

# Shotguns

By Robert Matthews

Poor, poor me. A writer's work is never done. For example, just last fall I was at home slaving away. I had just come in from a dove shoot and was cleaning a limit of birds destined to be summarily wrapped in bacon and tossed on my back porch grill. When the phone rang, I swished my hands under the faucet and picked up the phone to discover none other than our esteemed editor on the other end.

"Bob," says he, "Beretta is having a big shindig next month to announce something or other. It's supposed to be important. You want to go?"

"Where, pray tell, is this event, omniscient and omnipotent editor, says I . . . and what kind of shindig is this going to be?"

"Cut the crap, Matthews. The place is Cheyenne Ridge Signature Lodge in South Dakota. I hear that South Dakota is simply lousy with pheasants this year. Are you in or not?"

I have to confess that I didn't "quite exactly" know where Signature Lodge was, but I dearly love to hunt pheasants, and if the guys at Beretta had something big to announce, I certainly didn't want to miss it. I figured that I could work

*A writer's work is never done, especially when you're carrying a new Beretta and big, long-tailed roosters are boiling up all around you.*

it in between a Colorado elk trip and another bird hunt in Montana.

As it turned out, Cheyenne Ridge Signature Lodge perches on a small knoll overlooking Lake Oahe just north of Pierre. Right in the middle of South Dakota pheasant country. And the editor didn't lie about the birds. They had the best crop in years. The pheasants were there in near-pestilent numbers. Being the considerate guy that I am, I spent five days trying to alleviate their "pheasant problem." A writer's work is never done.

Beretta's news was indeed big. They were unveiling their new A400 Xplor autoloader, which ended up winning our Award of Excellence for shotguns. There was other big news, too. The lodge was slated to be the very first in Beretta's new Trident program. It was a Very Big Deal. And it should have been. Beretta has never done anything like this in its 400-year history. For a lodge to be approved is a compliment to the entire operation. To be the first is monumental.

Bob Edwards and the staff have really turned the place into something special. The lodge has been newly



*Ferry Allen needed a colorful cockbird for this still-life, and the photographer's old 16-gauge LeFever responded quickly and efficiently.*

S P O R T I N G C L A S S I C S

renovated, and it is as new and comfortable as you could want. The chef is my buddy Carl Hawkinson, and he made sure that every meal was nothing less than fabulous.

We hunted over flushing dogs most of the time, primarily labs and some springers from Craney Hill Kennels. All were superlative dogs, well-bred and well-trained. A couple of days we hunted with pointers, which worked out much better than I expected on hard-running pheasants. Photographer Terry Allen was with me, and between the birds and the clays range, we really put the A400 through the wringer. A writer's work, you know.

As for the hunting itself? The memory seems more like a series of "highlight clips" than a hunt. Birds were everywhere. Each day we would drive the standing corn with the labs and springers, popping away occasionally until things got "close" toward the end. When there was nowhere left to run, the big, long-tailed roosters would boil out in every direction and bedlam would ensue, with brightly hued, iridescent feathers filling the air.

One morning we took the springers and worked the side of a small snake-twisty creek. It was a little too wide and deep to cross, and as we thrashed the rough on the south side, many of the pheasants flushed wild into the standing corn to the north. We got plenty of shooting, but a lot of roosters got away.

That afternoon we circled around to the other side and drove the head-high corn with a whole crew of drivers and standers. The field was thick with the pheasants that we'd flushed across the creek that morning. I drew a spot near the edge of the corn where I could see a little better than some of the others. When three big roosters tried to circle around the corner, the A400 racked up its first "triple." Since I usually manage a double of one kind or another, it had been a very, very long time since I had pulled off that trick!

There were small highlights, too. One day I was talking to a couple of Beretta staffers after the evening drive. Neither they nor I had shot very well that day, and I mentioned

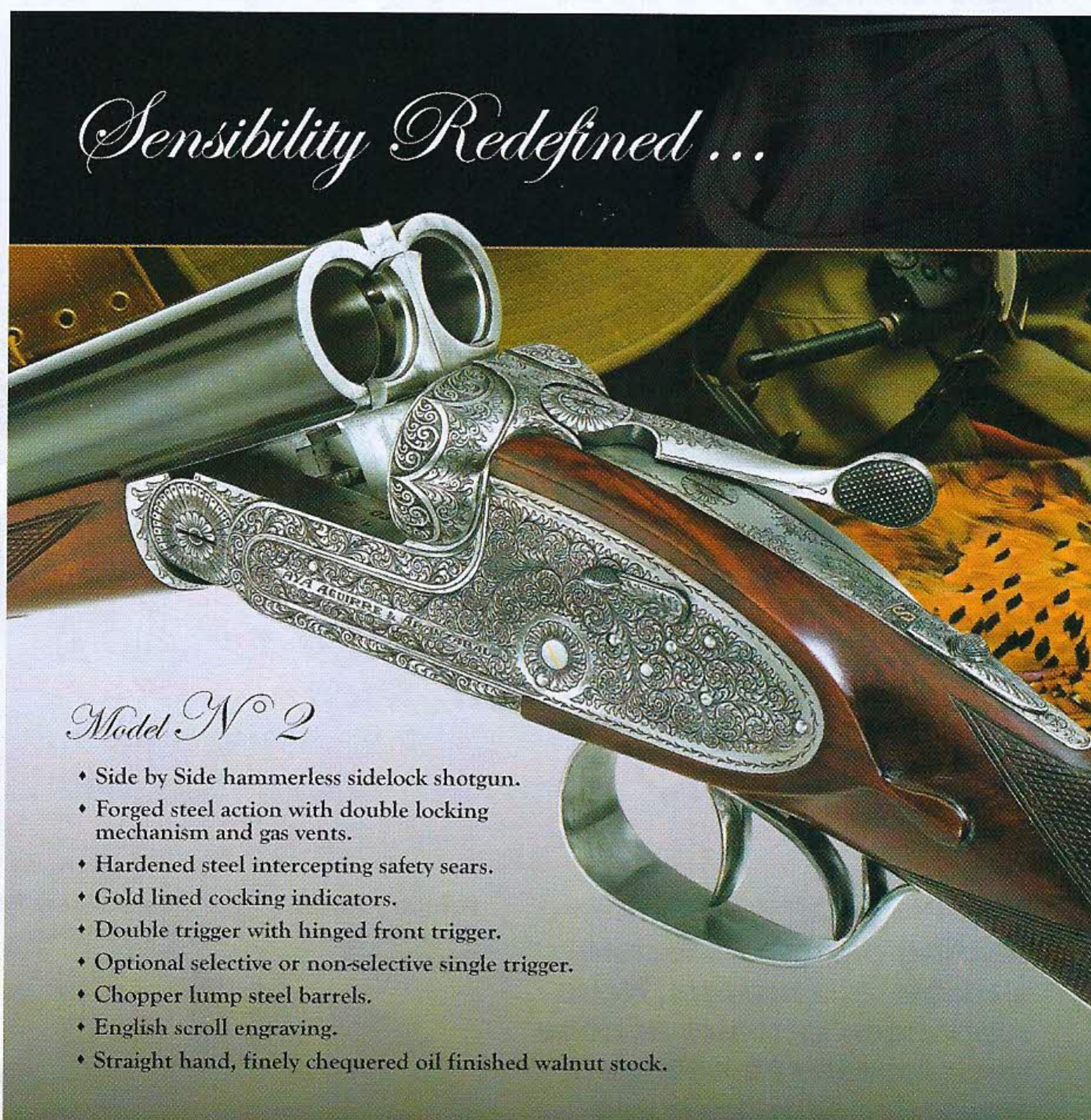
that the stock seemed a little high for me. One of them interjected, "You know it's adjustable for drop and cast, don't you? It comes with spacers and shims. You can make it fit."

About ten minutes later we all had a tad more drop and a tiny bit of cast-off. The next day, my shooting improved noticeably, and the Beretta guys had turned into real sharks. You should have seen the grins on their faces that evening! A "light bulb" had come on.

On another morning the cold air was totally still and clear as fine

crystal. The ground was whitewashed with frost. In the pre-dawn South Dakota was covered with glitter and tinsel. Terry and I decided we would skip the morning drive to ride around and take some pictures. For an accomplice, we took Denny Doyle who, along with Jonathan Sherrill, comprise Sporting Heritage Group, the architects of the event.

About 7:30 or so, we stumbled upon an abandoned farmhouse, complete with ramshackle barns and a rusty twisted-iron fence. Weeds



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grew waist-high all around and the shutters hung askew. Glowing in soft morning light, it was a classic piece of genuine Americana.

Behind the house was a damp slough, grown to weeds and willows, that ran about 50 yards into a field of recently cut corn. After taking some "nostalgia shots," Terry remembered the old 16-gauge LeFever double in the back seat of the truck. He scrambled around for a few minutes, propping the gun here and laying the gun there, trying to get some photos. Finally he muttered to himself, "What I really need is a pheasant."

Denny looked at me. I looked at Denny.

"You got any shells for that thing?"

"A couple."

"Wait here."

Denny shoved the gun and pair of shells in my direction and started out into the little slough. I grabbed the gun and circled around, stuffing shells into the old LeFever as I ran, and within the space of about 30 seconds I'd gotten ahead of Denny. In less time than it takes to tell, a half-dozen hens spewed out one end of the slough. At about 40 yards, it was a tad too far for comfort, but when two roosters brought up the rear, the LeFever did what good old doubles do. In no time at all there were two roosters flapping in the stubble.

Within a couple of minutes two grinning "adolescents" rounded the corner of the old farmhouse, each carrying a gleaming bronze prize and grinning from ear to ear. Terry just shook his head. Hung from the fencepost next to the little gun, they caught the morning light just perfectly!

As always, it was over far too soon. On our last night we mused over how much fun we had, and Bob Edwards insisted that I come back next year and do it again. Maybe we could even shoot some ducks over at Cheyenne Ridge's place on the North Platte. After a little arm-twisting, I allowed that if it meant that much to him, I just might be able to make time in my schedule. Just for him, of course. A writer's work is never done! Poor, poor me. ✨

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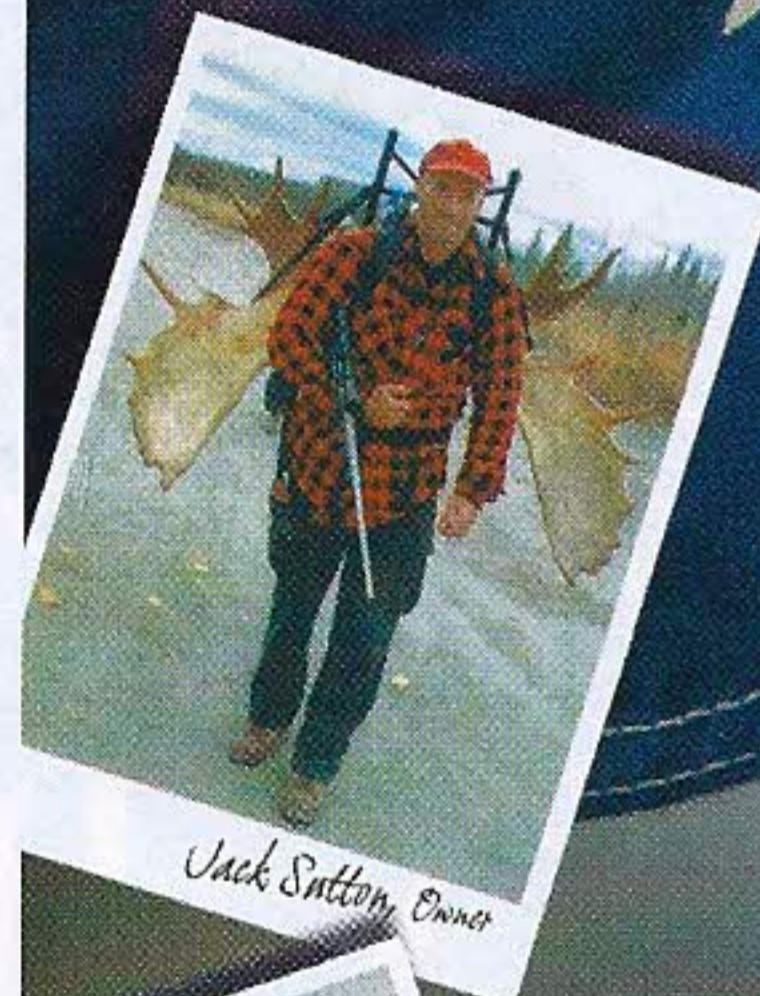


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