



# *A Bird Hunter's* Testament

*Rick Snipes*

Some time has passed since we've stood on a cold, frosty morning, as tense with anticipation as the two pointers who wait like coiled springs for the whistle signal that will send them in search of the prize we both seek: a covey of wild bobwhite quail. It is this search and this prize that bonds us, drives us and even defines us.

*Celebrating the artful nature  
of bird hunting*

*Eldridge Hardie*

"PANHANDLE COVEY," OIL PAINTING BY ELDRIDGE HARDIE

Technically, the object of the dogs' search is not the bird, *per se*, but its scent. It's a fine distinction, perhaps, but bird hunting, more than any other form of hunting I know, is an exercise in making fine distinctions: about dogs, about guns, about hunting partners, about who we are and what we value as sportsmen. This elevates bird hunting above most other fieldsports, in my view. At the risk of sticking my neck out, I believe it makes it more artful.

The artistry of the dogs dwarfs our own, of course. While their focus is singular and tight—their incomparable noses ignoring any scent but that of the sought-after quarry—ours is broader and more fluid, bringing into the frame of our consciousness a lifetime of memories. Unified by a feeling of joy so intense that it plays almost like a musical score, these images, perceptions and sensations unspool to our earliest beginnings as hunters.

Remember when you were young and the chance to spend a day outdoors was reward enough? How many happy days traipsing afield are we allowed in one lifetime? And how many of those days does it take to make a bird hunter?

Through our lives we have changed: from being thrilled simply to be out, to going afield wound tight with expectations; from hunting only with a buddy, to hunting with a buddy and a dog. At first this dog was usually a cast-off from someone else's kennel. Still, its presence as part of the team increased both our odds for success and the richness of the experience.

I suspect that Delmar Smith was right when he said that in the life of every dogman there is a dog that *makes* him. Mine was a pointer named Brisket, formally Rick's Lonestar Brisket, a son of the famous field-trial champion Pork Roll and destined to become famous himself—albeit in the small circle of people lucky enough to hunt with him. They came to call Brisket my “hip pocket dog,” his bird-finding ability so uncanny that it was as if he always carried a quail in his hip pocket that he could pull out and point when things got slow.

What I learned from Brisket was how *little* I knew, how barely I'd scratched the surface in my understanding of the habits and behavior of game, the bobwhite in particular. His nose became my window onto the bobwhite's world; his spirit, tenacity and sheer, God-given ability to dig up birds under any conditions were an inspiration. And a challenge: I needed a lot of work to be worthy of Brisket's company.

Brisket opened my eyes to the realization that, as hunters of wild birds behind great dogs, our role is to bear witness to the dogs' greatness and confirm their genius with our guns. As José Ortega y Gasset put it in *Meditations on Hunting*, “Man, when confronted with his evanescent instinct in failing to uncover the elusive game, turned to another animal for help . . . and made a partner of the dog, on whose instincts he came to rely.”

This brings up something else I've learned from Brisket and the other dogs, pointers and Labs both, whose company I've been privileged to share: If their instincts are sound, the best thing I can do as a trainer is take them hunting—and stay out of their way. The birds will teach them everything truly important they need to know. It's like being a coach who assembles a team of highly skilled ath-

letes or a CEO who surrounds himself with good people: You give them a little structure and the right tools, and then you let them do their jobs.

There's an old adage that every bird hunter gets one great dog in his lifetime, but my experience puts the lie to that. I suppose it's partly a reflection of the amount of time I've spent afield chasing birds (and the importance I attach to this pursuit), but since Brisket I've been blessed to have great dogs in my kennel with regularity. More than I deserve, to be sure. After Brisket came Sport, then Ellie, then Frickie, a free spirit whose love of hunting was infectious and whose bird-finding ability was second to none.

A girl named Spike was next in my personal Hall of Fame. One season she pointed 10 coveys in an hour's time on three separate occasions! You run out of superlatives to describe performances like that. Spike was one of those dogs to whom fences and heavy cover were inconveniences, not impediments, and range was an abstract concept. When my hunting buddies commented on this, my stock reply was, “Spike has a very low tolerance for country that doesn't hold birds.”

Most recently there was Scarky. In retrospect he may have been the best of them all: invariably to the front, never needing a whistle and always (or at least it seemed that way) pointing birds. It was as if he knew in advance where the coveys were and simply went from one to the next, connecting the dots on the map that he carried in his brain.

And those are just the pointers. The Labs, Babe and Daisy, made their own lasting marks—and introduced me to the special joy of a dog whose entire being, revolves around *you*.

**H**aving secured a dog's irreplaceable partnership, some of us begin to examine ourselves through their eyes. How do we stack up? In what areas are we lacking?

Bird hunting thus gives us cause to examine our skills, our conduct and our motives. Who can deny that to be held in high esteem by his human and canine partners is a large part of the satisfaction that comes from bird hunting? The beauty of bird hunting is that, within the broad parameters granted us by the state, we set our own rules. It is not illegal to ground swat a covey running down a road, but would you hunt with someone who did? Would you shoot a bird that flushed in front of your buddy? (Well, maybe—but only as a teaching aid!)

As George Bird Evans, who revered ruffed grouse the way I revere bobwhite quail, put it in *An Affair With Grouse*, “Nowhere more than in the shooting field can a man show himself such an ass, or prove himself such a gentleman.” The age-old test of ethics applies every day: What would you do if you thought no one was watching?

Bird hunting, then, is a kind of journey: ethical, spiritual and, in some cases, geographical. I started quail hunting on scrubby little tracts in South Carolina that were overlooked by the “real” bird hunters, and now I'm privileged to own and live on 6,000 acres of bobwhite heaven in West Texas. This has allowed me to assume a new role as a steward of the land, a role governed and informed by the same ethic I developed through the years as a bird hunter. My sense of responsibility has deepened as well, as I'm reminded on a

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daily basis that what makes everything else possible is the land.

It really is this simple: The land comes first.

After living on our ranch for more than a decade, we can't walk 100 yards without subconsciously evaluating all of the factors that affect our birds. We've come from looking at the country in the black-and-white terms of "grass and brush" to a point where we can name almost every species of vegetation that grows on the place. We know how land practices influence those plants too. It's a deeper, richer, infinitely more nuanced perspective. And it's another aspect of the journey.

But still it doesn't rain. And yet again the temperature hits 110 degrees. That greatly anticipated frosty morning looks much further away than the calendar promises. So what do we do? We keep the faith and turn our attention to the most important management task of all: managing our expectations.

We survive the tough times by rekindling the childlike sense of wonder we had when the birds and the sport were new to us. We rediscover the joy that comes from just being loose in a beautiful part of God's world; we take special pleasure in the company of a good friend and the performances of wonderful dogs. Instead of obsessing over the end result, we learn to savor the process, admiring our dogs' graceful strides and cracking tails, the intelligence they display in using the wind and searching the cover, their almost supernatural endurance.

And when they do make game, finding a covey and pointing with that fierce and all but fathomless intensity? We kill a bird—to honor the dogs, to honor the quail and to be true to ourselves. We observe the holy ritual, closing the circle. And we complete the cycle that, for me and for those who share my passion for the land and for this bird, goes on 365 days a year.

*Rick Snipes, of Aspermont, Texas, is the president of the Board of Trustees of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch. This essay was adapted from one that will appear in a collection honoring the career of eminent quail biologist Dr. Fred Guthery of Oklahoma State University.*

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