

A Quail Hunt with the Hemingways

Story and Photos by Douglas Dear



Kyle takes a nice shot at a high-flying quail.

The Hemingway family—no relation to Papa Ernest—has been offering quail hunts on their farm for more than 40 years. Their land holdings encompass more than 15,000 acres, including the Town of Hemingway, in eastern South Carolina between Charleston and Myrtle Beach. The centerpiece of their quail hunting operation is the Back Woods Quail Club that Rick Hemingway started in

1991. He has turned it into a premier, full-service hunting lodge and has also built one of the finest sporting clays courses in the South.

Rick's father, Edsel Hemingway, began offering hunts to "Northerners" (which, in their minds, would include Virginians) back in the 1960s. Edsel, who also owns the Hemingway Ford dealership, the local gas station and parts of a number

of other area businesses, would offer up country fare prepared by the family cook and lodging in one of the tenant houses. Things were done on a small scale, typically no more than four hunters at a time. A number of hunters from the Richmond area who started coming for the quail hunting and Southern hospitality with their fathers in the 1960s still come today with their sons and grandsons. Today, the food and accom-



Sam on point



Sydney instructing Conrad as he shoots his first quail

Sam and Fred on point as the author approaches for the flush



modations have become a little more elaborate—Southern casual with lots of sporting prints and furniture by renowned artist Bob Timberlake who hunts the property several times a year.

The large population of wild quail that originally brought so many Northerner guests has unfortunately faded in numbers much the way the populations have declined in Virginia. In South Carolina they say the problem is the fire ants, agricultural-practice changes and predators. But just as in Virginia, no one really knows why the numbers of wild quail continue to plummet. The Hemingways have combated this problem with an aggressive stocking program of the hardest flying pen-raised birds available. And while pen-raised birds are never quite the same as wild birds, the habitat, dogs and expert guides make for a hunting experience that is pretty close to an old-time South Carolina quail hunt.

About 10 years ago my father and I began hunting with Rick Hemingway after my parents retired to the Black River in Georgetown, South Carolina. As a child I did more fishing than hunting with my father, but he could not spend as much time in the outdoors as he would have liked. In my late 20s and 30s, I began to get him more involved in the outdoors both as a fly fisherman and a wingshooter.

As my own sons began to get older, I started taking them out with me as often as possible. Kyle, my oldest, begged to come along with Dad and me when he was about seven years old. For two years he walked with us in the pines and scrub, watching champion dogs go on point and experiencing the excitement of the flush and shot—without taking a shot of his own. When Kyle turned 10, Rick had his stock maker custom-build a short stock for a Berretta 20-gauge automatic. Rick, who is the current South Carolina Sporting Clays Champion, prefers the automatic for young hunters because the gas system that chambers the shell also greatly reduces the

recoil. Rick's expertise with young hunters was the impetus for his now very popular one-week children's camps that they host several times each summer. After a few lessons on the skeet range, and a number of lessons on gun safety, Kyle was ready to hunt with Dad. We followed the same steps with my younger son, Conrad, and this year he too was ready to hunt, not just follow along. Unfortunately, this year would not be a three-generation hunt because my father was not up to all the walking as he was recovering from minor heart surgery.

The boys and I met Rick and his guides on an early January morning. It was a crisp 45 degrees, but, typical of South Carolina that time of year, it would be 65 degrees by 10 a.m. We had hunted a few times with our guide, Sydney. He has been hunting quail in the Carolina pines since he was a boy. Now past 60, he still guides five or six days a week.

We loaded up in his pickup with three of his champion dogs—an English Pointer named Maggie and his two English Setters named Fred and Sam. After a short ride, we arrived at one of the several dozen 50-acre tracts that are rotated for the hunts. Safety is always the most important thing on a hunt. But when you have children along, it is really the only thing I find myself thinking about. My preferred method is to have the boys rotate shooting with me. My gun acts as a backup for the birds that the boys miss. Another safe method is for the guide to take one boy and I take the other. We stand side by side about five yards apart, and both boys get ready to shoot based on which way the bird flies. When you get a double or a triple flush, both boys can shoot.

It didn't take long for Fred to get a point, and the hunt was on. Fred had the rock-solid point and steadiness that comes from hunting five or six days out of the week. Sydney flushed the bird and Conrad dropped his first quail with a long rising shot. A solid shot in the Carolina-blue sky.

I always tell the boys that the only good shot is one with plenty of sky and no risk of hitting the dog, the guide or each other. A shot can never be taken back, and that is an immense responsibility for any man, let alone a young man. Before we had much time to revel in Conrad's first quail, Sam was on point, and Kyle shot a nice bird that climbed steadily and hooked to the right.

We walked the pine brush, taking turns. The boys each shot about eight birds over the course of the morning hunt. I had about the same number. Each shot came after a steady point of the great bird dogs and the flush of our guide. As we walked and talked, I was proud of how my boys enjoyed the hunt and accepted the responsibility that bird hunting teaches. Safety is always first and safe, responsible hunting allows us all to enjoy the bounty of nature. We loaded the dogs into the truck and headed back to the clubhouse. The staff cleaned and iced our birds for what would be a three-generation quail feast that night. My boys know well my motto of always eating what we harvest and never harvesting more than we can eat.

As we headed back to the Black River, I looked over at the boys and thought about how we had connected in the woods with the nature that I love—no small feat in this age of video games and MTV. As we pulled into the driveway, my father met us and asked all the usual questions about shots, birds and dogs. He could see from

my smile that we had had another great day in Hemingway. The next generation of bird hunters is now a part of our family's future. Later that night, as we savored the Southern-fried quail and gravy, I heard the words I had been waiting for—"Hey, Dad, when are we going back for another quail hunt?"

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