bird boys positioned across one end of the field and the shooter stationed along the sides and at the opposite end. A good field can harbor between 70 and 100 birds, all of them wild.

But pheasants aren't the only animals flushed from the fields. In my two days of hunting I saw hawks, owls and other birds shoot skyward as well as two coyotes that had hunkered down in the tunnel-like rows between plants. One field even produced what would become my name for the rest of the hunt.

On our second morning the bird boys were pushing through a stand of tall milo, calling for roosters as they went. "Hey-oh! Gallos! Gallos! Come gallos!"

When the birds were flushed, the boys would call out the sex – *gallos* for roosters, *gallina* for hens – to let



hunters know whether or not to shoot. In the middle of one large flock, a white cat raced away 20 yards from me. My scream echoed over all the other calls.

“Gallo! Gallo! No shoot gallina!” one of the boys cried out.

“No shoot! Gallina!” another yelled.

“Gato blanco!” I shrieked in surprise.

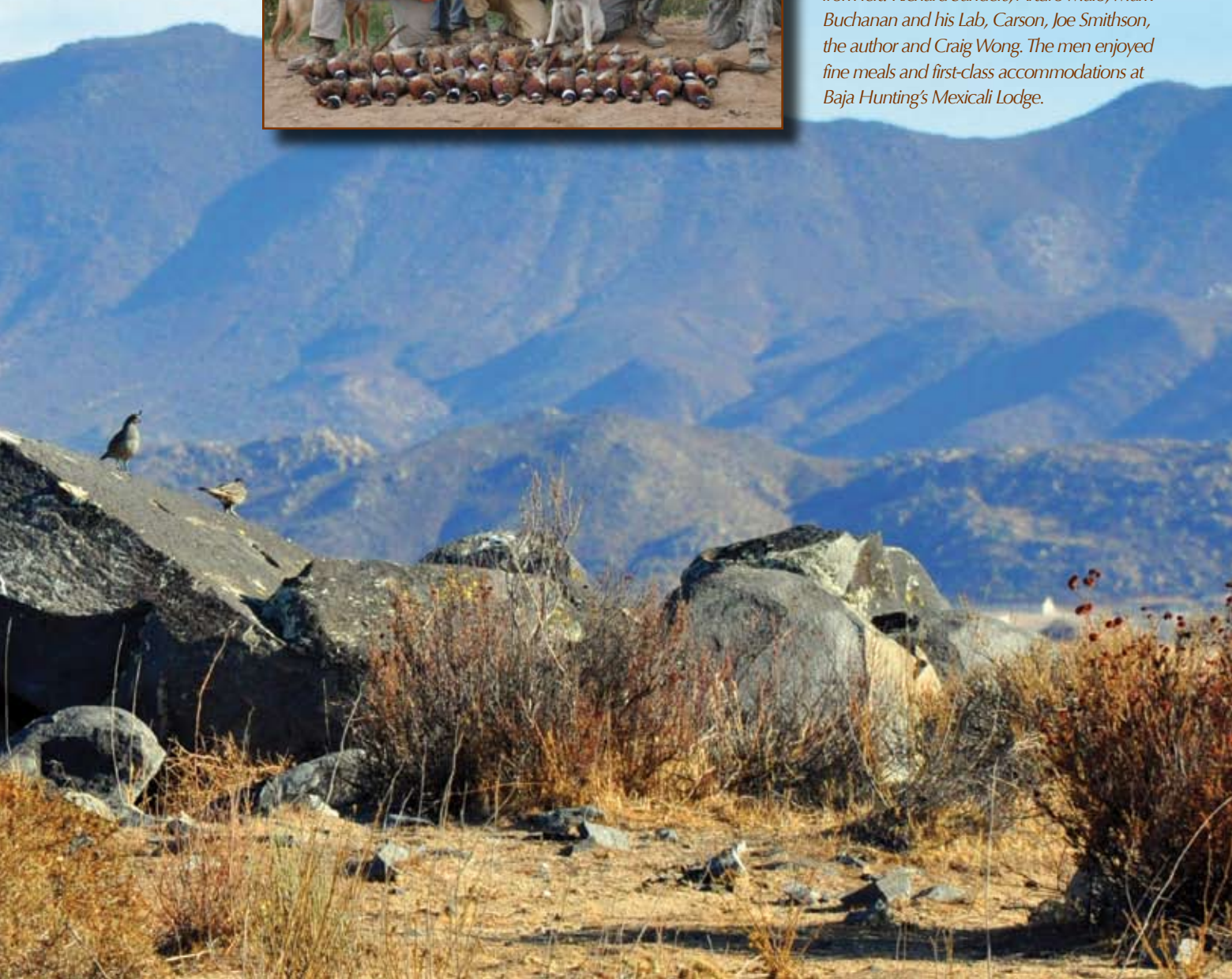
The bird boys howled with laughter at what I thought was a helpful identification. And for the next four days I was referred to as *Gato blanco*.

If pheasant hunting is the Mexicali Valley’s premier shooting sport, then dove hunting is a close second.

Both mourning and whitewing doves are found in huge flocks that from a distance resemble swarms



On their Baja expedition, the hunters experienced superb gunning for pheasants in the Mexicali Valley and then for quail in the sere scablands of the Ojos Negros Valley. With their morning's bag of ringnecks are, from left: Richard Sanders, Arturo Malo, Mark Buchanan and his Lab, Carson, Joe Smithson, the author and Craig Wong. The men enjoyed fine meals and first-class accommodations at Baja Hunting's Mexicali Lodge.





For our next hunt we traveled west over coastal mountains and into the Ojos Negros Valley. Meaning “black eyes” in English, this fertile valley is home to barley fields, vineyards, yucca plantations and more importantly, California, Gambel and mountain quail. A section of the world-famous Baja 1000 racecourse cuts through the valley, which is apropos given just how fast the *codorniz* can fly.

A typical quail hunt begins along the mountain ridges of the valley where rocks the size of V.W. Bugs litter the ground among clumps of sage, barrel cactus and cat’s claw. This scabland is difficult to traverse, but the bird boys made it look easy, running before the hunters to flush coveys as large as 200 birds.

of insects. Hunting is usually over freshly cut crops or along flight paths to water. Depending on your location, and luck, shots can be painfully sporadic or barrel-melting fast. The bird boys, it should be noted, are quick to move hunters to the best spots.

During an evening hunt over cut milo, my shooting was so slow that I quit in favor of a few cold *cerveza Tecâtes* back at the lodge’s Suburban. Yet on the opposite side of the field, Mark was so bombarded by birds that he had to give up because of a sore shoulder. Either that or he wanted to have a beer too.

Sergio’s decoy spreads brought in flock after flock of black brant that winter in Mexico’s San Quintin Bay.

Our first covey numbered between 60 and 80 birds, a grayish-black cloud that thundered away so quickly that all we could do was watch in awe as they flew out of range. Of course, the bird boys were used to these grandiose sights and were able to spot where the covey landed.

Once a hill has been covered or the birds have split into coveys too small for the bird boys’ liking, the hunting moves to the valley floor. Here, the granite boulders give way to clumps of matted brush or cut fields, but the shooting is just as fast and furious.

On our last afternoon we saw covey after covey, each numbering between 5 and 30 birds. This was the first quail hunt I’d ever been on where the hunters wore out before the birds did. And with such liberal limits (15 per day), it was an easy thing to do.



The combination of a huge flock and fast action continued at our next location when we traveled to San Quintin Bay for black brant. Originally declared *The Bahía de las 11,000 Virgenes* (The Bay of 11,000 Virgins) by Spanish explorers in 1542, San Quintin Bay actually consists of three bays – Bahía Falso, Bahía Santa María and Bahía San Quintin. One of the largest protected bays on the coast of Mexico’s Baja Peninsula, its waters are considered some of the purist on earth, a fact that worldwide connoisseurs of the locally farmed *Crassostrea gigas* oysters would attest to.

Each winter the bay’s vast beds of eel grass draw an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 Pacific black brant down from their nesting grounds in Alaska, the Yukon and Russia. Its placid waters also beckon widgeons, teal, pintails and various species of divers.

On this hunt, but Mark, Richard, Arturo and I were joined by Mike Cassidy of ESPN Outdoors/BASS. Mike, along with Arturo’s “brant team,” met us at the Old Mill Hotel, which sits directly on the bay.

Our hunt began with a gentle rap on my door at 5 a.m. followed by a quick breakfast of fresh tropical fruit. After that we settled into 16-foot *pangas* for the short jaunt across the bay to where head guide Sergio and his bird boys constructed two blinds. I must admit I was a little apprehensive because I didn’t see how hastily stretched

camo netting over bent rebar would make a decent blind, but I figured the boys knew what they were doing.

They certainly did.

At daybreak the first of many strings of brant appeared on the horizon. I had just pulled on my facemask when a lone brant streamed toward our decoys.

“Shoot it!” Mark yelled.

I threw my borrowed Beretta 12 gauge to my shoulder and tugged the trigger. Before I knew it, Carson, Mark’s yellow lab, was splashing through the water toward her first retrieve of the day. When she returned, Mark took the brant from her mouth and nodded his approval.

“You think you can get nine more?” he jokingly challenged.

“Give it the ol’ college try,” I responded, sliding back into position.

Mark followed, then badgered, “What kind of grades ya’ get in college?”

“Ok, I’ll give it more than the college try,” I laughed.

In no time the sky was filled with birds. Not just brant but pelicans, gulls, curlews and flocks of teal, widgeon and pintails that passed just out of range. But it was the brant that owned the sky. Great clouds of birds billowed up in every direction, some jetting straight toward us, others winging behind us or off to the side. They seemed to be everywhere.

At 9:30 our hunt came to a temporary stay when Sergio and his assistant returned. They immediately gave us a hard time for only getting half our limit in two hours and insisted on taking us to another blind where Sergio promised we’d see twice as many birds. I found that hard to believe but again put faith in my guide.



Our next blind was a weathered stand of brown, cardboard-stiff palmetto leaves just a few inlets away from the hotel. It even had a name: *tules de viejo Molino*, or “bulrush at Old Mill.” And just as Sergio had promised, I saw more birds sitting behind those rotted leaves than I’d ever seen before – or since. Storm clouds of ebony feathers blurred the sky, dropping and dipping into our decoys, then punching quick retreats as we opened fire. It was during this assault that I got my first triple, two of which were banded.

“Never seen a red band,” Mark commented after Carson had retrieved my birds. “Wonder if Sergio has.”

“You get red!” he proclaimed in his broken English. “It Russia. I no see red eight years.”

Back at the hotel over a few late-morning beers, I humorously tried to play up my red-band feat. “Yeah Sergio, I saw that red band dangling from the bird’s leg and knew he was something special.”

Not one to give any slack, Sergio responded, “That why you miss them all before he come?”

Touché, Sergio.

At nightfall Sergio and the other guides grilled brant, fresh fish and dozens of oysters. We gorged ourselves on the best of Mexico and wondered aloud how the next day could be any better. Mike, Richard and Arturo boasted that they doubted it as they had limited out by 9:30 a.m. Hearing this, Sergio rubbed more salt in the wound by proclaiming that the three of them had “Shot more better” than Mark and I.

Touché again Sergio.

The next day was different, though it’s hard to say if it was better. A cold front had pushed in during the night, bringing with it temperatures in the low 50s and a slight drizzle. As Mark and I settled into our blind, the high tide brought an array of visitors that none of us had seen the day before. A small pod of gray whales suddenly appeared no more than 50 feet from our blind, breaching to expel geysers of spray into the misty air. Beyond them came seals, referred to by local fishermen as sea wolves, or *lobos*, for their propensity to steal fish, bobbing in the water as they spy-glassed for danger or food.

Concentrating on this impressive show of marine life, Mark and I almost didn’t notice the first plump brant that charged into our spread. This flock was followed by another and another and yet another until, less than two hours after we’d arrived, each of us had our ten-bird limit. After a brief photo session, we radioed Sergio that our hunt had come to a close. He arrived a few moments later with some late-morning burritos and a mouth full of josh.

“What take so long? Your friends finish hour ago.”

“Just enjoying the hunt,” I responded only half-joking. “Just enjoying the hunt.”

Even after just one visit, it was easy to see why San Quintin Bay is a brant hunter’s paradise. Generally warm weather, friendly people and an abundance of birds altogether make it a truly special destination.



IF YOU WANT TO GO

Is Mexico safe? I had to laugh when a friend showed me a U.S. State Department travel warning issued on April 22nd that advised citizens to avoid certain areas of Mexico and not to drive at night. I laughed because this is sound advice concerning every country. It's sound advice even in the small town I live in.

Is there crime in Mexico? Absolutely. Drug cartels have turned some parts of the country into a war zone. Most of Mexico, however, is free from such violence. In fact, the warning advisory also included the following: "Resort areas and tourist destinations in Mexico generally do not see the levels of drug-related violence and crime reported in the border region and in areas along major trafficking routes."

The areas I hunted were considered safe and continue to be so. I have no qualms about returning to hunt there and have already made plans to do so this year.

The hunting seasons: Pheasant, from the last Sunday in October to the last Sunday of December; doves, the first Friday of September to the last Sunday of January; quail, the first Friday in October until the last Sunday in January.

For black brant in San Quintin, the season is from January until the end of February. Steel shot or other non-toxic ammunition must be used. Shells can be purchased from the outfitter.

Hunters can take their own shotguns or lease them from the outfitter. Baja Hunting has a big selection of Beretta shotguns. Visit bajahunting.com or call (866) 251-6405.

FIELD TEST

My pursuit of Baja birds took me from agricultural fields to thorn-laden desert to rock-strewn bayside. In between were three different lodges, various restaurants and quite a few bars. Despite this great diversity in terrain and conditions, I easily traversed all of it in a handsome pair of Russell Mocassin Turtleskin ThornArmor Safari PH boots. After breaking them in two weeks prior to my hunt (as Russell suggests), they proved to be one of the most comfortable boots I've ever worn. This, despite the fact that the entire foot (bottoms, sides, tops) is encased in Turtleskin, a sort of bulletproof vest material that keeps thorns and rocks out and provides superior ankle support. I'm not sure what a Vibram Huez sole is, but rest assured it makes for comfortable standing, walking and climbing.

