



Hunting the bird of the South in old Florida

by Thomas R. Pero

THE ENGLISH SETTER FROZE, ITS LITHE FEATHERY WHITE tail high in the air. "Move ahead to the right," directed Bill Thacker, who was decked out in fluorescent orange with various whistles and training devices draped from his belt. As I walked briskly with my 20-gauge Beretta over-under shotgun held aloft from my chest, fingering the safety, I could hear faint rustling and chirping.

"Get the bird, get the bird!" Bill said excitedly, thrusting his right arm forward, palm of his hand extended, while a sleek black Labrador retriever plunged into the palmetto thicket inches ahead of the rock-steady setter's pink and black wet, quiver-

ing nose. Bill was right behind, whacking away at the broad, green fleshy leaves with a stiff, three-foot brown leather flushing whip.

The whirring wings of the bobwhite quail filled the brightening morning air. They looked like a swarm of brown and gray 10-inch-fat bumblebees.

Bam! I pulled the trigger while peering down the barrels at a rocketing blur of feathers disappearing to my right. Bam! I shot left.

"You were over the first one and didn't swing through the second," Bill casually observed. I ejected the yellow plastic shells from my gun. The air smelled

ABOUT THE CLUB

Pine Creek Sporting Club (www.pinecreeksportingclub.com, 561-514-9920) in Okeechobee, Fla., features guided wing-shooting for bobwhite quail and pheasant. Owners occupy luxurious ranches and cabins. A \$3 million main lodge overlooks a five-acre lake. The club is a 75-minute drive from both Orlando and West Palm Beach. Private jets land on a 5,700-foot paved runway at Okeechobee. There is also a helicopter landing pad on site.



burnt; the autumn sky looked empty. But I knew I was fortunate to be hunting with one of the country's best gamebird-dog trainers. Thacker is a large, tough man with a warm smile and gentle demeanor. He's known for taking dogs others have given up on—or dogs that have given up on their trainers—and turning them into eager, effective hunters. We went on to flush another dozen coveys. And I managed to shoot straight and swing through a few times.

Thacker happily goes to work every day to a boisterous kennel of 48 pointers, setters, spaniels and retrievers at Pine Creek Sporting Club in Okeechobee, Fla., a 2,500-acre private reserve in palmetto cattle country. Weathered wooden houses here have steep tin roofs. Spanish moss hangs from the low, massive branches of 60-foot oaks with four-foot trunks. The song of crickets fills the damp night blackness. Wild hogs roam the swamps. This is a long way from South Beach.

One thousand acres of inviting hunting fields are cultivated on a grid, developed through burning, roller chopping and mowing. Four hundred more are being developed. Between scattered islands of palmetto are lush prairies of re-emergent native Florida bunchgrasses: wiregrass, chalky bluestem, broom sedge. Crews are getting ready to plant some 100,000 longleaf pines.

The robust mixture is important in providing distinct habitats for feeding, roosting and sanctuary.

"Quail like edges," Thacker explained. "You won't find them in a straight field of grass. They want cover where they can find insects and seeds. They would rather walk on dirt but under vegetation. It gives them protection from hawks and eagles, too."

As Bill drove me around the ranch in a customized high-wheel, open-air quail wagon built on a Ford Suburban chassis, I noticed the thick canvas gauntlets reaching from his boots to his knees. "Rattlers," he said. Once he was stepping over a log and heard the electrifying buzz. He looked down between his legs. All he could see was an enormous brown diamond. "Toss me the gun," he whispered to one of his hunters. The damn thing was empty! "Shells," he called out. And miraculously he caught one, slammed shut the breech, pointed toward the ground and unleashed a fatal blast. "Some people say a rattlesnake's strike is so quick that it must have struck at the muzzle flame," he said.

It is the only wildlife trophy he has mounted in his home. The skin is five feet long.



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