

By Tom Carpenter

ALABAMA BLACK BELT BOBWHITES

Quail hunting, savanna habitat and southern hospitality

TODD SAUERS





ALABAMA BLACK BELT BOBWHITES

For a Yankee boy with a deep love for quail, it was a dream come true.

Big, gentle horses nickered as saddles were cinched up around their bellies. Handsome, rangy pointing dogs whined in their kennels, begging for the work ahead. Double shotguns — some costing less than my old do-it-all semiauto at home, others worth more than my truck — emerged from cases while elsewhere chaps were donned and hunting vests slid into.

Broad smiles and soft laughter filled the air as new friends spoke a common language in the mild and pine-scented air of a late-winter Alabama morning: that of bobwhites and the hunt.

Adventure

Courtesy of Alabama Black Belt Adventures, an association that promotes the area's outdoor opportunities, a small contingent of Quail Forever employees, outdoors media and supporters had been invited to celebrate the quail tradition with new friends in a storied bird-hunting region of the state, experience real plantation-style bobwhite hunting, and learn about best habitat management practices being used in the Southeast to bring back wild quail where birds once teemed.

Alabama's Black Belt is a 23-county region running across the state, below Appalachian

foothills to the north and just above the coastal plain to the south. Named for its rich, dark and loamy soil, the Black Belt produces amazing hunting and fishing opportunity.

White-tailed deer and wild turkeys may be the kings of Black Belt hunting, but bobwhite quail are the little princes of this enchanting region.

Pam Swanner of Alabama Black Belt Adventures assured that four plantations filled our hunting agenda with birds and adventure: Rex and Jacque Clark's impressive and homey High Log Creek Preserve near Hurtsboro; laid-back Great Southern Outdoors Wildlife Plantation, managed by third-generation owner Rex Pritchett, near Union Springs; Tom and Sue Ellen Lanier's classic Shenandoah Plantation, also near Union Springs; and Thomas and Cindy Harris's lovely Gusto Plantation near Hayneville, just south of Montgomery.

From the start, and across the places hunted, it was clear that a significant part of the lifestyle in this special stretch of the Alabama countryside centers on three priorities: running bird dogs and hunting quail; managing habitat to make it bobwhite-friendly; and celebrating life with the kind of southern hospitality that must be experienced to be appreciated.

Hunting

Different plantations move hunters around in different ways — via horseback, mule-drawn wagon, UTV, or specially-rigged truck. Ahead of you, bird dogs (usually the aforementioned pointers) course the cover.

When a point is made, a pair of hunters climb down from their saddles or clamber off the wagon or vehicle, grab shotguns, flank the dog handler and load up. Only then does the trio walk in for the flush, usually with the aid of one or two energetic spaniels to help put the birds up. English cockers were most often used for this task, but Boykins also helped us at Shenandoah.

After the initial flush, the spaniels also fetched up any downed birds, and then the hunt was on for singles. A couple pushes were enough for each covey before the hunting crew would move on to new ground.



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Pam Swanner, director of Alabama Black Belt Adventures Association, coordinated the hunt to celebrate the region's bobwhite culture. Here she rides a horse during a quail-filled morning hunt at Rex and Jacque Clark's High Log Creek Reserve.



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And a hunting crew it was. Two pairs of hunters would take turns shooting. Along with drivers or horse handlers, guide, dog handlers and dog assistant, not to mention your hunting compatriots, that made plenty of eyes on you as a shooter.

Put another way, there were plenty of folks to listen to a tale of a miss — or congratulate after a shot made. But the real beauty was the chance to rib, visit, relax, laugh and enjoy the Alabama countryside together.

Habitat

Through the 1960s, wild quail were beyond abundant in the Black Belt. A massive network of small farms — which meant numerous small grain fields, grassy cow pastures, hayfields, fencelines, brushy creekbottoms, thick

At left, Quail Forever President and CEO Howard Vincent shares the story of his double — or was it a miss — with Quail Forever National Board Member Jon Kohler.



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The hunting crew greets a glorious late-winter day in Alabama and plans strategy on the ample bobwhite coveys of Tom and Sue Ellen Lanier's Shenandoah Plantation.



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woodlots and forgotten corners — made for a patchwork of habitat that grew astounding numbers of quail coveys.

In fact, birds (and bird dogs) were so abundant that Union Springs and surrounding Bullock County served as Field Trial Capital of the World. We took an afternoon off from hunting to learn about it all from three delightful local historians — Misters Tony Gibson, Joe Varner and Reuben Richardson — at the French Press Bakery in Union Springs.

The community still maintains the field trial culture. A bird dog statue even anchors the town square, which is flanked by a full building-side mural of bird dogs, bobwhites and horseback hunters.

When the small farms failed, hardwoods and then pine forest took over. Quail suffered. Today, annual fire is the management tool used to clear forest and brush, opening up the understory to allow grass to flourish amongst a smattering of native longleaf and loblolly pines.

There's a reason bobwhites are called firebirds. The habitat is called pine savanna, and it is a magical place: scented of pine and anchored with waving, yellow-cured grass hiding your next exploding covey of firebirds.

Hospitality

You learn quickly that Southern hospitality focuses on your stomach. Between riding for the hunts and eating southern specialties (examples: fried chicken, chicken-fried steak, ham, grits dishes of all wonderful descriptions, collard greens, green beans, pecan pie), it's a wonder we didn't gain more weight.

I for one came back six pounds heavier and thought that a victory.

Beyond each plantation's talented resident cooks, we had the pleasure of dining on creations, including quail we'd shot, from a duo of local chefs with national credentials (see companion "Field to Fork in Alabama" story).

Most of all, friendships were forged — folks from all kinds of places and all walks of life, all sharing a common bond in the gamebird we love.



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Quail Forever National Board Member John Thames walks classic pine savanna quail habitat on Tom and Cindy Harris's Gusto Plantation.

By the end of the hunt, even our language had mixed. Southerners were saying "ya" and "you guys" while northerners had adopted "yes sir" or "yes ma'am" and "y'all" into their vocabularies.

Memories

Most hunters wish they could replay in their mind every moment of a special hunt in a special place.

The reality is, you come away with a few specific and special memories etched onto your mind: the rhythmic creak of a saddle; a vista of grass and majestic pines; the perfume of loblolly and longleaf; dropping a paired double of hen and cock bird; the genuine smiles of new friends.

And the whistles of bobwhites getting back together as you ride off in search of a new covey. 🐔



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** View a complete photo gallery of the Alabama Black Belt hunt and a history of Bullock county field trials, on quailforever.org.*

Get Involved

Two new Quail Forever chapters were formed during our visit to Alabama's Black Belt. Those new groups are looking for more folks interested in joining the chapter and attending banquets. Contact Andy Edwards at aedwards@quailforever.org to learn how to get involved.

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FIELD TO FORK IN ALABAMA

By Bob St. Pierre

One of the fastest growing segments of new hunters are people shouldering shotguns as “locavores” — hunting for the purpose of sourcing local meat. While hunting to fill the freezer isn’t a new concept, it is a real trend that’s bringing some millennials without any family hunting background to the fields and forests.

During our quail hunt with the Alabama Black Belt Adventures Association, our group was treated to meals prepared by two of the state’s best chefs, both of whom go out of their way to source local ingredients.

And they both happen to be avid quail hunters to boot.

Chef Christopher Hastings

Owner of two restaurants in Birmingham, Alabama (Hot and Hot Fish Club and Ovenbird), Christopher Hastings earned the James Beard Award in 2012 as the “Best Chef in the South.”

Chef Hastings joined us for Thursday morning’s hunt at Gusto Plantation before turning the day’s bagged birds into a lunch feast featuring grilled quail on a bed of southern black-eyed pea succotash (photo at right).

Chef David Bancroft

Chef Bancroft was born in Alabama, but raised in San Antonio, Texas, where his skills as a chef were fostered through barbecuing and smoking meats. Today, he puts that fusion between Texas BBQ and Alabama ingredients on display at his award-winning Acre Restaurant in Auburn, Alabama. In fact, Acre sits on an actual acre of

land where Bancroft grows fruits and vegetables for the menu.

You may also recognize Chef Bancroft’s name as the winner of Food Network’s *Iron Chef Showdown*, and as a James Beard Foundation semifinalist the last two years.

We were spoiled to have Chef Bancroft not only prepare our dinner on Tuesday night at



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Great Southern Outdoors Wildlife Plantation and hunt with us on Wednesday morning at Shenandoah Plantation, but we were also treated to a six-course feast at Acre Restaurant where an unbelievable duck and Conecuh sausage (a local treasure) dish was only outdone by deliciously spatchcocked and smoked bobwhite quail. 🦋



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