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# A Look Inside



Vol. 26, No. 6

Dec/Jan 2016



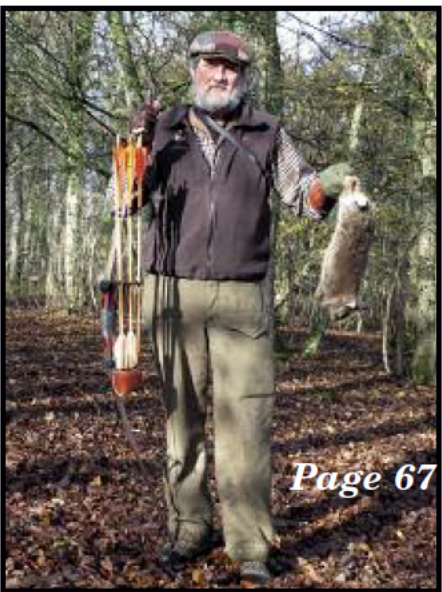
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*On The Cover — Late season whitetail hunting in the Midwest.*

*Photo by Jerry Gowins, Jr.*





# Hunting Le Lapin Français

A return trip to bowhunt in France

By T.J. Conrads

**T**he e-mail was harmless enough:

“Hello T.J. You promise every year to come back to see your old friend Xavier, but you never come. What is the chance I can see you in France this year? Should I even recognize you after all these years? Time is passing fast, and I want to see you again. Please try to make the rabbit hunt at my castle this December, my old friend. XP”

I first met Xavier Péchenart in Louisville, Kentucky, at the Bowhunting Show in early 1996. He was a subscriber to my magazine, and was planning on starting a French bowhunting magazine himself. We had corresponded for several months before, but that chance meeting was to be the start of a long, albeit long-distance,

friendship.

“You must come to France to hunt real boar...many big boar, not these little girly pigs here in the States,” Xavier said at the Bowhunting Show. “Come this fall and I will show you real boar hunting.” And that I did, taking three Russian boar with a longbow on that first trip, and making friends for life.

The following year, on the way back from Africa, Greg Joufflas and I stopped in France to meet up with Xavier and the gang for another hunt on his brother’s castle land, and to pick up my Russian boar shoulder mount from the previous fall. I ended up taking two roe deer with my longbow, but the fallow deer eluded me. We made plans to get together every year, but life had other ideas and the years passed with only the occasional phone call or e-mail.

It had been about 16 years since I had spent time with Xavier hunting Russian boar and roe deer on his brother’s estate, Chateau Vaguion, in the Loire Valley. I thought about the rabbit hunt, which Xavier holds at his new castle land in the same Loire Valley, and wrote him back asking dates: I was coming.

“Congratulations, Mr. T.J.! You have made the best decision of the year...it is time! You are the best for crossing the Atlantic to hunt rabbits...you should be crazy, but I am very proud to have you as a member of the club. We will have a grand time, my old friend.”

---

*Taking in the memories of the annual rabbit hunt at Chateau du Plessis. I spent several days as a guest in the castle’s top floor.*

I contacted my friend Virgil Vosse (who was interviewed in the *Oct/Nov 2015* issue) in Paris to make arrangements. Virgil and his girlfriend, Marie, had come to Boise the summer before and we had a chance to spend a day before they headed up into central Idaho for camping and fishing. He set up a schedule that would keep us busy for the entire 17 days I planned to be in France.

Arriving in Paris, Virgil and his

friend Pierre picked me up, and so began a whirlwind set of events. Not only was this a bowhunting trip, but it was also a chance to see the real Paris, visit cultural sites and museums, spend time with old friends, and spend some time on the Atlantic coast trying to find some surfing...one of my other favorite hobbies in life.

After settling into my hotel, we walked up to one of Virgil's favorite wine bars for lunch. Over a lovely meal

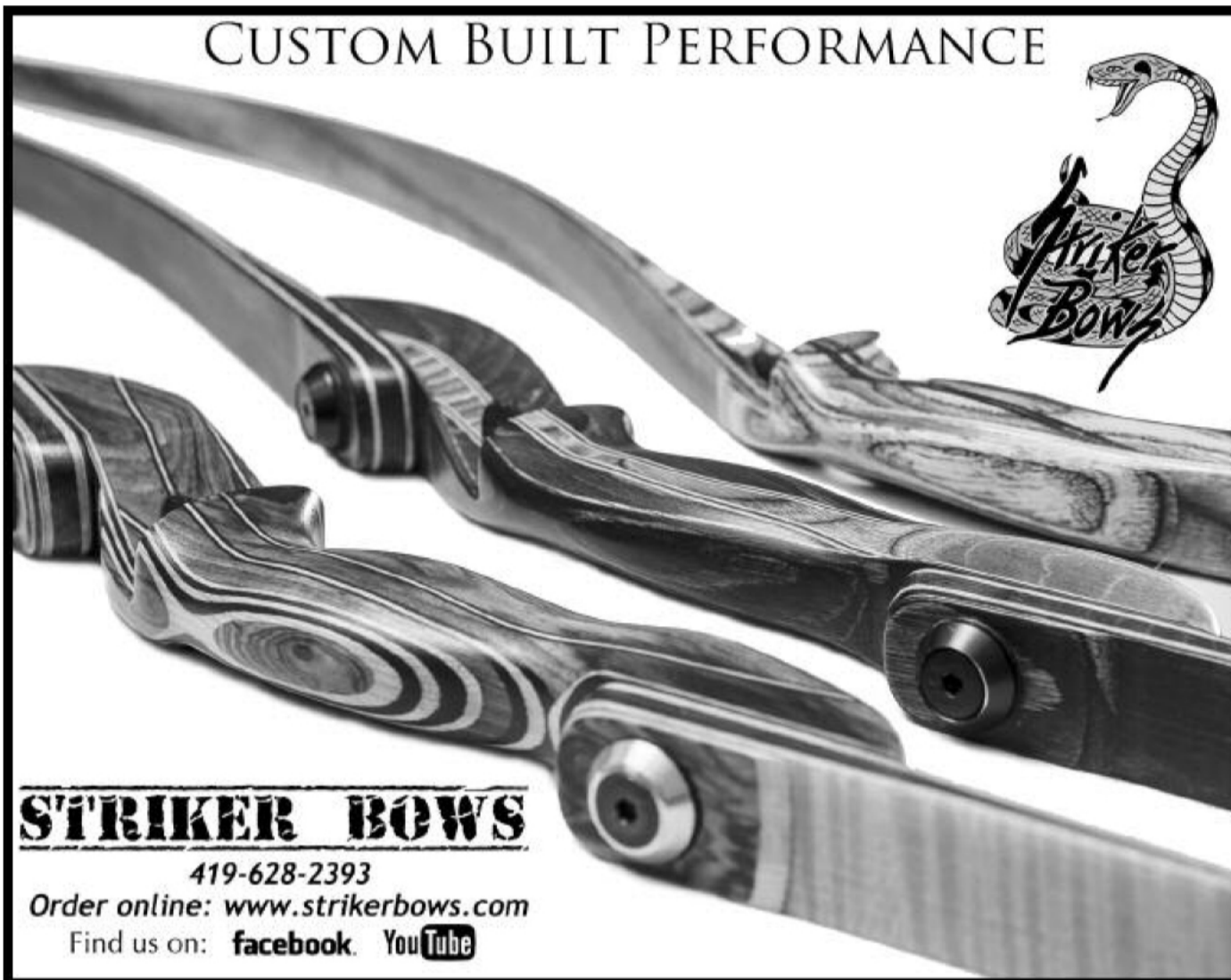
of chicken-wrapped wild mushrooms on potatoes with cream sauce, fresh fruit, thinly sliced air-cured ham, a selection of cheese, and a bottle of wine, we got caught up with our lives and talked about the next two weeks of travel. This was the start of an adventure into gastronomic delights, cultural overstimulation, and time spent bowhunting with old and new friends. I needed this break, and Virgil made sure my time was put to good use.

After lunch, we visited Espace Dali, a permanent exhibition of Salvador Dali's work, in the famous Montmartre section of old Paris. This is where many of the great artists worked, including Pablo Picasso, Claude Monet, Piet Mondrian, and Vincent van Gogh. In the exhibition were many of Dali's photos, engravings, and sculptures. Dozens of street artists were set up in the courtyard around several flats where many of the old artists lived, including Ernest Hemingway while he was living in Paris working on his masterpiece, *A Movable Feast*. The following day Virgil took me to have breakfast at Au Clarion des Chasseurs, a street-side restaurant where Hemingway and his cronies would come for coffee and to write. It hasn't changed in all these years, and reeked of history.

The following day we visited the Musée de la Chasse et De La Nature (Museum of Hunting and Nature), a magnificent collection of weapons, art, trophies, and history of hunting in France, as well as collections of arms and trophies from famous French hunters. Virgil pointed out a pair of enormous elephant tusks that framed a massive doorway. These I had seen before; they once belonged to Marc Péchenart, my friend Xavier's brother, who passed away three years prior. When I was hunting at Chateau Vaguion in 1996, Marc gave me a private tour of his personal hunting museum on his castle land. Many of Marc's trophies were on display at Musée de la Chasse et De La Nature.

Over the next few days Virgil, Marie, and I dined at various fine restaurants, toured the Louvre, which is so massive it would take a week or two to see everything in the myriad halls and collections, and visited other cultural sites

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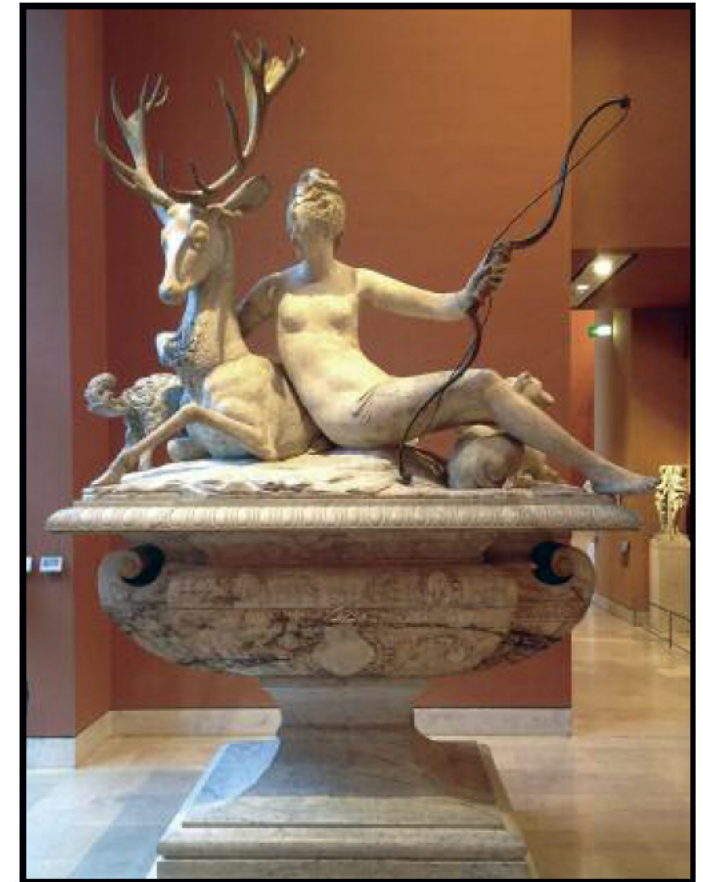
*The Louvre, Paris. This depository of many of the world's most precious artwork and artifacts has a long history based in fortresses and rulers' palaces.*

and curiosity shops. One night after a late dinner we walked over to see the Eiffel Tower. I had seen it before, but never this close. As we walked under it, the line to ride the elevators to the top was minimal. Normally, Virgil told me, it is a minimum two- to four-hour wait, but we were able to get tickets, ride both elevators to the top, take pictures of Paris, the Arc de Triomphe, the Seine...witness a guy propose to his girlfriend on his knees, which did not end the way he wanted it to...and were back down in less than 45 minutes. We then strolled along the Seine River back to my hotel. It was around 1:30 a.m. and I was wide-awake, ready for more.



*Napoleon's dining room with its gilded walls and ceiling in the Louvre.*

The next day we flew to Biarritz on the Atlantic coast. One of my goals was to surf in France, and Biarritz, once a part of the World Surfing Tour, is still a major destination for surfers world-wide. Marie's childhood friend owned the hotel right on the beach, and we settled into our rooms for two days. Unfortunately, being winter, the weather was wicked, the skies bruised, and seas angry. The rip tides were too dangerous, ruining my chance to try and catch a few waves. So, we spent time exploring the restaurants and then spent a day in San Sebastian, Spain, where I was treated to some of the




*Diana the huntress on display in one of Napoleon's apartments in the Louvre.*


finest ham in the world: pata negra (black hoof), which sells here in the States for around \$800 a leg.

With full stomachs and hungry for more travel, Marie dropped Virgil and me off at the train station in Biarritz, as we were to meet Xavier and others for a two-day boar hunt in central France at a lodge that Xavier had reserved for our group. The lodge was exquisite, the accommodations and food fantastic, the wine...the best. The hosts, Xavier and

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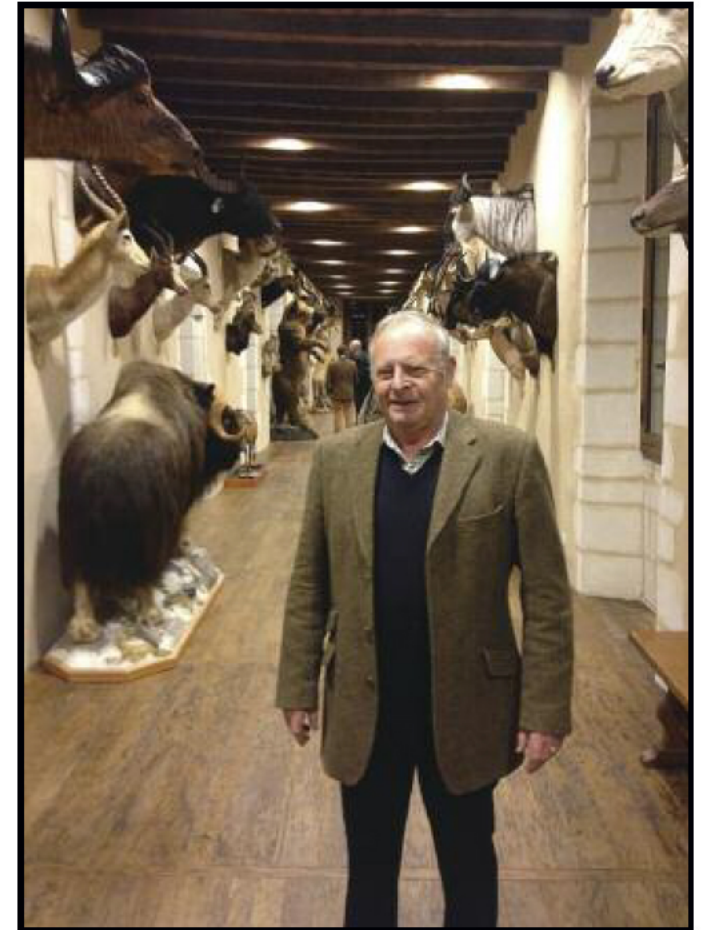
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*The Russian boar can be seen trotting across the hillside in the rain. I followed him all the way back to the lodge where he finally slipped into the thick briars and disappeared for good.*



*Emanuel Benoit showing us his trophy wing, which encompasses one entire second floor of one of his three castles. He was a fabulous host and dinner was superb.*

Charlotte Benoit, managed the hunting lodge and lands that have been in his family for generations. Each of us had our own private room, and the house was filled with mounts from all over Europe and Africa.

The hunting was hard, but enjoyable, as it rained off and on and the boars were holed up in the thickest recesses of creek bottoms. Several times I was surrounded by boars, but couldn't see anything more than hair through the thick, low-growing spruce. They were running around me, grunting

their disapproval of my presence, and at one time, while trying to stalk through the spruce, I heard a splash and turned around to see a 200+ boar following me down the marshy path. By the time I spun around, he slipped a few feet off the trail and vanished forever.

The second day of the hunt, our last, was my birthday. At breakfast Virgil surprised me with two beautiful gifts: a custom made French Languiole knife, and one of his exquisite leather arm-guards he tooled specifically for me. I was shocked; everyone else knew about

it, but I never told them it was my birthday. To celebrate, Charlotte handed me a bunch of litchis—one of my favorite fruits—a cup of black coffee, and a fresh chocolate pastry. I'm not much of a sweet eater, but one cannot simply pass up a French pastry when given as a gift.

That day everyone got into boar... and everyone missed one or two. Not to be outdone, I was walking back to the lodge from deep down a canyon, soaking wet from the rain and feeling beat, when I jumped a large boar from the creek bottom. He started trotting along an adjacent hill, using all the cover he could. I jogged along with him, across the creek, trying to keep him in sight. When he broke out of the brush he started walking and I tried to settle my breath as drew back my bow, and sent an arrow right over his back. I followed him out of the canyon, across several creeks, through four open glades, and finally watched as he slipped down into thick brush and vanished.

That night we were all invited to Emmanuel Benoit's castle (Xavier's father) for an exquisite seafood dinner. Starting off with champagne, dinner followed: a table full of raw oysters, head-on giant prawns, sea snails, asparagus, fresh breads and cheeses,

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*Me and Xavier Péchenart warming up by a fire in the main room before dinner. The property had hundreds of red deer, but I never got close enough to one to shoot.*

and wine, of course. After dinner, Emmanuel brought out a 93-year-old bottle of cognac and proceeded to tell us of his exploits of hunting. It was a grand evening, something I want to experience again.

The following morning we drove to Xavier Péchenart's castle lands along the Loire River. The land consists of about 500 acres, a four-story castle, and myriad outbuildings, including an entertainment lodge. After settling into my suite on the fourth floor, Xavier gave me a tour of the property. The land consists of a large lake and is surrounded by a nine-foot wall, along with guarded gate entries. We saw roe deer, rabbits,



*Hunters regrouping for another rabbit drive at Xavier's castle lands.*

and Reeves' pheasants, which caught my eye.

"Can we hunt those as well?" I asked.

"Yes, but you must use steel blunts and can only shoot them from the air," he said. "It is illegal to release an arrow with a broadhead into the air in France...safety reasons." After walking up on a half dozen within a few yards, I fully expected to bring one of these beautiful birds home. My plan was to shoot my first rabbit, then spend time hunting pheasants.

The next day men and women started showing up and we all had to partake in shooting practice, which went well. There were folks from all over France and elsewhere: poor, rich, and famous...young and old...it was truly a mixed group of interesting people.

There was a pre-hunt dinner prepared for everyone, with lots of wine, of

course, and one of the guests brought an entire pata negra ham, which was the center of attention. As always, fine cheese finished the meal and everyone retired for the night. In the morning, the dogs and handlers would arrive, breakfast would be served, and then the rabbit hunt would begin.

Mid-morning, everyone was ready. The handlers set their beagles out and the hunt was on. It wasn't more than a few minutes before rabbits started dart-

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*Virgil Vosse with a rabbit.*

“You got one, T.J.!” Virgil’s voice shook me from my thoughts. “Me too,” he said as he handed a fat rabbit up to me to inspect. Head shot...perfect. Now it was time to hunt pheasants.

Unlike the two days before, the pheasants were not cooperative. The barking of the dogs, the blasting of the horns, the people stomping around in the forest...it was enough to put the birds into hiding. When they did take to the air, it was 30-50 yards away, with many pines and hardwoods making it impossible to see, much less shoot at one. Several times I would draw back and swing, but there would be no clear shot. I was persistent, though, and missed two birds cleanly as the day progressed.

By mid-afternoon we had almost two-dozen rabbits bagged, and we started hunting back to the castle to prepare dinner. Xavier and I were talking as we took a stand along a road that cut through the forest when a pheasant cackled and took flight somewhere in front of us. It was climbing higher, trying to get above the 75-100 foot pines, when it came into view. I pulled back, led the bird as best I could, and let go. It was like slow motion, the arrow sailing higher and higher in front of the bird. I got excited, as it appeared the bird and the arrow would connect, but I had not led enough; tail feathers exploded off the rear of the bird and it continued on its way.

“That was a very good shot, my friend,” Xavier said to me as I watched my arrow fly off into the trees, feathers wafting down from the confrontation between arrow and pheasant. So close... next year, I thought as I trotted off to find my arrow.

Dinner was a raucous event. Everyone—hunters, wives, dog handlers, and guests—shared the day’s events. Thankfully, many of my friends speak both French and English, so I stayed up on much of the conversation. Always one who keeps his wine cellar stocked, Xavier brought out the largest magnum bottle of Bordeaux I had ever seen; it held 4.5 liters, and took two hands to hoist it up to pour.

After dinner, as this was late December, the cooks brought out two king cakes and cut slices off for every-

ing from thicket to thicket. Arrows were flying, at times a little too close...lots of anxiety amongst the hunters. So, I stayed away from the crowd, missed a few crazy running shots, but was thoroughly enjoying the music of the handlers blowing horns and yelling out orders in French, which I never could understand, but the dogs did; they obeyed all the horn and voice commands perfectly.

With so many people and dogs, and rabbits scurrying about, I decided to move off and take a stand in front of the procession. Nestled against a tree between two thickets, I nocked an arrow and waited. Several rabbits blew across the opening in front of me, seeming to follow a known path. I missed the next rabbit, but connected on my following shot. Talk about exhilarating! I was wondering how my shooting would be, not knowing anything about this type of drive hunting.

Walking up to the rabbit, I took time to admire that this was the first one I had taken over three trips to France. I hoisted it up, soaking in the earthy smell of the animal, its beautiful brown fur, and closed my eyes and listened to the chatter of the hunt, the breeze softly pawing my face. At that moment, everything I wanted to experience on this hunt was fulfilled.

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*My first French rabbit, taken on the run.*

one. Traditionally, a small porcelain baby was hidden in the cake to symbolize Jesus, usually the colors of the season: gold, purple, or green. Today, however, it is used to symbolize prosperity to those who find the baby in their slice. In many traditions, such as here in France, finding the baby dubs the person king or queen for the evening.

Not being much of a dessert eater, I felt I had to partake in the event. The talk was thick, the wine flowing well,

when about half way through the cake I bit into something; it was a tile, as opposed to a baby. I pulled it out of my mouth and Virgil yells, "T.J. is king!"

I heard a little grumbling at an adjacent table and Xavier waved a tile in his hand; he had found the tile from the second cake. Safa, Xavier's wife, then preceded to place paper crowns, which looked like the ones from Burger King, on both Xavier and my heads. A round of applause, a little speech, and the night continued on.

The next morning we drove back to Paris for one last night exploring the city. After a lovely dinner, we strolled along the Seine toward my hotel. I had an early morning flight back to the States, and the goodbyes were hard for all of us.

"Next year, same time, my friend,"



*My title King of the Evening, with my friend Frédéric Caujolle at Chateau du Plessis.*

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Virgil said as he and Marie hugged me. I watched them slowly walk down the avenue, turn and wave, and slip into the Paris evening.

I stood there for a few moments absorbing the sounds and smells of Paris shutting down for the night, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and entered the hotel. Indeed, I will be back to hunt the French countryside many more times. Besides, I have destiny with a Reeves' pheasant.



### Bowhunting France

Bowhunting in France is very good, although much of it is on estate lands. Contact Bowhunting Safari Consultants (ad page 72), as they can steer you through the legalities and logistics.

For a video of this rabbit hunt, go to: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT55Q6t7K5s&list=UU7OwXjzDOIQCcR9EaPa84Yw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT55Q6t7K5s&list=UU7OwXjzDOIQCcR9EaPa84Yw).

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