



TARHEEL QUAIL

Spend a day behind the horses and in the quail fields at North Carolina's George Hi Plantation.

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One hundred yards ahead of us, Tommy Allen and Jeff Howell raised their hats, and by their signal our turn had come. Dan O'Connor unsheathed a pair of smallbores and handed one to me and one to Paulo de Brito. We clambered off the back of the wagon and quick stepped past the horses, up a sandy path toward the two guides and a brace of locked-up pointers and a little cocker spaniel quivering at heel. We knew the drill.

We'd had a bird's-eye view atop our perch on the back of the wagon, seeing the first point of the afternoon in a field of sorghum cropped to the height of a pointer's head, when our fellow hunters Tad and Elizabeth walked in at the ready. Paulo, a friend visiting from Lisbon, recalled what he saw with the Iberian flair of the Portuguese: "It was an amazing view when Tad and Elizabeth shot their first birds—when the covey flushed and flew in every direction it was like magic . . . the sunlight coming from the opposite direction, the wings of the birds glittering. Three quail fell—a pair by Elizabeth, one from Tad—and after the shots there were feathers spread through the air like golden leaves being taken by the breeze. It was beyond words; only a hunter can understand the beauty of such a sight."

It was our turn to duplicate the shooting success of our partners; back in Portugal, Paulo is a hotshot live-pigeon trap shooter, and as a wild-bird snob I rarely reckon plantation quail very much of a challenge. As we flanked the pointers, the little cocker named Abby rumbled the covey up in a flurry and four shots followed. Paulo and I stared briefly at each other, then turned to trudge a sheepish shooter's walk of shame back to the wagon. There were no feathers hanging golden in the sky

this time, only a hiss from the punctured vanity of a writer's ego and *nada* in either of our game bags. "At this point," Dan said to Elizabeth and Tad as we climbed aboard, "you two are outshooting the pros."

Dan, who is the manager of North Carolina's George Hi Plantation, grabbed the rails, leaned back on the rear step of the wagon, and said, "Let's move up a bit." At that, Tina Sutton in the driver's seat on the wagon bench flicked the reins and softly commanded "Step up" to Little Luke and Big Jake, the pair of impressively large white Percherons who had us in tow. The wagon lurched forward, swaying as we rolled along to the *clip-clop* cadence of horse hooves and the jingle and squeak of tack. Up ahead, under scattered longleaves and in the cover of lush waist-high grasses, Tommy and Jeff worked the dogs and only minutes passed before they once again held blaze-orange hats above their heads.

"Whoa . . . whoa boys," said Tina. With a snort, the draft horses stopped on cue and it was our turn to stand and watch as Tad and Elizabeth Dunn once again made the pros appear amateurish. Which is fair enough: My longtime friends from Wilmington, North Carolina, were seasoned hands at George Hi, and it had been on their enthusiastic recommendation that Paulo and I had come to ride a wagon with them and shoot some quail—or shoot *at* quail, in our case.

We had as our backdrop a lovely afternoon in mid-December—cool, not cold, a soft breeze ruffling the tops of the pines and fluttering an expansive spread of little bluestem, a warm-season grass that O'Connor recently introduced to improve George Hi's habitat for quail.

PLANTATION TRANSFORMATION
Dan O'Connor has renewed the quail habitat at George Hi.



As a Tarheel, I'm sometimes blinded by the familiar, as the pastoral qualities of the rural eastern North Carolina landscape unfold before me. But the sensibilities of my Portuguese friend had not been jaded. With fresh eyes, Paulo noted with appreciation the golden tans and browns of the native grasses, the greens of the cane and pines, and the reds and yellows of hardwood saplings turning in the fall. "It's like being in a painting filled with all the autumn colors," he said.

For the next couple hours, we were carted along at a gentle pace through a mosaic of small fields and burned-over pine clearings, over a cane-lined creek, past ditches guarded by greenbrier, and along pocket-size openings laced with partridge pea. A dozen or so times during our ride, we halted to shoot pointed covey rises—alternating each point with a fresh pair of shooters—and by late afternoon Tommy had stopped laughing (mostly) at my marksmanship and Paulo had trained in his shooting eye. Tad and Elizabeth, as we could well see from our perch up high on the wagon, were still shooting like the pros should have been all along.

Wagon hunts helped distinguish George Hi when it first opened in the 1980s as a 1,000-acre commercial shooting preserve near the town of Clinton, founded on the family farm by Jack DuBose—described in his 2010 obituary as a “fabulist . . . and showman . . . with the instincts of P. T. Barnum and the infectious wit of Mark Twain.” The colorful entrepreneur insisted on adding mule-drawn wagons to the mix, which were (and remain) something of an anomaly in North Carolina, where yeoman foot-slogging bird-hunting traditions are more

egalitarian than those of private quail plantations in South Georgia and North Florida.

George Hi garnered national attention in the sporting press in its early years, but ultimately the mules turned out to be, well, mules: temperamental, hard to train, and expensive to maintain. Moreover, fostering the sort of habitat required to provide a first-class shooting experience—thinning the timber to noncommercial densities, for example, and instituting costly annual prescribed burning to renew the grasses and weeds that bobwhites need—was not being pursued with requisite vigor. Eventually the mules got old and died, were not replaced, and George Hi slipped into a somnolent, low-key existence—still open to the public on a limited basis, but no longer considered a prime destination for wingshooters from around the country seeking Southern-style bobwhite hunting.

That began to change almost three years ago when Charles DuBose, Jr., son of the founder, brought in Dan O'Connor from Vermont to run the show and rejuvenate George Hi. O'Connor had started a consulting business after leaving The Orvis Company after 13 years, where among other executive responsibilities he had been director of its Endorsed Lodge, Outfitter, and Guide Program. To gain a coveted Orvis endorsement, O'Connor explained, a lodge needs three things: good food and accommodations, great resources and habitat, and world-class hospitality.

“When I came here, I considered George Hi to be a start-up in terms of what it needed,” O'Connor said. But he thought the bones of the place were good—plenty of land, a lovely lake, and

COMMITMENT TO QUALITY

George Hi owner Charles DuBose, Jr., (*far left*) has made a commitment to offering good food and accommodations, great resources and habitat, and world-class hospitality, transforming George Hi into a first-class venue for guests. In particular, the varied quail habitat is now superb, with expanded hunting courses.





BEFORE THE HUNT, AND AFTER
Guests at George Hi can sharpen their shooting skills at the plantation's five-stand station. The lodge sits on a lovely lake, providing a tranquil setting for post-hunt relaxation.



a fine purpose-built lodge that could be brought up to standards. Most important, he had the commitment of DuBose. “I told Charles it would not be for the faint of heart,” O’Connor said. “He stepped up.”

O’Connor prettied up the field borders to improve the aesthetics, added private bathrooms to the lodge, and brought in a private gourmet chef. Then he added guides as handy with Southern manners as they were handling bird dogs. More than 400 acres were added to increase the size of the hunting courses.

But it was upon habitat rehabilitation that George Hi’s success would really hinge. Thickets of hardwood saplings were cleared and once-impenetrable stands of pine were carefully thinned to allow sunlight to reach the forest floor. Prescribed burning was redoubled to encourage growth of native wiregrass, lespedeza, and partridge pea, and stumps and debris from logging were ground down or burned away to make walking through cover easier. O’Connor also initiated an intensive program to cultivate warm-season grasses that are not only pleasing to look at, but also protect bobwhites from raptors.

“We’ve prioritized planting of native warm-season grasses of the same types seen when European settlers first set foot on the continent in the 17th Century,” O’Connor explained. “We’ve drilled or broadcast seed on almost every inch of the property.”

Our hunting partners, the Dunns, have hunted George Hi several times since Dan O’Connor arrived, and Elizabeth was effusive about improvements she’s seen in the cover.

“There are more native grasses, more partridge peas—less dog fennel and cane,” she said. “Walking is easy: no holes or

stumps from the cuttings. And now there are plenty of birds.”

Like all commercial bobwhite plantations, George Hi releases birds (preseason in September) but its vastly improved cover now keeps coveys together to range free and remain alive season-long to learn wild-bird wiles. Although hunts on foot are the norm, O’Connor reintroduced wagon hunts last fall as an add-on option. The wagons are pulled not by mules but by elegant French Percherons caparisoned in decorative harness. Here’s why: When perfectly trained, a mule will stand still, oblivious to nearby gunshots, Tina explained to me; however, if not perfectly trained—and thoroughly training a mule can be an arduous process—they may break at a gunshot and pull the wagon and its occupants fast and far away until they decide it’s safe to stop. Generally, this is not an experience wingshooters pay good money for. So the horses are welcome additions.

When the shadows lengthened, Tina called “haw” to her horses to turn them toward the lodge. In a vest of English tweed and with an accent from New England, Dan O’Connor will hardly pass for a local, but his pride in what George Hi is becoming is homegrown and genuine. “Look there,” he said, as we passed an expanse of open pines and native grasses—perfect bobwhite habitat. “This was so thick you couldn’t hunt it last year. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Indeed it was, and the ride back gave us time to reflect on the day—the points and covey rises, views of shots made and missed, little cockers flushing and retrieving, camaraderie on the back of the wagon, and the placid Arcadian pace of our utterly old-fashioned mode of transportation. 🐾