

COVEY RISE



THE CONSUMMATE QUAIL HUNTER

In the squinty-eyed view of veteran Texas quail hunters, Rick Snipes sets the bar.

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SHAGGILY WILD

The 6,000-acre Snipes Ranch boasts some of the finest bobwhite quail habitat in the Rolling Plains ecoregion and is comparable to scenes of the safaris of Africa.



With the rising sun at our backs and a soft west wind in our faces, we topped a gentle rise to behold the Texas of the imagination: a broad, grandly austere plain, its matrix of stalky forbs and plumed native grasses dotted with radial clumps of spearlike yucca. Here and there, umber mottes of shinnery muscled roughly from the fine sand. Taller-growing mesquites, their crookedly spreading branches still fringed with pale green leaves in early November, stippled the landscape to the far horizon. The light that filled this landscape was of rare purity; the sky that arched above it was unblemished and seemingly without end. To the north, a jutting prow of brick-red cliffs marked the serpentine course of the Salt Fork of the Brazos.

The authors of the Old Testament, it might occur to you, lived in places like this.

There were four of us on the Jeep. John Thames and I, the “shooting guests,” shared the elevated bench above the dog boxes; ranch manager Raul Lujan was behind the wheel. The man directing the show, our host Rick Snipes, occupied the handler’s seat attached to the front bumper.

Now, turning to us with a gleam in his eye, Rick asked, “How do you like the view?”

“Incredible,” John said. “It’s like something you’d expect to see on the plains of Africa.”

“The only thing that would improve it,” I added, “would be a bird dog on point.”

“I’m with you on that,” Rick nodded. “And these are the dogs to do it.”

“These” were Jill, a fancy white-and-liver pointer, and Tink, a powerful orange-ticked setter, who spend their days afield with Rick. With literally hundreds of coveys on their respective résumés, they’d been canvassing that big country like the savvy veterans they are—sweeping to the front, hitting all the birdy places, roaming far and wide, and looking good doing it.

To succeed in West Texas, a dog needs to be uncommonly tough, uncommonly tenacious, and possess a ton of bird sense. The territory simply demands it. To earn a place in the Snipes Ranch kennel, though, a dog must display yet another quality: that indefinable something known as *class*.

“Lana [Rick’s wife] asks me all the time how I decide which dogs to keep,” Rick explained as Raul eased the Jeep along. “I tell her it’s very simple: I keep the ones that put a smile on my face.

“Take Blanca, the young setter we ran earlier. She hasn’t held a point yet, but she makes me smile every time we put her down. Hell, Tink was a year and a half old before she pointed *anything*. She ran up every bird she found—and now, at age four, she’s one of the best dogs I’ve ever owned. One afternoon last year, as near as we could figure, she pointed 11 coveys in something like 50 minutes.”

“Who does that?” a mutual friend and lifelong quail hunter questions. “Who has the patience to give a dog that kind of time





to put it all together? A hundred years ago, maybe, but now? The guy's just unbelievable."

This is the kind of dog man Rick Snipes is: He bought Jill sight-unseen as a started dog, and very quickly decided that the seller, a professional trainer, had charged him far less than she was worth. So he wrote the man another check, essentially doubling the purchase price. Who does that, indeed.

The dogs hunted splendidly, but the birds—who clearly hadn't read the script—made themselves scarce. We crossed the plain and dipped down into a shallow, troughlike valley, a place where the cover tightened.

"When I bought this ranch in 1993," Rick told us as we waited on the dogs, "the mesquite was so thick right here that you had to get on your hands and knees to cross it. We've opened it up considerably since then but my philosophy has always been to not overmanage the habitat.

"I operate on the 'good miss' principle," he continued. "When

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a professional golfer's shooting for a tight pin, he wants to be sure that if he misses the green, he misses in a place that still gives him a good chance to save par. I decided early on that if I miss, it's going to be on the side of too few cows and too much cover."

For the record, Rick and Lana graze 60 certified organic black Angus on their 6,000 acres, along with five Texas longhorns that Rick calls "Lana's pets." How many cattle did the previous owners typically run? Try 300 on for size. It seems fair to say that with the change of ownership came a change of priorities.

Jill was the first of the dogs to show up, sprinting in from the left only to flash into a thrilling point, her tail so high it was as if it were being pulled toward the heavens by an invisible string. "Here we go," Rick said. We'd just started to scramble off the Jeep when Tink hove into view. Spying her bracedmate dead ahead, the setter hit the brakes so hard she raised dust, morphing into a feathered lance such as Edmund Osthaus might have painted. It was the quail hunter's dream tableau, the scene that, charged with excitement and tense with anticipatory drama, never grows old—and never plays out the same way.

We deployed with John on the left, Rick in the middle, and me

PREPARATION AND OPPORTUNITY

The attention Snipes' dogs receive before and after the hunt helps them perform at their best.

on the right. The birds were having none of it, though. Screened by mesquite, the covey—a big one—blew out to our left with that emphatic *swoosh* that seems to suck the oxygen out of the air. John marked the singles down in a swale leading gently uphill toward a stand of live oak, but even then, the little so-and-sos didn't play fair. Finally, one bird tarried a bit too long, gave John a good look as it crossed right-to-left against a bright blue sky, and folded obligingly at the crack of his side-by-side. Sadie, the doughty yellow Lab who is Rick's pickup dog—she rides on the bench seat of the Jeep until her services are required—promptly scooped it up.

"Nice shot, John," Rick said as they admired the handsome, pear-plump cock bird. "That covey sure beat us up, though."

In the months since Park Cities Quail announced Rick Snipes as the 2018 recipient of the T. Boone Pickens Lifetime Sportsman Award—an award previously bestowed on Tom Brokaw, Delmar Smith, George Strait, and Ted Turner, among others—he's

frequently been described as "the consummate quail hunter." That sounds like PR, but in fact, it's how he's thought of by other dead-serious Texas quail hunters—some of the toughest, hardest-shelled, most bottom-line-oriented characters you'll ever cut the tracks of. If you can't walk the walk to the satisfaction of this crowd, they'll kick your ass from here to the Red River.

Metaphorically, I mean.

To put it as simply as I know how, Rick Snipes shoots the finest shotguns ever made over the finest bird dogs ever bred on one of the prettiest pieces of quail country on the planet. And until macular degeneration began to erode his vision, it's doubtful that anyone with a comparable "sample size" could boast a higher lifetime shooting percentage on bobwhite quail. When Rick missed a quail—or any other feathered target, for that matter—it was front-page news. This is a man who made a double on ruffed grouse the first time he ever shot at the birds, and went two days, in a high "cycle" year in Minnesota, before missing one!

"I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about," he said with a shrug. "I'd grown up hunting quail in the briers in South Carolina, so I felt completely at home hunting grouse in the briers in Minnesota. The only difference was that instead of picking one little bird to shoot at out of a rise of 10 or 12, I could shoot at one big bird at a time."

We grouse hunters in the "mere mortal" category tend to

POINTS OF PRIDE

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glaze over and go a little slack-jawed at that.

His idea of challenging wingshooting? Long crossing doves—long as in 50 yards—with a 28-gauge Luciano Bosis choked full-and-full.

The point being that in a culture where fathers are prouder of their sons for doubling on quail than for graduating from college, a man who handles a shotgun the way Rick Snipes does is regarded with a certain amount of awe. The top-to-bottom quality of his kennel, which by acclamation ranks second to none, only enhances his stature. But what ultimately makes Rick not only the consummate quail hunter but the *complete* quail hunter is this: His encyclopedic knowledge of bobwhite quail biology, behavior, and management, and his quarter century of hands-on experience transforming his 6,000-acre ranch into something resembling the platonic ideal of West Texas quail country.

One January afternoon in 2016, Rick, Lana, their friend Chip Martin, and I started hunting around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. By the time we quit at dusk, we'd moved 45 coveys of birds—and no, that is not a misprint. The dogs put on a hell of a show. But here's the thing: At most, we covered half a section of ground. This led Rick to quip, "The only way to fit another quail onto this ranch would be to use a shoehorn."

This raises the important point that there's nothing manicured about the Snipes Ranch. There are no "courses," and there's certainly no feeder line. It's as shaggily wild and natural as it could possibly be, a haven for all manner of native flora and fauna where Lana has identified no fewer than 45 species of wildflowers. The ranch is a testament to the Snipes' devoted stewardship, to Rick's artful touch in managing the land, and to his adherence to Aldo Leopold's declaration that "the value of a head of game is in inverse proportion to the artificiality of its origin."

One morning while John and I were hunting with Rick, he mused: "I try not to get so wrapped up in managing the land and embracing the role of 'quail steward' that it ceases to be fun. Sometimes the hardest part of all is managing your expectations. I get mad at Mother Nature a lot, but it's never done me a damn bit of good."

Prior to moving to the ranch full time in 2001—about 75 miles north of Abilene, it's so remote that a friend once asked Rick very seriously if he was in the Witness Protection Program—he was chairman and CEO of Barry, Evans, Joseph & Snipes, a purveyor of designer life insurance products based in Charlotte, North Carolina. He'd become a kind of insurance *wunderkind* after graduating in 1971 from nearby Davidson University, where, as a rangy 6-foot, 7-inch forward, he'd played basketball under legendary coach Lefty Driesell. It was during a business trip to New York City in 1977 that he met Lana, who was a buyer for the Detroit-based Hudson's department store. Six months later, they were married.

They'd originally planned to spend winters on the ranch, but for a variety of reasons decided in 2001 to move lock, stock, and barrel. Rick, Lana, and their son Bailey lived in what's now

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their guest cottage for several years, and in 2005 moved into the "big house." Designed by Lana with the help of an architect, it's imposing but not ostentatious, with walls of Texas limestone, 14-foot ceilings, a hybrid Western and quail-hunting theme décor (highlighted by Lana's paintings and the full-sized Walter Matia pointer that stands atop the baby grand piano), and an overall sense of bigness entirely appropriate to the environment—physical, cultural, and historical.

"I have friends who still can't believe I like living here," Lana remarked one balmy afternoon as we sipped iced tea on their patio. "But I love it. I think you're born with either a city soul or a country soul, and I was definitely born with a country soul."

Rick, for his part, was perfectly happy living the life of the rancher-sportsman. But then, in 2007, the nonprofit Rolling Plains Quail Research Foundation (RPQRF) was established on a 4,700-acre property near Roby, Texas, about 35 miles northwest of Abilene. Its mission is to serve as a living laboratory for bobwhite and scaled quail research, a demonstration area for effective management practices, and a learning center for hunters, landowners, and anyone else with an interest in these grand little birds.

Above and beyond this mission, though, the vision of the RPQRF's founders was that its work might serve to stem, and ultimately to push back, the tide of bobwhite quail decline—a decline that's been called "the greatest wildlife tragedy of our lifetime" and that's made the Rolling Plains ecoregion of West Texas and Oklahoma one of the bird's last strongholds.

Rick wasn't technically one of the founders, but when it came time to assemble a board of directors he was the obvious



BOOTS ON THE GROUND

The hunting day begins in the “boot barn,” where the dogs are outfitted with sandbur-resistant footwear.

choice for president. He had all the credibility in the world on the quail side, he'd run a hugely successful business, and he believed passionately in the mission of the RPQRF. He was charismatic, forceful, persuasive—the kind of person who commands attention. It was the perfect skill set for the job, and Rick's leadership helped propel the RPQRF to the forefront of the quail conservation arena. (Figuring 10 years in the hot seat was long enough, in November of 2017, Rick handed the RPQRF reins to the next best man in line, Justin Trail.)

In 2011, having witnessed quail numbers fall off a cliff on his ranch in 2010 in a way that couldn't be connected to habitat or weather, Rick directed Dr. Dale Rollins, the executive director of the RPQRF, to implement Operation Idiopathic Decline (OID). Designed to determine if disease, parasites, toxins in the environment, or some other “X” factor could be behind these inexplicable mortality events, OID has come to define the cutting edge of quail research.

It hasn't been cheap, and it hasn't been easy. But now, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Ron Kendall and his associates at Texas Tech University, a parasitic eyeworm that can devastate quail populations on a landscape scale has been identified; an effective anthelmintic to combat this parasite has been developed; and trials aimed at delivering it to wild quail via medicated feed have yielded extremely encouraging results. (Stay abreast of progress in this groundbreaking effort by visiting quailresearch.org.)

“We're not going to eradicate the eyeworm,” Rick empha-

sized when I asked him about OID, “and we can't control the weather. That will always be the most important factor affecting quail populations in this part of the world. Our hope is that we can prevent the kind of devastating eyeworm outbreak that can cause quail populations to crash even when the weather's favorable.

“The challenge ahead will be figuring out the most effective, efficient way to deliver the medication, and I'm confident that we will. I tell people that right now we're still in the ‘bag phone’ stage, but it won't be long until we're in the ‘iPhone’ stage.”

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Even the best dogs can't always be on the right side of the wind, though, and as we approached the big house a covey roared up within spitting distance on the left side of the Jeep. They'd barely gotten airborne when another covey flushed from the same tangle, and as we watched them rocket toward a clump of mesquite they triggered yet *another* covey to rise.

Rick had been a little down in the mouth over the early returns, but now he brightened some.

“You know,” he said, “we may have some birds on this ranch after all.” 🐾

NATURE'S COURSE

A disciple of Aldo Leopold and past-President of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Foundation, Snipes is deeply devoted to the cause of conservation.

