

Hot Fun with a shotgun

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Those who read the 50th edition of *Australian Hunter* will be aware of the Cobaw Private Game Reserve in Victoria for hunting released partridges and pheasants but there's another side to Cobaw - clay target shooting.

Settled amid the Cobaw State Forest lies a beautifully maintained property set aside for the discerning shotgun shooter, novice or corporate client, looking for fun with a shotgun. Run by Jon Thomas and wife

Cate, the sporting clays set-up is another example of the professionalism I've always found with Jon. On arrival the double iron gates open to reveal a magnificent setting hewn from the forest - two cottages, a hunting club and farm structures inhabit the area along with a variety of clay target ranges.

There's tower shooting with several towers set over an area where the 'pegs' or positions can be altered and targets changed to offer the most challenging shooting to be

found anywhere, each tower housing two automatic traps with huge hoppers which can throw targets all day.

The Cobaw Grouse Plate layout is also spectacular where serious shotgunners and beginners alike can enjoy a day of uninterrupted shooting whether over the tower ground, on the driven grouse ground or rabbit trap. Things can be made as difficult as possible to challenge shooters looking to hone their skills or targets can be set simple for the novice or corporate day shooter.



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The Cobaw Grouse Plate is a shotgun team event featuring a captain and three other members in each line-up, five teams shooting for the Grouse Plate trophy, a beautifully engraved silver serving plate the winning team retains for 12 months. To make this day even more challenging, teams are allocated 1000 cartridges which cover practice over the tower shoot layout before the serious competition grouse butts.

The fun of the day is that each shooter is appointed a loader, as with English tradition, so on completion of their two shots - or maybe after just one from a double-barrelled gun - the opened breech is presented to the loader who swiftly reloads the chambers in order for the shooting to proceed.

On the sound of a horn the fun begins as each shooter is presented with 25 targets, some missing their own while picking up those missed by other team members. Towards the end of the shoot it becomes apparent some have shot other shooter's targets or fired two shots to take one clay, and with cartridges limited to one shot per target, picking your clay becomes a skill in itself.

The ability and agility of the loaders is also a sight to behold. When I attended, the Danby team captain used two guns and it was a matter of having one fully loaded at all times to avoid missing any passing targets. It was amazing to watch Andrew Cameron handling both guns with complete safety and deftness.

Among the men was one lady shooter, Rochelle, who shot very well and pushed many of the men to their limits. Her husband Steve, although with another team, capably loaded for her as she busted clay after clay and it was entertaining to watch as loaders acted as a second pair of eyes to locate targets for the shooter they were assisting - all a great prelude to the main event.

The tower ground has an amazing layout, each tower having two automatic, hopper-fed traps at the top with targets remotely thrown by Jon using a pair of console panels. There were close targets missed - often while loading - and a few flying off unscathed but the fervent shooting by team members was riveting, ably assisted by their loaders.

After teams had shot from each of the four pegs alongside and between the

towers, there was a short break before heading to the grouse butts. Now came the moment of decision, the warm-up was over and the shooting would become a bit more serious. Every bird missed was counted by referees scouted from other teams, the counting precise and zealously recorded.

Teams had been named after prominent grouse grounds in England - Danby, Rosedale, Farndale, Bransdale and Snilesworth - and the whole day was typically English in conception while remaining uniquely Australian. Few chose to use a traditional side-by-side shotgun, Browning firearms prominent followed by Berettas with a few double guns, Andrew Cameron opting to use a beautiful matching set of Brownings he brought from Spain. Choked cylinder and cylinder in all barrels, they were ideal for both close shooting over the tower ground and the grouse plate.

The defending team led by Andrew were first to shoot. They faced two sessions straight, each being presented with 25 targets per shooter per visit, alternating grouse butts twice. After all teams had shot their two rounds, the final two alternating rounds would again find team members having shot from all four butts.

At the ready - the calm before the storm.



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The butts were excellent, built from layers of stone in a traditional manner with huge polythene hoops either side to restrict the shooting area and ensure safe conditions. Shooters were instructed to maintain the forward position in their butts but most shot from within the confining area to one side or slightly rearward for a split-second advantage.

Targets were driven from all angles across the face of the four butts and directly towards them, overhead. Most targets were presented no further than 10 to 15m from the butts but they were mid-targets and flew hard, as you'd expect with driven grouse. Some of them were loaded with flash powder and the spectacle when they broke was spectacular. Secret to the game was to keep your gun loaded at all times and ready to the mount, many shots akin to a station eight Skeet with targets speeding overhead.

The shooting was impressive, none more so than by Andrew Cameron as he swapped guns with his loader, ever ready for the next target. Some would fire one shot then

reload, whereas others would shoot two while reloading but Andrew simply changed guns with his loader as soon as a newly-loaded firearm was available.

Reflexive shooters who swiftly put up their gun from a near mounted position seemed to fare best as the flurry of targets was fast and furious, flash targets making it spectacular for onlookers. The black mid-targets were hard to pick up close to the traps but once overhead or to one side were there for the taking against the blue sky.

The toughest aspect was avoiding taking other shooters' targets as the number of cartridges was calculated to match the number of targets thrown, so if you kept hitting your opponents' targets as they passed between, you'd eventually be short of cartridges. It was a great clay target game, challenging the best of shooters and setting new standards for those working on their skills.

Shooting had begun at 10.30am and went on with brief interludes until 2.30pm and was followed by a formal dinner. On completion of the meal Jon Thomas gave

out the day's results judged on the number of targets missed by each team from 600 'birds' over the grouse butts. The Danby team retained the Cobaw Grouse Plate, missing just 74 targets and blitzing their nearest challengers by almost 30 targets, Cameron easily the top gun on the day.

Cobaw Sporting Clays run privately booked corporate and group days during the year and elite bookings throughout the week outside of their regular competition days and beginners can expect excellent tutoring from experienced coaches. The whole complex, immaculately kept and presented, is an indication of the thoroughness and enthusiasm with which Jon approaches the shooting sports.

So for a great day's sport where you'll have enormous fun with a shotgun - whether novice, corporate or enthusiast - Cobaw Sporting Clays fits the bill. I highly recommend a visit and reckon that once you've shot there you'll likely return. More at cobaw.com ●



Cobaw Sporting Clays owner Jon Thomas releases targets remotely from the tower range.



Andrew Cameron, second left, and his winning team with the Grouse Plate trophy.