

Uruguay Hunt

Expedition for Birds with Benelli 828U

BY STEVE COMUS

South America is a storied destination for some of the best bird hunting on Planet Earth. If South America is a treasure chest of bird hunting opportunities, then Uruguay has to be a shining gem within that chest.

It had been several decades since I did much high volume bird shooting when I chanced upon an opportunity to join fellow scribes and a couple of industry folks on a birding safari in the area surrounding Young, Uruguay.

For those not familiar with Uruguay, much of it resembles the Great Plains of the United States or the steppes in Eastern Europe, with open fields, rolling hills and wide-open flatlands. We're talking industrial grade farming and ranching for both crops and beef. And with all that grain and all those grasses come swarms of wild birds, including doves, ducks and perdiz (a relatively small ground bird that is a bit larger than a quail, but smaller yet than a partridge). By any name, the perdiz offers some of the best white-meat table fare in all of Birddom.

The South American expedition was designed to afford SCI opportunities to check out Benelli's new 828U over/under shotgun. Mission accomplished. During the course of the trip, we had repeated opportunities to use the new guns in duck blinds, in upland fields and engaging clouds of doves on their way to roost.

The dove shooting, of course, was a hot-barrel, high volume proposition, while the perdiz hunting was in classic upland style over pointers. Duck hunting is duck hunting: Bang, bang, and there was a good variety of ducks in the bag each trip to the ponds. Suffice it to say that never was there a time when one felt at a loss for birds to engage.

Guns performed flawlessly, hunting was outstanding and the accommodations were as good or better than any others I have experienced anywhere in the world on any hunt – I was impressed. Let's take a look at the gun, next the hunting and then the accommodations.

The Gun

"Benelli doesn't copy designs," said Benelli's George Thompson, explaining that six years ago they started the over/under project. Benelli wanted to continue to grow, he explained. That's why they went with the over/under. They had looked at handguns and bolt rifles, but decided to go with the over/under.

Technically, the 28-inch-barrel guns used featured AA Grade satin walnut stocks and engraved nickel receivers. Overall length was 45.25 inches and nominal weight 6.6 pounds (depending on density of the wood in individual stocks). MSRP is \$2,999.

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Benelli's George Thompson checks out one of the ducks he bagged during the hunt.



Small bodies of water and a handful of decoys is all it took to bring ducks to the blind.

Diana Rupp swings on doves during one of the hot-barrel sessions. Shooting positions had pedestals for ammo and water, and bird retrievers were close at hand.

About the only thing that is really the same with the Benelli 828U and more traditional over/unders is the fact that the barrels stack up and down.

In use, the Benelli 828U is both simple and straightforward. It is a thoroughbred game gun, and it performed sterlingly when used in all three wingshooting disciplines.

Those who shoot instinctively will find this gun to be amazing. See the bird, move the gun to the bird, shoot the bird. The gun used moved quickly, yet smoothly.

When more technical shooting techniques were employed, the gun worked fine, but longer barrels and a little more weight would do wonders for such applications. Although none exist yet, there is talk about the future possibly including a target version of the 828 with longer barrels and steel rather than aluminum receiver – a technical shooting delight, no doubt.

Benelli has had great triggers in their pump and semi-auto shotguns. That reality continues with the 828U. Trigger pull weight, movement and let-off are all just right for effective shotgunning. That's nice. The 828U features strikers rather than hammers.

Form follows function, so some of the look of the 828U is a factor of what all can be done with it. For example, the rear of the receiver abuts the front of the stock similarly to a pump or auto. This allows Benelli to offer a series of shims that can be used to extend the length of pull, or to change cast and/or drop.

Here is where the QuadraFit stock comes into play. It is easy to adjust drop, cast, comb height and length of pull in just minutes.

There is a recoil reduction device built into the buttstock, known proprietarily as Progressive Comfort. It incorporates three sets of patented interlocking flexible buffers that absorb recoil at different stages dependent on the strength of the shotshell's load.

A close look at the inside and outside of the receiver also shows that this gun is anything but typical. For example, the lever used to open the barrels can be swapped so that the gun works correctly for either right or left-handed shooters.

The traditional linkages found in other over/unders that determine when the extractors should kick the empty shell out, or when they should merely push a still loaded shell up are not there. Rather, there is an ingenious system that uses a tiny plunger located about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way toward the front of the chamber that, under the pressure of a shot, sets the ejector to eject. Otherwise, the ejector is simply a mechanical extractor for unfired shells.

The 828U has a locking plate arrangement that keeps all of the force/pressure of the shots within the steel of the locking plate and the barrel monoblock. This means the aluminum receiver is not stressed when the shots go off.

Even the forend catch is different on the 828U. It features a plunger at the front of the wooden forend, but merely pushing the plunger in does not free the forend from the barrels. By squeezing the top of the forend and barrels together with

one hand, and then depressing the plunger, the forend pops off effortlessly.

Assembling the barrels to the receiver also calls for a slightly different series of movements than one encounters with more traditional over/unders.

This means pushing down and forward on the barrels simultaneously when assembling the gun. The barrels then slip over the trunnions and click into place smoothly and quickly. That's one procedure that was not instinctive for the author, but which became crystal clear, once the series of movements needed was understood.

Stock and forend design follow the function of a game gun. The forend is slim, and the combination of longitudinal groove with checkering result in something that both looks and feels right when the gun is shot.

The pistol grip has a tight enough curve to afford an authoritative hold. That shape also allows the gun to be used effectively by shooters with hands of significant difference in size. Because of the curve and other dimensions of the pistol grip, the gun can be controlled and the trigger can be engaged, regardless where on the curve the palm of the hand happens to fall. Checkering on the pistol grip enhances both the look and feel of the gun.

Like many game guns, the 828U comes with a mechanical tang safety that goes "On" when the opening lever is moved. By removing the trigger assembly, the shooter can remove one small piece, and the safety no longer goes "On" automatically.

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The Benelli 828U features a removable trigger mechanism – handy for cleaning. This gun has strikers rather than hammers.

Benelli's Progressive Comfort recoil reduction device incorporates three sets of patented interlocking flexible buffers.

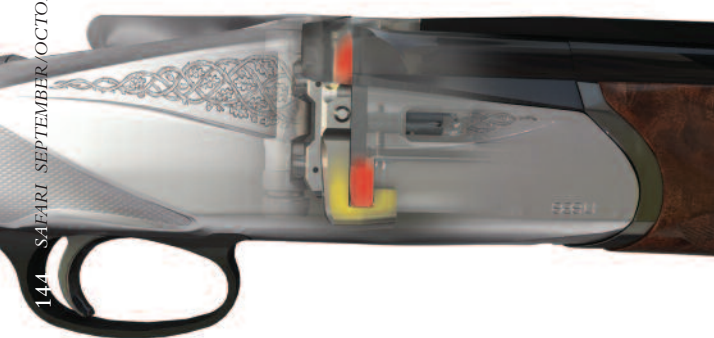




Andrew McKean shows some perdiz he took during the hunt.



The 828U has a locking plate arrangement that keeps all of the force/pressure within the steel of the locking plate and the monoblock.



Because the 828U has a removable trigger assembly, it is easy to clean and maintain the innards of the gun. That is really nice for a gun that is designed to be used in the elements.

Like many Italian over/unders, the barrel selector is a small slide within the mechanical safety button on the tang.

The manual safety can be engaged and disengaged with the thumb, and it goes from one position to the other with authority. However, I did note that when doing some high-volume shooting in the rain, the thumb tended to slip over the safety button when taking the gun off safe in a hurry. Wouldn't hurt for the button to be a bit higher, but that's not a big deal – just something that would be nice.

Like other Benellis, the 828U features a removable fiberglass ventilated rib. Such a rib allows for a savings in weight on the game gun, but it also means the shooter can change rib height, if needed.

I particularly liked the smooth outer surfaces of the barrels. Bluing is delicious, and they reflect a premium level of buffing to get to that point. Very impressive.

For most folks, the basic look of the receiver is “different.” I found that the more I studied the lines of the receiver as they appear in concert with the lines of the stock and forend, that the gun as a total package came together interestingly.

In addition to the basic design lines, there are the various surfaces with the various embellishments in the form of checking or engraving. None is atonal to another. Very interesting. Not traditional. But nice in its unique sort of way.

Even the barrels and interchangeable choke tubes are high tech. They are cryogenically treated (stress relieved via extreme cold). On the entire trip, I used only the improved cylinder and modified chokes for all hunting – they worked fine, so why bother changing?

The Hunting

Despite rainy weather the first two days, the hunt was outstanding in every way imaginable. Hunts, of course, were different for each of the three bird types pursued.

For us, doving was an afternoon affair, and it was classic in every respect. Hunters arranged at the edges of openings in the tree and thicket-covered bush were able to engage doves, both coming and going in waves.

It is possible to shoot at birds as fast as the gun can be loaded, and shot distances ranged from a few feet away to as far as a shooter wanted to take a shot. Definitely no lack of doves, even in the rain. This is a great place for high-volume doving.

Duck hunting was most enjoyable and done from blinds adjacent to small ponds and sloughs in major agricultural areas.

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Josh Ward swings on doves.



Uruguay Lodge is an 1890s country estate that exudes both style and grace.



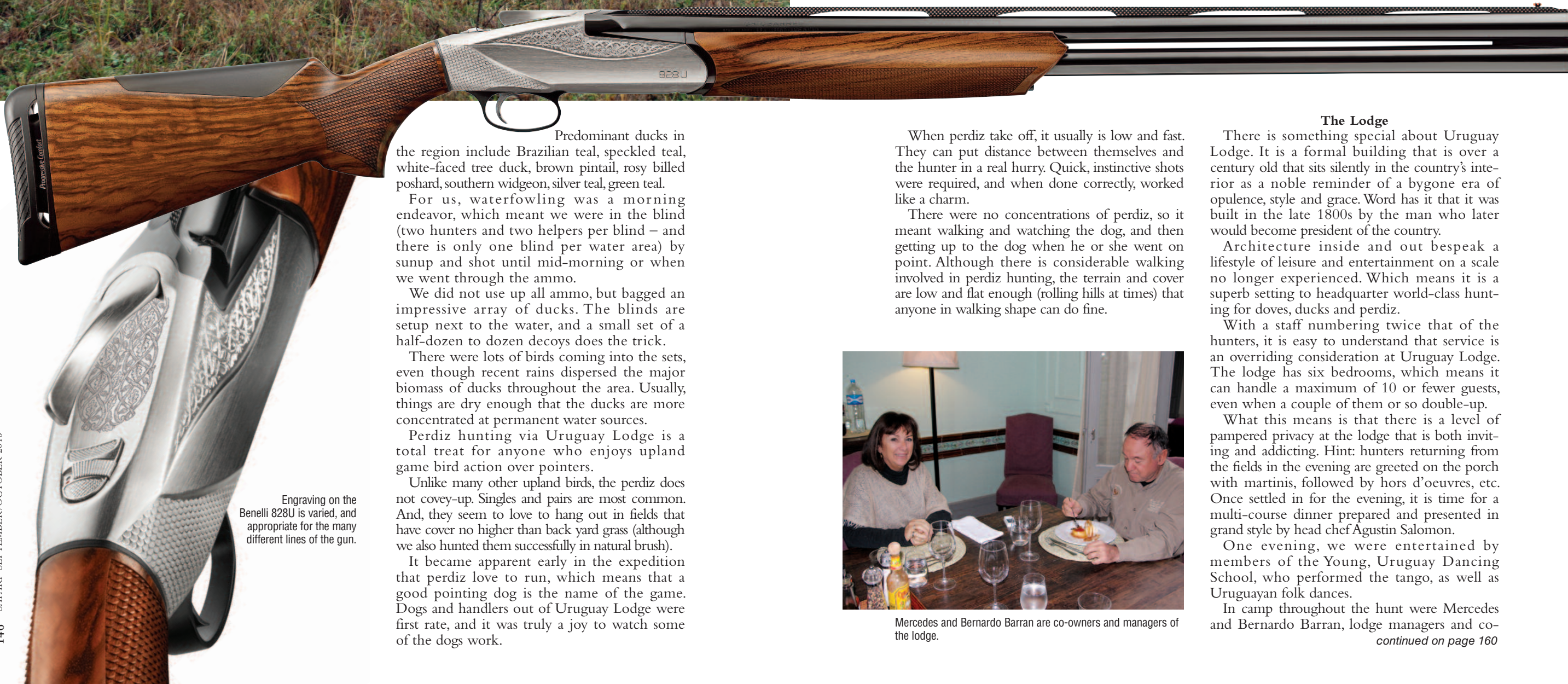
Perdiz hunting over pointers is both classic and a joy as the dogs work tirelessly over the open fields.



Head Chef Augustin Salomon prepared superb fare throughout the hunt.



Natalia Carolina Sanguinetti meets Fernando de las Carreras, right, and Santiago Garcia Seeber on the porch with Martinis as they arrive back from the hunt.



Engraving on the Benelli 828U is varied, and appropriate for the many different lines of the gun.

Predominant ducks in the region include Brazilian teal, speckled teal, white-faced tree duck, brown pintail, rosy billed poshard, southern widgeon, silver teal, green teal.

For us, waterfowling was a morning endeavor, which meant we were in the blind (two hunters and two helpers per blind – and there is only one blind per water area) by sunup and shot until mid-morning or when we went through the ammo.

We did not use up all ammo, but bagged an impressive array of ducks. The blinds are setup next to the water, and a small set of a half-dozen to dozen decoys does the trick.

There were lots of birds coming into the sets, even though recent rains dispersed the major biomass of ducks throughout the area. Usually, things are dry enough that the ducks are more concentrated at permanent water sources.

Perdiz hunting via Uruguay Lodge is a total treat for anyone who enjoys upland game bird action over pointers.

Unlike many other upland birds, the perdiz does not covey-up. Singles and pairs are most common. And, they seem to love to hang out in fields that have cover no higher than back yard grass (although we also hunted them successfully in natural brush).

It became apparent early in the expedition that perdiz love to run, which means that a good pointing dog is the name of the game. Dogs and handlers out of Uruguay Lodge were first rate, and it was truly a joy to watch some of the dogs work.

When perdiz take off, it usually is low and fast. They can put distance between themselves and the hunter in a real hurry. Quick, instinctive shots were required, and when done correctly, worked like a charm.

There were no concentrations of perdiz, so it meant walking and watching the dog, and then getting up to the dog when he or she went on point. Although there is considerable walking involved in perdiz hunting, the terrain and cover are low and flat enough (rolling hills at times) that anyone in walking shape can do fine.



Mercedes and Bernardo Barran are co-owners and managers of the lodge.

The Lodge

There is something special about Uruguay Lodge. It is a formal building that is over a century old that sits silently in the country's interior as a noble reminder of a bygone era of opulence, style and grace. Word has it that it was built in the late 1800s by the man who later would become president of the country.

Architecture inside and out bespeak a lifestyle of leisure and entertainment on a scale no longer experienced. Which means it is a superb setting to headquarter world-class hunting for doves, ducks and perdiz.

With a staff numbering twice that of the hunters, it is easy to understand that service is an overriding consideration at Uruguay Lodge. The lodge has six bedrooms, which means it can handle a maximum of 10 or fewer guests, even when a couple of them or so double-up.

What this means is that there is a level of pampered privacy at the lodge that is both inviting and addicting. Hint: hunters returning from the fields in the evening are greeted on the porch with martinis, followed by hors d'oeuvres, etc. Once settled in for the evening, it is time for a multi-course dinner prepared and presented in grand style by head chef Agustin Salomon.

One evening, we were entertained by members of the Young, Uruguay Dancing School, who performed the tango, as well as Uruguayan folk dances.

In camp throughout the hunt were Mercedes and Bernardo Barran, lodge managers and co-

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Author checks out a Brazilian teal during the hunt.

owners. They also have another hunting lodge in Uruguay and are most gracious hosts.

The Barrans are co-owners with a larger hunting and fishing conglomerate that includes David Denies Wingshooting (Argentina and Uruguay), Red Stag Patagonia (Argentina and Chile) and Marvelous Waters A Higher Form of Fishing (Argentina, Chile, Bahamas).

Also during the hunt, Fernando de las Carreras, CEO and Founder of the various hunting and fishing companies, and Santiago Garcia Seeber, sales and marketing director, stopped in to say hi. Great guys who offer an extremely wide variety of hunting and fishing opportunities. Their companies are represented each year at the SCI Convention. Check out their booths. 🐾



Phil Bourjaily wipes down his shotgun following a hunt as the camp terrier lends moral support.