



'Stuffer' David McNabb reloads Bill Swale's gun at the Cobaw Cup, a shooting competition held in central Victoria's Macedon Ranges.
RIGHT: Novice shooters are instructed at Cobaw Sporting.



ON TARGET

A LOVE FOR THE OUTDOORS INSPIRED AN ENGAGING AUSTRALIAN SPORTING EXPERIENCE, WHICH CATERERS FOR NOVICE SHOOTERS AND EXPERT SHOTS.

STORY + PHOTOS KATHY MEXTED

A SHRILL BLAST from the shoot master's whistle starts the annual team event, The Cobaw Cup, and four participants simultaneously shoulder their shotguns. The first flying targets pass overhead. The captain takes two fast-moving clays, a right and a left, while his teammates pivot, their sights aimed high, chasing the rest. The exertion of lifting and lowering the weapon to reload about 25 times in quick succession, while trying to keep up with the barrage of targets, certainly concentrates the mind and gets the adrenalin pumping, and the smell of burnt gunpowder blending with freshly cut grass creates a heady mix in the still morning air.

During this first drive hundreds of clay pigeons whirr by. Some are crossing, some high overhead and others sideways – each coursing unpredictably over its 100-metre journey. After each couple of shots the gun is broken open and spent cartridges are pumped out in a dramatic puff of smoke. An eager 'stuffer' stands at the shooter's side ready to replace them from a leather bag around his neck. This speed of cartridge replacement is both an art and an exercise in teamwork.

Sixteen traps, some of which are on four high towers, enable more than a dozen clay targets to be released in many

configurations. They are controlled using an electronic remote-release system and the aim of the exercise is for each team to hit as many targets as possible. Fifty metres behind the team are a couple of counters noting how many targets pass through untouched. The other four teams are watching from the sidelines. The team with the highest strike rate is the winner and by the third round there are friendly wagers being made about the outcome. Nearby, an experienced shooter claims this to be the best simulated target ground in Australia.

Cobaw Sporting has been operating for 10 years since Jon and Cate Thomas bought "Cobaw", a 283-hectare fine-wool Merino property in central Victoria. The Thomases continue to grow Merino wool and have regenerated the property into a healthy ecosystem, direct seeding over 130 kilometres of native trees, including wildlife corridors, and reconfiguring a quarry site into a wetland. About half the property is now under native vegetation and Jon says native birdlife has increased significantly and includes wedge-tailed eagles, hawks, ducks and owls. Horses, alpacas and geese add to the ambience and the pre-shoot safety briefing clearly considers them. It is a stunning environment.

Jon has been shooting since he was a child and was mentored



FROM TOP: Participants of the annual Cobaw Cup; a line-up of beautifully crafted firearms, some of them custom-made to fit the body of their owners; shooters take a tea-break, leaving the game to hang in preparation for plucking and gutting.



by his father, James, who designed Australia's first simulated field shooting ground near Ballarat, Vic, in the 1960s. Jon and Cate have five children, aged 16 to 25, who are also skilled in shooting sports and often return from school, university and work in the Northern Territory to take part in a shoot.

Participants range from newcomers seeking an introduction to the sport through to seasoned hunters, some who carry their own beautifully crafted sporting firearms that they've owned for many years and had fitted to them. A gun is made to fit a person's body, as one would commission a pair of custom-made boots. This is not lost on Dan Flynn, a master silversmith from Kyneton, Vic, who carefully admires the fine silver engraving of a running hare and a flying woodcock on a teammate's Italian custom-made Beretta.

Jon is a skilled facilitator with a ready smile, and at lunchtime he announces a winner and presents the trophy. The group, with wide-ranging backgrounds, mixes well and is indicative of the diversity of Cobaw guests, relaxing with a traditional post-shoot tonic of sloe gin and champagne. "We've hosted a wide variety of clients from corporate and pre-season hunting groups through to a 70-year-old's birthday," Cate says. "The birthday group travelled out in the one vehicle for a few hours shooting, then relaxed by the fire in the shoot room and sang happy birthday before returning home."

Clay target shooting was invented to simulate live quarry shooting for out-of-season practice, and while many clay target shooters never hunt, many hunters use clay targets to hone their skills.

Cobaw Sporting also offers seasonal live partridge shoots for experienced hunters and is a very different experience. The group of about a dozen convenes at a brisk 7am with pointing and flushing bird-dogs, live birds, gamekeepers and a whole lot of walking and stalking – on this day it was up a verdant valley littered with giant granite boulders.

In the bracken fern along a deep creek, the dogs sniff and scratch around before one of them goes on point, indicating he has found a bird. Everybody stops. Everything is silent. When the handler gives the word the Brittany Spaniel flushes out a partridge, and from a safe distance a hunter gets off one clear shot. On command, the dog retrieves the bird to the hand of the waiting gamekeeper. It's all in a day's work for the spaniel "Maurice" and by day's end each group member takes home about half a dozen birds and a sumptuous recipe for Wild Beauty, a Cobaw partridge specialty.

SHOOTING ON COBAW

Cobaw Sporting is located in central Victoria's Macedon Ranges. The company provides clay target shooting throughout the year, private tuition and group shooting. Partridge hunting is from April to September. Guided trips to North Yorkshire, UK, for pheasant and partridge hunting are usually taken in November and are booked 12 months in advance.

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