

DOGGONE B L U E S

BY RON TAYLOR

THINK BOBWHITES ARE THE ONLY QUAIL TO HOLD A POINT? **THINK AGAIN.**

The last few years have been challenging ones for bobwhite quail hunters in Texas. Most parts of the state for which the bobwhite are so well known have been in one of our famous down cycles. But blue quail (or scaled quail as they're also known), which inhabit much of the southwestern U.S., including West Texas, offer bird hunters a much-needed option for both hunter and dog. Blues are similar to bobs in many ways, but they seem to be better survivors during tough times, resulting in more stable populations.

Like many bird hunters, I've heard for years that, "You can't hunt blues with dogs," or "Those birds won't hold a point and you'll wind up walking your legs off for nothing." So I was a little dubious when I met James Collier and he assured me that the opposite was true. James operates Collier Kennels in Decatur, Texas, and has spent more than four decades hunting and training bird dogs. James operates several large leases in the "big country" located west of San Angelo. He also offers guided bird hunts in this same area. So when the chance came in February 2006, I jumped at the chance to hunt with James and resolve the issue of "the blues" for myself.

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I joined James and his band of happy hunters on one of his many leases in the big country. I think they were such happy hunters because of their good fortune to learn the truth about "the blues." Many hunters in the group had traveled a great distance for the chance

birds' set-down point before they moved away. In spite of extremely dry conditions (no rain since October of 2005), James' pointer Smart found the birds within a 100 feet of where they'd landed. The covey flushed when we were about 10 yards away, and two birds went down. I had seen my first proof

Donny had never considered his mortality in the context of bird hunting. Exploding out of his easy chair like a blue from a cactus patch he exclaimed, "I gotta hunt this afternoon!" I naturally concurred, and we headed out the door to join James.

Donny's decision to stay was a

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to hunt this special land of gentle hills and sweeping vistas. Mike, Mr. Jimmy, and Vaughn hailed from Mississippi, Billy and Glenn were from Louisiana, and Donny had come down from Oklahoma. Most have been on the lease for a number of years and refer to their host as "Dundee"—as in crocodile—rather than James, for while he hails from the deep woods of Louisiana, according to his hunters, his ancestry is mysterious. They're not sure that he's completely human.

The evening before our hunt I was privileged to share fine food and the camaraderie of dog lovers and sportsmen. Much of the foods were Cajun specialties prepared by Glen Poche from Baton Rouge. His preparations undoubtedly added to the happy mood. Not to be outdone, Mike Daughdrill from Centreville, Mississippi, prepared a large brisket that was the best I've ever had. And I *really* like brisket. These guys should get together and open a restaurant. Sitting at the long dining table, listening to everyone's hunting tales, I thought to myself, *If the hunting tomorrow is half as good as the companionship and food I've got it made.*

The first morning of our hunt, James, Donny Winslow, and I loaded dogs and gear into "Mabel" the Jeep and Donnie's truck. Within two or three minutes of pulling onto the lease, a covey of birds flushed near the road. Hunters, dogs, and guns piled out fast to reach the

that blues hold for a point when they have sufficient cover.

This pattern continued the rest of the morning with the dogs finding four more coveys. One was located on a hillside with fairly sparse cover, not much except scattered bunch grasses and chunks of flint rock. That covey held for some time but flushed before we got within shooting range because of the open terrain. In all we wound up with 10 birds for a few hours shooting and had opportunities at many more.

We broke for lunch and a rest for both hunters and dogs. This terrain, though beautiful, tires both man and beast fairly quickly—and in many areas, the larger variety of prickly pear cactus is about the friendliest plant you'll find. After lunch, James did a few chores while Donny and I relaxed in the house. Unfortunately, Donny was suffering from that terrible hunter's disease often known as "get back"—guilt that he should return to his job in Oklahoma. He was also concerned that the wind, which had been mild during the morning but now seemed to be steadily increasing and might ruin the rest of the hunt.

"Maybe I should go on home and pass on the afternoon hunt," he said to me.

I casually replied, "Well, you know best what you need to do. Of course, you will *never* have this afternoon again!"

A startled look crossed Donny's face, which then changed quickly to one resembling sheer terror. Apparently

fortunate one. We were rewarded with one of the best afternoons of hunting either of us had experienced. The wind gusted at times and the temperatures that had started in the low 60s dropped to the 50s as the hunt proceeded in the glow of what could have passed for an October afternoon, but James' experienced English pointer Easy and Donny's English pointer Centa did the job.

The first covey we found was near the road and a cattle corral. We saw them too late, and our vehicles caused them flush through a line of trees. By the time we got into the field, the birds had scattered and we never found the covey. I did find a single and had my first experience with VTO (vertical take off) as practiced by blue quail. Generally blues flush just like bobwhites, but even so often a bird will flush straight up for 40 feet or so before leveling off. I was a little taken by surprise, but thankfully made the shot.

The closer the sun came to the horizon, the better the hunting became. The sight of the dogs working birds in the tall, swaying, native grasses backlit by the winter sun was well beyond intoxicating. I found myself wishing I could go on and on.

This great hunt was made even better by the experience of negotiating through this terrain with James at the helm of "mature" Jeep, Mabel. James' approach negotiating this rugged country was

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run over anything that blocked our path other than good-sized mesquite trees, and when he angled Mabel down one especially steep, rocky ravine, I found myself doubting our chances of survival. At the bottom, we all breathed a little easier.

As much as I was impressed with the dogs' ability to handle this world of thorns, Mabel was the stand out. My memories of the hunt will always include the West Texas wind whistling through the tall native grasses, Mabel groaning as she bounced down ravines over large chunks of flint rock, and the slapping sound on her belly from various thorn bushes. After looking at the wear and tear on my beloved Chippewa bird boots, I couldn't believe that the Jeep's tires could hold up to more than a day or two of this adventure.

Mabel was a two-seater, so Donny, as the youngest, got sandwiched between seats amid equipment and hunting clothes. I told him he had a built-in excuse if he missed any birds because he

couldn't possibly have normal blood circulation in that position. He didn't need it. As I recall, Donny didn't miss any quail—maybe that was why Mike Daughdrill had introduced him as the "Oklahoma Flash." On one occasion, Donny had followed up on a single with the pointer Easy and come back shaking his head in amazement saying, "That bird would not stop walking. Easy pointed it a bunch of times before he flew and I got him." Donny spent the rest of the hunt trying to convince James to part with Easy.

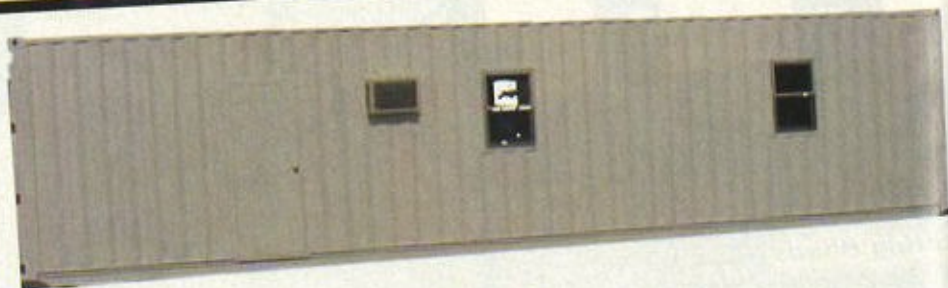
The last covey of the day proved to be a very large one, perhaps 30 or more birds. As we approached the locked-up dogs we fanned out into a semi-circle. When the covey flushed, several of the birds went completely vertical, like miniature fighter jets. We downed two, and the surviving birds then leveled off at 50 feet or so before taking off. This is a challenging and fun shot to take, and I have never seen a bobwhite flush in this manner.

By the afternoon's end, the dogs had located and pointed nine coveys, each averaging 15 to 20 birds, and we ended with 22 blues between Donny and myself. I'm very grateful to James for introducing me to the reality of hunting blue quail with dogs. (One caveat must be made here. When blues are heavily pressured, they become very wary and difficult to hunt. James is careful to manage and distribute hunting pressure on the thousands of acres he has.) I think the popular conception that blues won't hold for pointing dogs results from the experiences of hunters who pursue this species in the desert-like terrain that makes up much of their range. But as James and his dogs proved time and again, blues will hold for dogs when they have a place to hide. One quail hunter with decades of bird hunting experience once told James, "I never dreamed that blues could be so much fun to hunt." I couldn't agree more, and I'll never think of "having the blues" in quite the same way again. 🐾

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