

A blue perched atop a prickly pear.



My Blues Heaven

Scaled Quail Will Hold For Dogs—If There's Sufficient Cover BY RON TAYLOR

Like many bird hunters I have heard for years that you can't hunt blue quail with dogs. "Those birds won't hold a point and you'll spend your day chasing dust" was the conventional wisdom and the admonition I heard from virtually all quail hunters, no matter how many decades of bird hunting experience they had. So I was a little confused 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.

Lucky holds a covey during a mid-afternoon hunt.



My Blues Heaven

In early February this past year I jumped at the chance to join James and resolve the issue of "the blues" for myself. I joined James and his band of merry men on one of his many leases in the big country of West Texas near San Angelo. I refer to them as merry men because that is what they were, in no small part, I think, because of their good fortune in learning the truth about blue (or scaled) quail.

Most hunters in the group had traveled a great distance for the chance 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 was 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. We know that he came from the deep woods of Louisiana but, according to his hunters, his ancestry is mysterious and rumored to include alligators and bobcats.

The evening before our hunt I was privileged to share the fine food prepared by Glen Poché from Baton Rouge. No doubt his food added to the happy mood—it was exactly what you'd expect from someone named Poché from Baton Rouge. (We're all hoping that he decides to open a restaurant when he retires.) If you're ever driving through South

dogs found four more coveys. One covey was located on a hillside with fairly sparse cover except for 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. We wound up with 10 birds after a few hours of hunting, and we had shooting opportunities at many more.

We broke for lunch and a rest for both hunters and dogs. This terrain, while beautiful, tires both species fairly quickly. In many areas, the larger variety of prickly pear is about the friendliest plant you'll find. After lunch James did a few chores while Donny and I relaxed in the house. Donny was suffering from that dreaded hunter's disease often known as "returnitis"—guilt that he should return to Oklahoma and to work.

He was also concerned that the wind, which was mild during the morning, 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.

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 and changed quickly to one resembling sheer terror. Bolting out of his easy chair like a blue quail from a prickly pear patch, he exclaimed,

Preparing to have a go in the wide-open terrain.



Louisiana and see a restaurant with the name Poché, well, you know what to do.

POINTS AND FLUSHED COVEYS

The first morning of our hunt, James, Donny and I loaded dogs and gear into Mabel, James' jeep, and into Donnie's truck. Within two or three minutes of pulling onto the lease, we saw a covey of birds flush near the road. Hunters, dogs and guns piled out fast to reach the birds' set-down point before they moved away.

In spite of extremely dry conditions with no rain since October of 2005, James' pointer Smart found the birds within a hundred feet of where they had landed. The covey flushed when we were about 10 yards away but two birds went down. I had seen my first proof that blues will hold for a point when they have sufficient cover.

This pattern continued the rest of the morning and the

Cash, the author's pointer, runs to join Scenta and Easy on point.



"I better hunt this afternoon!" I quickly affirmed both his wisdom and judgment, and we headed out the door to join James.

Donny's decision to stay was rewarded by one of the best afternoons of hunting that either of us had experienced in some time. The wind gusted at times but James' experienced English pointer Easy and Donny's English pointer Scenta were up to the task. The temperature started in the low 60s and dropped to the 50s as the hunt proceeded in the beautiful glow of what could have passed for an early fall afternoon.

The more the sun sank in the sky the better the hunting became. The sight of the dogs working birds in the tall, swaying native grasses backlit by the winter sun was intoxicating. I found myself wishing it could last forever.

A truly great hunt was made even better by riding with James through the terrain in his "mature" jeep, Mabel.



James and Donny approach four locked-up dogs (left to right): Scooby in foreground, Stepper, Scenta and Easy, in the fading glow of the Concho Valley.

James' approach to negotiating this rugged country was to run over anything that blocked our path except good-sized mesquite trees. As James angled Mabel down one especially steep, rocky ravine I found myself calculating our chances of survival. Then the thought occurred, what a way to go—breathing clean West Texas air and watching your dogs find quail in beautiful country.

As much as I was impressed with the dogs' ability to handle this world of thorns, Mabel was the standout.

My memories of the hunt will always include the West Texas wind whistling through the tall native grasses, but Mable groaning as she bounced down ravines over large chunks of flint rock and the slapping sound on her belly made by various thorn bushes was the highlight. 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 is a two-seater so Donny (he's the youngest) got sandwiched between seats amid equipment and hunting clothes. I told Donny that he had a built-in excuse if he missed any birds because he couldn't possibly have normal blood circulation in that position. As I recall he didn't miss any, even though he was not shooting the "white lightning" shells loaded by Mike Daughdrill from Centreville, Mississippi.

Maybe his shooting was why Mike introduced Donny as the Oklahoma Flash when we first met. And even though Mabel was a two-seater, our configuration required two operators as Donny had the four-wheel-drive stick stuck between his legs. He repeatedly admonished James to give him "plen-

ty of warning" before requesting a shift to four-wheel.

By the afternoon's end, the dogs had located and pointed nine coveys of 15 to 20 birds each, and we had 19 blues between Donny and myself. On one occasion Donny followed up on a single with Easy and came back shaking his head in amazement, saying, "Easy pointed that bird seven times before he flew and I got him. I call that control and perseverance." He spent the rest of the hunt trying (unsuccessfully) to convince

James to part with Easy.

One very large covey held tight for three dogs and we would have had several more blues for the bag. However, one unnamed young dog failed to back and bustled the covey. That dog got to run back to the front gate rather than ride.

Donny and James with part of the day's bag of blues.



I'm very grateful to James for introducing me to the reality of hunting blue quail with dogs. When you hear conflicting information from good sources the only thing to do is investigate firsthand. I think the popular conception about blues and pointing dogs comes from the experiences of hunters who pursue them in the desert-like terrain, which makes up much of their range. But as James and his dogs proved time and again, blues hold for dogs when they have a place to hide.

James has introduced many experienced bird hunters to this reality. He quoted one quail hunter of 40 years as saying, "I never dreamed that blues could be so much fun to hunt."

I couldn't agree more. If my experience is what they mean by "having the blues," I would like to have a whole lot more. *

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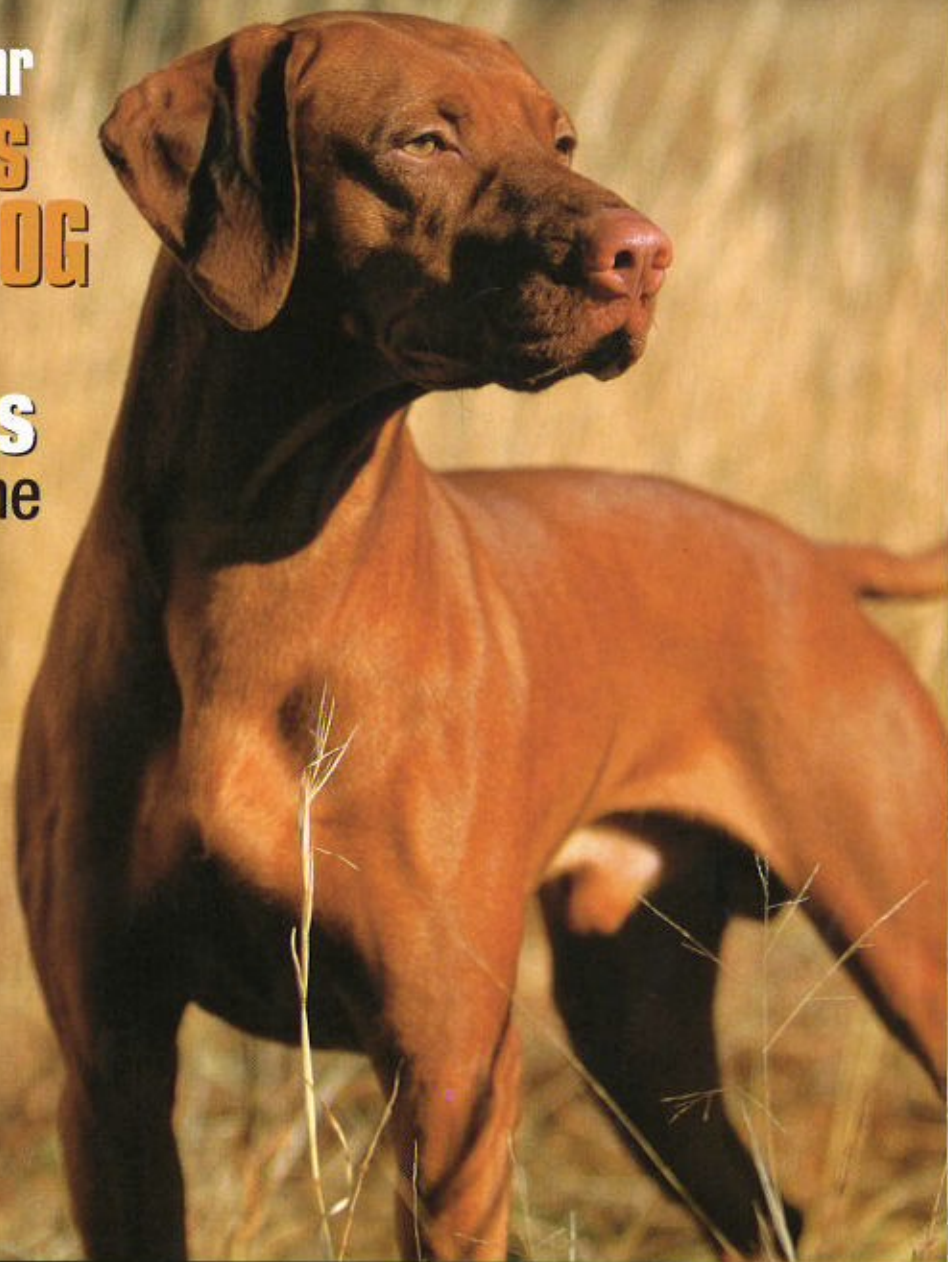
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