

Hi ON QUAIL

T. EDWARD NICKENS

ENJOYING A BOUTIQUE EXPERIENCE AT GEORGE HI PLANTATION



AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRY ALLEN

My buddy, George Dixon, has dropped back behind me, moving through Indiangrass and big bluestem to take up a position to the left of the dogs.

"I want you to notice," he announces, "that I'm switching sides."

I grin. The last five bird rises have been to my right, where George has been working that flank of a flushing English cocker. Five flushes and I haven't had a shot, while George has put on an impressive run of downed birds.

So I'll give him credit for good intentions, but these bobwhite quail are having none of it. Not 60 seconds later the big pointer, Jake, goes rigid. One moment he's sailing through waist-high grasses, tacking the wind like a schooner. The next moment he's channeling his inner Michelangelo, solid as a sculpture, pointing birds.

On my left. In front of George. Again.

The little English cocker, Ranger, has to practically dig the birds out of a tangled gnarl of maple and sweetgum, but off they go, rocketing through the pines at 10 o'clock to my gun. George drops a single, and then holds fire.

"I'm trying to be a gentleman about this," he laughs, "but the birds aren't helping!"

At least my friend is in the right place for such a display of chivalry. Here at North Carolina's George Hi Plantation, a team of plantation managers, native-grass specialists



Formerly a family retreat, George Hi Plantation now offers a luxury lakeside lodge, a first-rate 5 Stand setup and a kennel full of talented pointers, setters and English cockers.

and forest planners are turning back time to one largely forgotten. George Hi's 1,000 acres of pines and old fields have been hunted with pointing dogs since before the Civil War, and today there's a massive program of habitat improvement transforming the spread. Agricultural fields long sown in cotton and corn are being converted to native warm-season grasses. Targeted timber operations are opening up the pinewoods to flood the forest floor

with sunlight. Two years ago George Hi lured Orvis stalwart Dan O'Connor to the Carolina Coastal Plain, and he's overseen an overhaul of the former family retreat into a luxury lodge with a world-class 5 Stand setup, fine dining, a serene lakeside location, and a platoon of bird-crazy pointers, setters and flushing English cockers.

All in all, it's a bit of history re-visioned, although even longtime North Carolina natives know little of the bird hunting traditions of their homeland. At about the same period that Northern gunners were discovering the bird-rich pinelands of the Tallahassee-to-Thomasville corridor, along the Florida-Georgia line, other wealthy industrialists were taking note of fabulous shooting a lot closer to New York City. Tens of thousands of North Carolina acres were managed as quail plantations around the turn of

the 20th Century, and finding 40 coveys a day wasn't uncommon. J.P. Morgan had a quail hunting plantation near Climax, North Carolina, the centerpiece of 26,000 acres of leased Tar Heel ground. Washington Duke, president of the American Tobacco Company and the primary early benefactor of Duke University, ran quail dogs over 4,000 acres of North Carolina woods. Bubble-gum inventor Frank Fler was part of the scene, as was the grandson of

Jay Gould. The railroad tracks to Greensboro and Thomasville—North Carolina, not Georgia—hummed with well-heeled hunters finding a quail-bird paradise far from the Red Hills of the deeper South.

They would have recognized the landscape reemerging at George Hi—and the feeling I'm getting as we move deeper into a tract of timber, trunks blackened with a recent controlled burn and underlain with newly restored grasses. My breath drifts from left to right, signaling a crossing wind, and George Hi guide Bryan Hargrove lets Jake range a bit farther, giving him room to loop and swing and work the wind without being underfoot.

"Find 'em in here, bud," Bryan intones as Jake works a fence-line that should give up a covey. "Find 'em in here."

It's a dance with the wind, and at times it's hard to tell who's



Owners Helen and Charles DuBose (above) have been thrilled with the work Dan O'Connor (opposite, bottom) has done to upgrade almost every aspect of the plantation's hunting operation.



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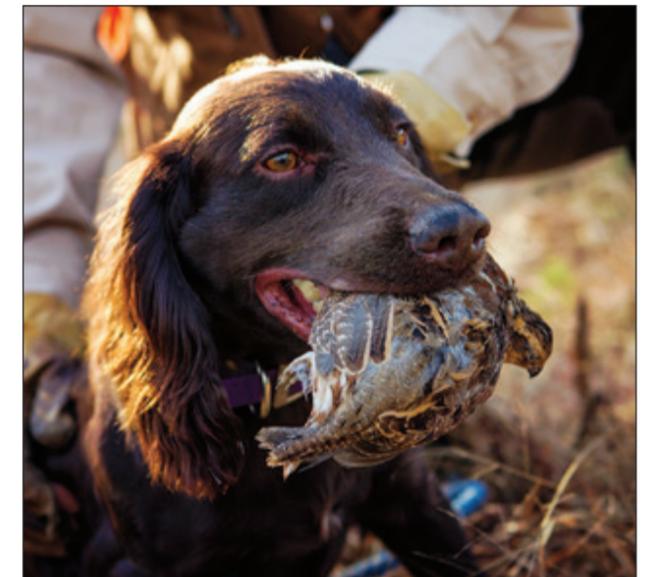


AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

leading the choreography: beast or breeze. Jake is sucking in every detail, his flanks heaving. As much as I enjoy a morning in the quail woods, I'd give anything to inhabit the world of a bird dog, if only for an hour. They live in a parallel universe filled with scent that layers their experience with a completely new dimension—to them, I suspect, a human hunter is like a blind man walking through the woods. And Jake's focus is telling too. He's not taken in by the history and the visuals of this landscape. He's not waxing about the heritage of the ghosts of hunts past. A bird dog exists in real time only. What matters most—the only thing that matters at all—is the faintest hint of bird smell.

Dogs and guns and bird flushes have been a part of George Hi's history since at least the mid-1850s, but colonial history on the tract goes back even further. The George Highsmith family was granted the Coharie River spread by the King of England—an old family cemetery on the property offers final rest for four generations of Highsmiths—and the property produced cotton, turpentine, pitch and pine logs that were floated all the way to the port at Wilmington, North Carolina. The DuBose family bought the spread in 1942, and today Charles Holden DuBose Jr. is the third generation of his family to walk the historic property behind bird dogs. His father started the George Hi shooting preserve in the early 1980s, but horses were his first love and quail management a side interest. When Charles took over the operation, "it was like I had one foot on the boat and the other on the dock, and somebody cut the rope," he laughs. "We had to expand or contract." When Charles found Dan O'Connor, who was looking for a new challenge after running the Orvis Endorsed Operations program, a new era opened for George Hi. "The last two years have been a revelation," Charles says. "The cover has undergone an unbelievable transformation. Every detail of the lodging and dining operations has been taken up two levels." George Hi, it seems, has figured out its niche: a small boutique shooting preserve. "We can't accommodate a world of hunters, and

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we don't want to," Charles explains. "But we can make sure everyone leaves here getting more than they expected, and Dan has been the key to that."

At mid-afternoon Dan O'Connor meets us in the woods, just as Bryan sends Ranger to work a point in a tangle of briars and piled-up brush. The utility of the English cocker breed is on fine display. These birds seem to have dug into a foxhole, and the compact, tough, indefatigable Ranger is in his element. Bred to penetrate dense cover, with a broad muzzle for bringing to hand even larger game, English cockers harken to their historic sporting roots. Ranger tracks the birds from tree trunk to tree trunk, hesitates for a half-second at a copse of sweetgum saplings, and then pounces for the force as the birds blow out of the thicket, barreling through the pines. Two guns sweep after them, and feathers answer the reports.

It's a sweet little scene, but Dan, his mind ever on the future, chews his lip for a moment. "Getting these hardwoods under control is one of the toughest jobs we have here," he says. "But we're closing in. We have a vision for this place. We are taking out timber and getting sunlight to the floor. We have our eye on the ball—our focus is on establishing native warm-season grasses. They provide cover, they're beautiful and they hold up well to the dogs and hunters."

He nods toward a nearby field, barely visible through the woods. It's another 75-acre opening being converted back to food plots of sorghum and millet and the native grasses that hold birds: Indiangrass, switchgrass, big bluestem and coastal panicgrass. "The goal is to make it a beautiful place, to convert as much of this plantation as possible to what folks will recognize as bird habitat. Nothing here is haphazard. We're putting a real focus on a Southern aesthetic."

It's a signature component of a George Hi hunt and a particularly pleasing one. This is no pine monoculture. We move in and out of quail habitats, from small fields of partridge pea and sorghum through pinewoods and pine savannahs where greenbrier and turkey oaks provide

cover. There's a stand of longleaf pine underlain by wiregrass—the classic pairing of Old South-style quail shooting—and the occasional rough ground of dead branches and slash from recent habitat work. We drop birds in stands of dog fennel and open swaths of bunch grasses and pine needles and work the dark edges of creekbot-toms that snake through tangled hollows. It's rolling, beautiful country—the old fields unfurling like ruffled quilts against distant smudges of dark timber.

But not all of the quail are minding their manners. Most, in fact, act like they have no interest at all in making George and my acquaintance. On our fourth drop of the hunt, Bryan adds Mae to the bird dog mix. She's slim and slender, with light ticking—a pale rider loping on the edge

of range. She's a pleasing counterpoint to the muscular Jake, a relative home-body compared to Mae's big-ranging demeanor.

Bryan keeps her in check, though. "Close, Mae," he admonishes. "With two dogs out, she likes to hunt on the edge," he explains. "She knows she can open it up, but only to a point."

It's as if Mae senses that she's pushing her limits and better bring an offer to the table fast, for right then she freezes, four paws on the ground, muzzle canted a quarter-turn to starboard. "These dogs are making us look better than we are," George grins, as we move upslope to Mae. But he speaks too soon. This bird knows how to negotiate. It bursts from the base of a fire-blackened trunk straight up. It's perfectly positioned to force my gun up and overhead as I twist to the left, weight on my

heels, and just as the bead catches up with the bird, I've over-rotated and feel it all come apart. The shotgun butt loses touch with my shoulder, my cheek cheats over the comb, the gun goes off and the bird knows and I know and the dogs know that I've been beat.

Fortunately, I know just how—and where—to soothe my battered ego. We have an hour of daylight between the last point and the first course of dinner, and I split the time between a vigorous walk along the George Hi lakeshore and an equally determined go at the quail breast appetizers and bourbon selections in the lodge's great room. The fireplace is cranking at a near-volcanic level, and there are a few acres of sofa upholstery I

claim all to myself. For a moment I consider apologizing for showing up in my sock feet just as the drinks are poured—after all, this is a cradle of Southern gentility. But I'm from the South, from right down the road. So I'm practically at home, I think to myself, as I kick back and warm my toes by the fire.

I fondly recall that cozy feeling the next morning. It is 20 degrees and blowing hard as George and I down tall cups of coffee from the porch, mallards winging into a nearby cove. The previous day's balmy Southern warmth is a flash-frozen memory. Thankfully, we are in no rush. We load up on grits and eggs and local sausages and say a prayer that the quail-birds are feeling a similar need to be up and about and on the hunt for food.

It doesn't take long to realize that the birds feel the change as well. From the start they are flinty and wild. On the first point a pair of quail channel their inner spring-teal, launching skyward from a tangled wrack line of pine slash. We are hunting a George Hi section called the Horseshoe, a series of long linear fields through strips of big pines—patchy habitat that keeps the dogs guessing and George and me on our toes. Jake works tight through a gridded plot of millet and sorghum, and we shoot one single and barely have time to pick up the bird before there's another point in a long downhill glade of grass.

Mae, of course, is all gazelle. She flashes in and out of view as she works mature timber, a rising wind sighing in the big pines. With the wind at our backs, we're happy to

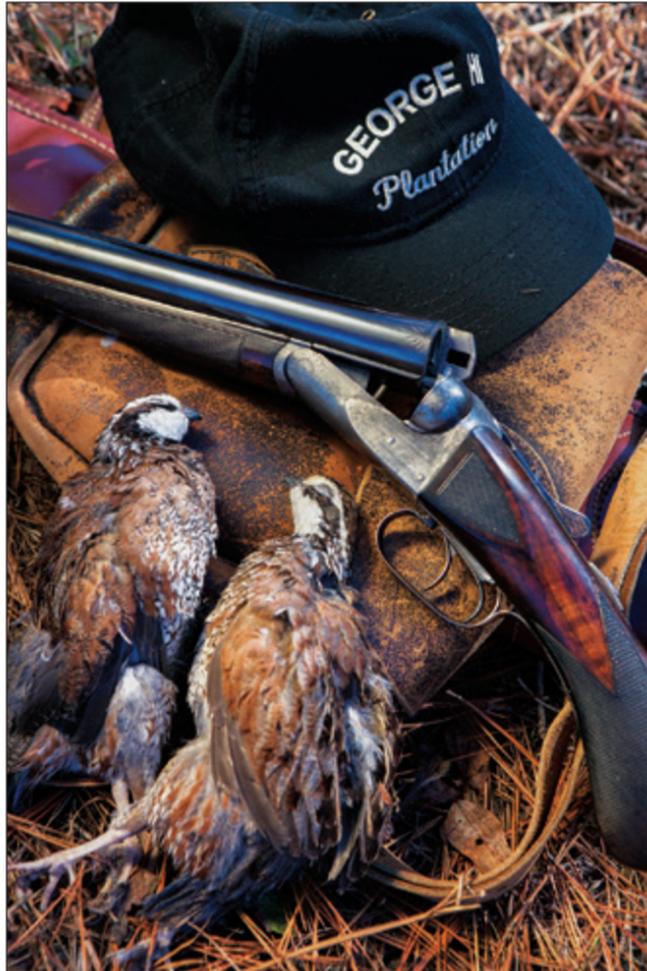
give her some lead, let her instincts to roam play in our favor, and I'm watching when she hits the scent, running full steam, stretched out, doing her best pale-white, long-haired-greyhound act. I swear the dog goes on point in midair. She locks up without a single paw on the ground, so when she finally returns to earth, she hits the ground like a cemetery angel, kicking up plumes of dirt. If ever a pointing dog deserved for a hunter to hold up his end of the bargain, this is the time. I wade through river cane and sweetgum stems, Ranger on the job, and when the birds blow up, George fells a single with a rarely needed second shot. It's a fine piece of dogwork—a tag-team of perfection whose success is writ overhead where a corolla of quail feathers drifts down from the pines.

I try to find Mae. I want to catch her eye, to see if there's an approving cast to her expression.

Not even close. The bird dog is 40 yards away, pointing yet again. She has no time to pat us on the back, no inclination to congratulate us for holding up our end of the bargain. Mae has work to do. As do we.

Author's Note: For more information, contact George Hi Plantation, 910-564-5860; www.georgehi.com.

Raised and rooted in the South, T. Edward Nickens writes about hunting and fishing across North America. He is a longtime editor-at-large for Field & Stream, the author of Field & Stream's Total Outdoorsman Manual and a contributing editor for Audubon Magazine.



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