



Adam Harden, left, and his dad, Jerry Harden, experienced an epic father-son hunt for doves and pigeons in Argentina. PHOTO PROVIDED

Father-son outing takes pair to bird-rich fields of Argentina

Jerry Harden is fond of the old saying, "If you take your boy hunting, you'll never have to hunt for your boy."

"Someone told me that years ago and it's so true," Harden said. "For some it's golf and football, but for us it's been wing-shooting."

Harden's boy, Adam, is now 35 year old, married and the father of two young children.

Through the cycle of life — family, work, bills — Jerry and Adam make it a point to partake in a shared passion passed down from father to son: skeet and sporting clays shooting and regular excursions to hunt duck, geese and upland game birds.

But for the Hardens, members of the Williamson Conservation & Sporting Club, there remained a longing for an epic father-son adventure. Something they would remember for the rest of their lives and talk about over a beer while sharing stories with family and friends.

After much planning, saving and dreaming, Jerry and Adam experienced just such a trip last month, when they spent a week in Cordoba, Argentina, site of the greatest wingshooting on the planet for doves and pigeons. A place where the skies are literally black with millions of birds.

For many of us, priorities get shot down by life. But this Father's Day, memories of stealing time together are fresh for the Hardens. Because really, what else matters?

"My passion for wingshooting began by going duck hunting with my dad," said Jerry Harden, 62, who was raised in Ontario, Wayne County. "Nuts don't fall far from the tree and Adam picked it up from me. I taught

Leo Roth

SPORTS COLUMNIST

LROTH@DemocratandChronicle.com



him how to shoot — and then I taught him how to walk. This was a premium hunt, but to be able to take my kid and share it with him — well, that was the most enjoyable part."

Jerry first experienced the sheer awe of dove hunting in Argentina in 2008, hooking up with three Rochester-area hunters he met upon arriving in South America.

It was enjoyable hunting with new friends but after that, he swore he'd return with Adam. Thus began five years of saving up for the \$7,000-per-person trip, booked this time through famed outfitter David Denies (www.daviddenies.com), who has been guiding hunts for 30 years.

While Jerry tried to prepare his son for what it would be like, words, pictures and brochures can't do it justice.

"It was more than I expected," Adam Harden said. "There were points where there were so many birds in the air, you simply just stopped and watched. It was almost overwhelming."

There are an estimated 50 million Eared doves (cousin to our morning dove) in Cordoba province, where they are regarded as an agricultural pest. The Argentine government, Jerry Harden said he was told, used to poison the doves, which breed four times a year, for population control until a light bulb went off.

"They began to say, 'Hey, wait a minute, this is the best

wingshooting you'll ever do anywhere,' so they began setting up these hunts," Harden said. "The only way to compare it is that if you were a race car fanatic and you got to go to Daytona and Indianapolis — in the same day."

Imagine shooting down an average of more than 600 doves per day, where you need to wear gloves to protect against blisters and hot shotgun barrels. Hunters can bring their own shotguns, but many prefer to simply rent a quality Beretta or Benelli 12- or 20-gauge from the outfitter and save the wear and tear.

Adam Harden's one-day record for doves was an astounding 1,050 (out of about 1,400 shots). At 50 cents a shot, his shell bill that day came to \$700, which his dad happily paid.

"You couldn't wipe the smile off his face," Jerry Harden said proudly. "I told him, 'This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, I waited five years saving every nickel, so if you think you can shoot 1,000 birds in one day, I'll pay the shell bill.' And he did it. He's an excellent shot, better than I'll ever be on a good day."

The land is scrub brush and corn fields. Hunters sit in blinds with their lodge guide and field assistant and take aim at the swift Argentine doves that zip by at a distance of about 35 yards.

"They are pretty quick," Adam Harden said. "They're not very large in the hand and smaller than anything here in New York."

Two types of pigeons — including the large, swift Pica Zuro, a game bird on par with a pheasant or mallard duck — were hunted over decoys. What's it like to burn through

cases — not boxes — of shotgun shells?

"I was pretty tired, but more from actually lifting the gun than the recoil," Adam Harden said. "At the end of the day, you're just ready for dinner and to relax and to enjoy the scenery. That's where it's really nice. The accommodations were top notch."

Denies' portfolio of five-star lodges are where hunters are pampered after a long day in the blind. Here, the taste of steak and red wine takes on new meaning. All of this after a hearty breakfast and tasty barbecue lunch in the bush country, where afterwards "you are required to take a siesta," Jerry Harden said.

Over the years, Denies' wingshooting operation has helped build six community centers where more than 800 children are fed daily. A portion of the birds that are killed by hunters are processed and given to local missions and orphanages.

As ethical waterfowl hunters used to having a bag limit in New York, the Hardens learned to understand the vastly more liberal conservation standards in place in Argentina.

"With the population of birds being what it is, it's a problem and they realized they could make it into a business that benefits a lot of people," Adam said.

The Hardens are already talking about a return engagement, perhaps when Jerry retires. On last month's long flight to Argentina, Jerry Harden sat next to his son and entered in his hunting log book the words, "This is my dream hunt."

Then he put down his pen. No more words were necessary.