

JOSHUA CREEK RANCH A HUNTING DESTINATION

TOP DRAWER



STEVE KNIGHT

Outdoor Writer

BOERNE — Any day is a good day to be in the Texas Hill Country.

Walking along behind a bird dog as a quail rockets into the cloudless blue sky just makes it a little better.

The temperature was hovering around freezing when the first brace of dogs bolted from guide Joseph Kercheville's truck on Joshua Creek Ranch and started working the cover in what is known as the South Texas pasture. The ranch location, between San Antonio and Kerrville, isn't exactly in traditional quail country these days. But not to worry, Joshua Creek Ranch has spent the last two decades perfecting the art of shooting preserve hunting.

Purchased in 1987, Joe and Ann Kercheville began transforming the property from cedar-choked pastures and grass bur-infested farmland into what is now the second oldest continually operated shooting preserve in the state.

"We traveled all over hunting, and wondered why we couldn't do it here," Joe Kercheville said over dinner recently. "We incubated the idea for three years before we got it started."

From its beginning in 1990 during one of the state's great oil and real estate busts, and during an era in which wild quail could still easily be found across Texas, Joshua Creek Ranch has evolved into a Beretta Trident lodge, the hunting equivalent of a five-star facility. It is the only facility in Texas with the designation, and that badge of honor attracts hunters statewide as well as nationally and internationally.

Along with quail, pheasant and chukar hunting, Joshua Creek visitors can also shoot sporting clays, hunt axis and white-tailed deer, turkey or fish for rainbow trout during the winter months in the cypress-lined namesake creek that rambles through the ranch before flowing into the Guadalupe River on the north boundary. In the summer, the facilities are transformed into a youth outdoor adventure camp.

Jody Jackson, ranch marketing manager, and I spent an afternoon riding across the ranch's rolling terrain.

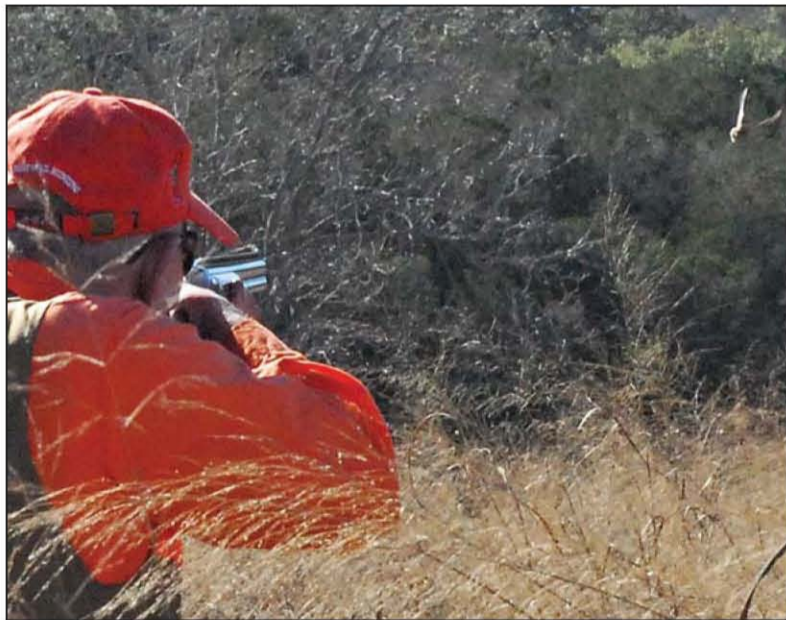
Just 50 minutes from San Antonio, its laid-back, rustic feel is light years removed from the big city hustle. The cypresses along the creek give way to white rock cliffs then hills of cedar and oaks.

The ranch is Texas typical Hill Country, and may look more like it did when German settlers first arrived in the area in the mid-1800s. Fields of wheat and grain are planted in the flat spots along the creek and river. The farmland is surrounded by the higher grass pastures in the rolling country. Instead of providing food for settlers and their livestock, everything on the ranch is now geared toward its wildlife.

Being winter, wild turkeys were bunched in groups of 10 and 20, scurrying from one feeder to another for a free meal. Spotted axis deer, almost non-existent when the Kerchevilles bought the ranch, are now the predominate deer species. While hunters account for many of the almost 200 axis taken each year, hunting guides also take the deer whenever possible for the venison that is featured in meals at



NATURAL COVER provides plenty of protection for upland birds from predators and hunters on Joshua Creek Ranch. The San Antonio-area facility has been named a Beretta Trident facility.



the ranch's Cyprus Lodge.

There are also white-tailed deer. Although in lesser numbers than years past, they still provide another hunting option.

Quail existed in the Edwards Plateau before cattle became king in Texas and fenced-in pastures were grazed down leaving no cover for the birds. Joshua Creek's management program has brought the cover back for the 40,000 or so quail released each year. Another 20,000 pheasant are release, about two-thirds of which are used for the ranch's popular driven hunts, a European-style shoot where hunters hunt from assigned stations.

Preparations for quail season actually begin in July when the first birds are released around the ranch.

"We don't put birds out when hunters come," Joe Kercheville explained.

"We have plenty of birds out there. We have birds that carry over during the summer. We know when populations are getting low and that is when we add more birds."

Good cover, both in the fields and in the trees, provides the birds protection from marauding hawks. A regular feeding program supplements native seed and years of development on the property has resulted in the construction of ponds and watering station.

The hunting season begins in October and with the Hill Country's weather can continue into March.

Joseph Kercheville, the owners' son, grew up with the ranch and is

one of eight guides that stay busy during the season.

He is confident we will see plenty of birds during a morning round.

Kercheville dropped one of his setters and my pointer on the ground along with Java, a grey English cocker spaniel who is assigned the duties of flushing and retrieving after the others go on point.

A recent three-inch rain and a stretch of days with morning temperatures starting around freezing helped scenting conditions. It wasn't long before the dogs were being pointing and birds were being flushed. As the wind increased the dog work just got better. We found the mother lode in the highest grass. A giant covey boiled out of the cover, and those birds that weren't downed and didn't fly the creek into the adjacent woods headed elsewhere into the field for more action.

Pen-reared birds may never equal wild birds for flight speed and covey rise action, but they are getting better.

And with the future of quail hunting in doubt, they are becoming an accepted option.

For more information on hunting Joshua Creek Ranch, visit their website at www.joshuacreek.com.

Have a comment or opinion on this story? Contact outdoor writer Steve Knight by email at outdoor@tylerpaper.com. Follow Steve Knight on Facebook at [TylerPaper Outdoors](https://www.facebook.com/TylerPaperOutdoors) and on Twitter @tyleroutdoor.



Cooking by the JCR game book

BY STEVE KNIGHT
outdoor@tylerpaper.com

BOERNE — A good meal should be a mandatory way to end a good hunt.

Gathering friends around the table to talk about the day's hunt, those that have come before and possibly down the road, just caps everything. It doesn't have to be fine dining. A hamburger or turkey sandwich can fill the bill, but if it is something like pheasant pot pie for lunch at Joshua Creek Ranch, well, it may just not get any better than that.

"This is always good," said Ann Kercheville, who along with husband, Joe, own the ranch that has received Beretta's Trident certification. "But the favorite among the hunters is the pheasant enchiladas."

JCR is unique among hunting lodges in Texas because most of its meals are game and much of the game comes off the ranch that features quail and pheasant hunting across its 1,200 acres. A large herd of exotic axis deer that have overtaken the ranch in the last 20 years provides a source for fresh venison and a stocking program in Joshua Creek is a seasonal source for trout.

Food from the ranch's Cypress Lodge is so popular with its guests that the Kerchevilles and their chefs have produced a cookbook so hunters can enjoy the game they take as much as they did their hunt.

The cookbook, which costs \$29.95 plus shipping, features drinks, salads and dressings, soups, sandwiches, entrees and desserts from the lodge's kitchen.

For more information on the cookbook, visit their website at <http://joshuacreek.com/product/hunters-harvest-cookbook>.