

That dog will hunt

Article and photographs by Tony Young

Unfortunately, quail hunting in Florida is not what it used to be. The population of the once-so-popular game bird has declined in our state by more than 70 percent since the sport's heyday back in the 1970s. The primary reason for this sharp decline is deterioration of quality habitat – a change known as succession. As the quail population shrank, so did another species – quail hunters.

Fortunately though for me, I know a guy who is still very passionate about the sport and does his part in keeping the tradition alive by quail hunting on Florida's public lands and breeding some mighty fine English pointers – something he has done for 30 years.

And when he invited me to go hunting the opening day of quail season this year – I jumped at the chance.

John Barksdale, 49, is the son-in-law of my dear next-door neighbor, Mrs. Jean Jones. John is a native Floridian and lives in Tallahassee but was born in the Gulf Coast town of Valparaiso. There, he attended nearby Okaloosa-Walton College and then moved to the capital city in 1981. In Tallahassee, he received a degree from Florida Agriculture & Mechanical University in



"James" points a wild covey of quail as "Tim" backs him, while John Barksdale prepares to flush the birds amid a superb quail habitat of wiregrass and longleaf pines.



John Barksdale and his best bird dog, Tubby, relax after an early morning training session at the Blue Springs Unit of Twin Rivers WMA in Hamilton County, owned by the Division of Forestry.

animal science, showing John's interest and love for animals.

The now-Florida Department of Agriculture lab technician said he grew up quail hunting with his father and four brothers on Eglin Air Force Base. John's father, Ronald Barksdale, was in the Air Force and, in 1940, ironically helped clear the land and built runways on auxiliary fields at the new base, which used to be the Choctawhatchee National Forest.

"Back in those days, quail hunting was big. Everyone was into it, and everyone owned bird dogs," John said.

John's father not only is credited for John's love of quail hunting but also his "addiction," as John calls it, for breeding English pointers.

John owns five pointers – four males and one female – and a six-month-old male Llewelin setter. The dogs are all registered with the Field Dog Stud Book, which recognizes breeds in the "pointing dog" category.

"I average two litters a year and have probably helped birth more than 300 puppies over the

years. All the pups we sell go to hunters," John said.

John trains his bird dogs, sometimes with the help of his good friend and hunting buddy, Benjie Mills, who owns quite a few English pointers himself.

"John's a regular bird dog 'junkie' – he knows as much about their lineage and history as anyone I know," Benjie said. "All you have to do is look around his house at all the pictures to see what kind of fanatic he is."

John enjoys training and hunting his dogs on "plantation-style" habitats like Blackwater Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Eglin and parts of the Apalachicola National Forest.

"I've never taken any of my dogs and competed in the field trials they have at Blackwater, but I've driven over and watched several times," John said. "Some of those dogs are amazing."

John does not use electronic collars on his dogs to train them like some hunters do. Instead, he prefers to let his dogs develop their "natural" instincts. He uses standard vocal commands to get

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his dogs to come when called and to hold point. John also uses a coach's whistle to assist in the training process.

"Usually by the time a dog's a year-and-a-half-old, you know if it's gonna make a good bird dog," John said. "A great quail dog's got to have a good nose, an insatiable desire to find birds and be able to point – and, to stay on point. They've also got to 'handle' for you and should be happy around people."

All of the members of John's family help out a great deal in caring for the puppies, and they each spend a lot of time with the dogs, which makes them more sociable, John said.

John recently trained his dogs on the pristine, 1,973-acre Blue Springs Unit of Twin Rivers WMA in Hamilton County to get them ready for the coming season. When training on private land, he often releases pen-raised quail when wild coveys are not present.

When his pups are 8 to 10 weeks old, John acclimates them to the sound of gunfire by shooting blanks with a .22-caliber pistol.

"Right now my most consistent dog is a 6-year-old male named Tubby. He's always out front hunting and handles very well without a lot of effort," John explained.

"As a puppy, Tubby started out slow. But my son had picked him out of the litter, and I knew Evan would've been upset if we didn't keep him," John continued.

John kept working with Tubby and putting him in birds, and eventually, John said, the

“light bulb” came on in Tubby’s head.

“I’m really glad I didn’t let Tubby go to someone else. As my friend Benjie says, patience is definitely a virtue when developing bird dogs,” John said.

The best bird dog John ever owned though was a female pointer named Hannah. Females often are easier to train – maybe because they tend to be more submissive.

“She was one of the toughest dogs I’ve ever hunted behind and had tremendous drive to find birds. And when she found ’em, she never bumped ’em,” John said, reminiscing.

Opening day finally came, and I was really excited about going quail hunting. The last time I had gone was back in the late 1980s when I was in college. Needless to say, some 15 years later, I was stoked to be going again.

As the two of us climbed into the cab of his pickup that morning, with all five of his pointers in the back, John continued to reflect on the past. He told me about his most memorable quail hunt as we hurried down the road headed for a section of the Apalachicola National Forest, which he historically knew to have birds.

“It was back in the mid ’70s, and my brother Ronnie and I were hunting Eglin. We found 22 different wild coveys that day – every time we turned around, a dog was on point,” John said excitedly. “It was a cold and overcast day, and the weather really had the birds moving around and feeding.”

As we neared the spot we would be hunting, I could only hope to experience what John had described.

“The thing about wild quail,” John said, “if they aren’t out feeding and moving around, it’s difficult to find them. I don’t care how good your dogs are.” **FW**

Ecosystem restoration benefits quail

Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative is helping to fund projects that will restore upland ecosystems to benefit species such as quail. One such project will lead to an unprecedented multi-agency effort to rejuvenate upland ecosystems by affecting landscape restoration on more than 100,000 acres of public and private lands. A cooperative program, the Upland Ecosystem Restoration Project (UERP) began in July.

Tall Timbers Research Station, nationally recognized for its quail research, coordinates the initiative aimed at enhancing upland habitat. Three state agencies, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), Division of Forestry and Department of Environmental Protection each gave \$20,000 toward the \$60,000 matching funds needed to take advantage of a \$300,000 grant from Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative.

“We will be assisting agencies with evaluation of potential restoration sites statewide, planning restoration actions, creating partnerships to help fund management and design restoration targets and monitoring strategies,” said



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Bill Palmer, wildlife biologist with Tall Timbers Research Station.

The idea sprang from a statewide summit held last year to enlist support of leaders and key stakeholders in public land management to focus on restoring early successional upland habitats.

“The project will help not only quail but several other birds including

the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker as well as more than 40 endangered or threatened plant species – all of which depend on the same open pine woods ecosystems for survival,” Palmer said.

Florida’s quail population has dropped between 3 and 5 percent each year for a total decrease of 70 percent since 1980. Experts say that is merely a symptom of a much bigger problem – loss of quality habitat. Where hunters in Florida were once harvesting about 2.5 million quail annually during the 1960s, they are now taking less than a quarter-million.

The FWC started Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative as a statewide effort to conserve wildlife before they become endangered. The Initiative centers on voluntary efforts aimed at creating partnerships to help implement Florida’s Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy – an action plan for conserving all wildlife through habitat conservation. The program offers grants to help partners implement parts of the strategy.

To learn more, visit MyFWC.com.