Hunt Season

TRACKING THE BOBWHITE AT BLANDFIELD
by CLARK C. JONES

DINING
The Red Hen’s storybook charm

HOME
A groovy Greek Revival

FOOD
Winter dishes to pair with beer
The small, quick **BOBWHITE** has long been a favorite quarry for hunters.

Owing to development and modern farming practices, **THE QUAIL POPULATION HAS FALLEN** in recent decades—but private, conservation-minded preserves such as **BLANDFIELD PLANTATION** in Essex County have become a redoubt for wild birds and waterfowl as well as the sporting folk who pursue them.

By Clarke C. Jones | Photography by Stewart Ferebee
The setter needs little encouragement—he is a field trial champion and knows his business. Head held high, he searches for a familiar scent. As he races to the edge of another field, the setter's nose finds what it seeks, and suddenly his attitude transforms himself into a speckled statue. Dave raises his hat, a signal to his assistant, Darin Strickland, and the six-person hunting party he's been ferrying behind Pomfret in a modified "bird buggy," that Specter改造了一个“小四轮”；在萨克特的指导下，庞弗特的协助下，他终于找到了野鸟的踪迹。戴夫举起他的帽子，向他的助手达林·斯特里克兰德发出信号。斯特里克兰德是戴夫·庞弗特的助手，他正在带领六个人在一辆改装过的“鸟车”上——由萨克特驾驶——在萨克特和庞弗特的协助下，他们终于找到了野鸟的踪迹。

Specter quickly turns and then dashes into a stand of young Longleaf Pines. Pomfret watches.

As Speaker quickly turns and then rushes into a stand of young Longleaf Pines.


A Lone English Setter Charges Through the Broomstraw.

"Yowl! Specter!"


Mounted on Blackjack, his Tennessee walking horse, Pomfret watches.

As Speaker quickly turns and then dashes into a stand of young Longleaf Pines.
Clockwise from top left: The hunting party in the “bird buggy”; Kayla, a Boykin spaniel; the Royalls traipsing through grass; upland manager/guide Dave Pomfret.
also provide places on this property where we never hunt or disturb them. We have built impoundment sanctuaries for waterfowl that no one disturbs, not during hunting season, not when hunting season is over, not ever!” Woe to the individual, employee or guest, who does not get that message.

Pomfret, Blandfield’s upland manager, also knows his business. Hired by Wheat two years ago, Pomfret, who is in his mid-60s, has been a professional bird dog trainer and trialer of pointers and setters since 1985. In the summer, Pomfret, like a number of serious bird dog trainers, heads north to continue dog training—in his case, to his home in North Dakota. When you quail hunt at Blandfield, he says, you are not following behind some plodding dog that bumps or blinks birds. You may be shooting over Daisy, the 2007 American Pointer Club National Champion, or Specter, an English setter, who is both a Field Champion and an Amateur Field Champion, or Tripper, another Field Champion setter. In other words, the dogs used for quail hunting may often have a higher pedigree than the people who are hunting with them.

These days, the manor house is used for weddings, meetings and charity events—but it’s the quail hunting and waterfowl hunting that are Blandfield’s biggest draws. John Corey, of Ridgeway, a frequent hunter, says that Blandfield compares more favorably with other East Coast private preserves.” I was in south Georgia last February, quail hunting, and went on my second Blandfield quail hunt about two weeks ago. In both places we hunted over released birds. I can say without a doubt that Blandfield [had birds that flew higher and] more birds in the [covey] rise than in Georgia. Dave Pomfret seemed very organized and focused on providing a successful hunt. Also, the thinning and clearing at Blandfield in the timber areas have improved the hunting and shooting without obstruction—unlike the terrain in Georgia. I think Jimmy Wheat’s operation has surpassed the ones I have experienced, and that, along with being less expensive, provides a better value for me.”

Colinus virginianus, or the bobwhite, has often been called the “Prince of Game Birds.” Rather than flush wildly, as a pheasant or grouse might, its defense is to hold in a covey that then erupts all at once, causing great consternation to a predator. It tends to hold fast and not flush until the last possible moment. This allows a bird dog to point it when the dog has located the covey. The bird’s small size and quick flight burst make it both fun and challenging to hunt, which increasingly takes place on private preserves as America’s quail population, over the last few decades, has dropped dramatically.

This is not due to overhunting, as some might expect, but due to loss of habitat and to modern farming practices. Marc Puckett, a wildlife division biologist for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries who has been involved in a number of studies of the bobwhite and its habitat, says that it takes very large tracts of land with diverse vegetation to attract quail. Farm fields are an ideal quail habitat—or at least they were during the gilded era of quail hunting, from the middle 1800s to the early 1900s. That was the era when farmers started using advanced farming techniques such as chemical fertilization, and a period when the concept of crop rotation was unknown.

Fields that could no longer produce were left fallow, and timber was cut to make way for new fields. The fields that were left unattended grew weeds and early-season grasses, which in the spring attracted the insects that are a major food source for newly hatched quail. Quail thrived in this early agrarian environment. There was plenty of food—and, because farmers used hedgerows to separate their fields, there was good protection from predators.

That is not the case anymore. Development and changes in farming technology and techniques, among other issues, have adversely affected the quail. For one thing, there are fewer farmland hedgerows offering cover for quail. Farmers have been removing them for years to add tillable acreage to their land. In addition, farmers long ago started using fescue for grazing stock and as a cover crop. Fields of fescue, a cool-season grass, make poor living space for quail. What’s more, while longleaf pine trees are an ideal habitat for quail, there are fewer of them these days as farmers plant the faster-growing loblolly pines to supplement their farming income. Longleaf pines are also less affected by prescribed burning, which helps rejuvenate quail habitat.

Puckett acknowledges the necessity and benefits of these changes but also believes that farmers, in some cases, could help to boost the quail population. “If a landowner’s number one goal is timber income, then by all means, manage for that,” he says. “But if they have a strong desire to manage for wildlife, look into alternatives.” He points out that both the state and federal governments offer financial incentive programs that allow farmers to cost-effectively take some land out of crop production and leave a percentage for wildlife.

“Lot can be accomplished by taking 5 percent of a farm out of production and placing it into field borders, hedgerows, idle crop land and thicket cover,” argues Puckett. He encourages anyone interested in helping bring back the quail population to visit www.dgif.virginia.gov/quail for comprehensive quail management information. “Joining the Game and Inland Fisheries department’s new Quail Management Assistance Program will intensify our efforts to help quail,” he says. “It will help us better to track habitat improvements and document successes.”

Put good hunters with good dogs in a favorable bird habitat and you get a successful quail hunt. Having bagged several birds during their late-starting quail hunt, the Royal party heads back to the lodge, high above the marsh, just as the November sun begins to set over Essex County, turning the sky reddish purple. There, they will spend the night and rise early to hunt waterfowl in the morning—followed by a goose hunt in the afternoon.

The ride back to the lodge is a good time to reexamine shots missed, share excuses and salute shots well made. Waterfowl hunting is always unpredictable, [yet] it’s always conducive to conversation, friendship, story-telling and a sense of remoteness…. In other words, it’s an escape from the world for a day or two, and who doesn’t need that!
Opposite page: James Wheat III, owner of Blandfield Plantation. This page, clockwise from top left: Dave Pomfret on Blackjack; three quail; Darin Strickland with Specter, an English setter; gourmet treats at the end of the day.