



# Texas Blues

Story and photos by Ron Taylor

The last few years have been challenging ones for quail hunters in Texas. Challenging, that is, for bobwhite quail hunters. Most parts of the state have been in one of the famous "down cycles" for which bobwhite quail are so well known. Blue or scaled quail, 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 resulting in more stable populations. Blues are slightly larger than bobwhites, have a completely different call, and a unique "crest" on their heads that is often visible as they move on the ground. And they do move on the ground, preferring to walk or run rather than fly.

Blues love of "footwork" has earned them a reputation of being difficult to hunt with dogs. I have heard for years that you "can't hunt blues with dogs."

"Those birds won't hold a point, and you'll wind up walking your legs off for nothing," was the conventional wisdom and the admonition I heard from nearly all experienced quail hunters.

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 over 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.

In early February of 2006 I jumped at the chance to hunt with James and resolve the issue of "the blues" for myself. 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 to hunt this special land of gentle hills and sweeping vistas. Mike, Mr. Jimmy, and Vaughn hailed from Mississippi, Billy and Glenn from Louisiana, and Donny 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 hails from the deep woods of Louisiana, but 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 fine sportsmen. Much of the food was Cajun specialties prepared by Glen Poche' from Baton Rouge. No doubt his food added to the happy mood. It was what you'd expect from someone named Poche' from Baton Rouge. Not to be outdone, Mike Daughdrill from 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 tale, 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 into 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 birds' set down point before they moved away. In spite of extremely dry conditions with no rain since the previous October, James's 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 hold for a point when they have sufficient cover.

This pattern continued the rest of the morning, and the dogs found four more coveys. One covey was located on a hillside with fairly sparse cover except for scattered bunch grass 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 for a few hours shooting and had opportunities at many more.

We broke for lunch and for a rest for both hunters and dogs. This terrain, while beautiful, tires both man and dog fairly quickly. 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.

Donny was suffering from the 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 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 after-



James Collier lines up on a departing blue and the pointer "Easy" gives chase.

James takes a blue from his excellent English pointer "Smart".



noon 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. Apparently 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 quickly concurred, and we headed out the door to join James.

Donny's decision to stay was a fortunate one. We were rewarded by one of the best afternoons of hunting that either of

us had experienced. The wind gusted at times, but James's experienced English pointer, Easy, and Donny's English pointer, Scenta, did the job. The temperature started in the low 60s dropping to the 50s as the hunt proceeded in the glow of what could have passed for an October afternoon.

The first covey that we found was near the road and a cattle corral. We saw them too late, and our vehicles caused them to 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 every 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 it 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 his "mature" jeep Mabel. James's approach to negotiating this rugged country was to run over anything that blocked our path other than good-sized mesquite trees. As James angled Mabel down one especially steep, rocky ravine, I found myself doubting our chances of survival.

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, Mabel groaning as she bounced down ravines over large chunks of flint rock, and the slapping sound on her belly made by 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 is a two-seater so Donny, as 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.

By the afternoon's end, the dogs had located and pointed nine coveys, each averaging 15-20 birds, and we had 22 blues between Donny and me. On one occasion Donny followed up on a single with Easy and came 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." He spent the rest of the hunt trying, unsuccessfully, to convince James to part with Easy.

The last covey of the day proved to be a large one, perhaps 30 or more birds. As we approached the locked-up dogs, we fanned out into a semicircle. 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 about 50 feet or so and went horizontal. This is a challenging and fun shot to take, and I have never seen a bobwhite flush in this manner.

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 first-hand. One caveat here relates to hunting pressure. James is careful to manage and distribute hunting pressure. Luckily he has thousands of acres to choose from. If blues are heavily pressured, they become very wary and difficult to hunt.

I think the popular conception that blues won't hold for pointing dogs results from the experiences of hunters who pursue blues 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. He has introduced many experienced quail hunters to this reality. One such quail hunter with decades of bird hunting told James, "I never dreamed that blues could be so much fun to hunt." I couldn't agree more. I will never think of having the blues in quite the same way again. I hope that more bobwhite hunters will give "the blues" a second look.

#### Seasons

Typically four months from late October to late February. License fees: Five-Day Non-Resident is \$45.00 plus Upland Game Stamp \$6.00. This license does not include deer, turkey and some other game species. Quail daily bag limit

was 15 total per day/45 possession. Current regulations at:

[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/)

#### Weather

This area is about 200 miles southwest of Fort Worth, Texas. Winter weather is generally sunny and mild to warm with lows in the 20s to 30s and afternoon highs often reaching the 70s. However, there can be cold snaps, and it is often windy in this wide-open country.

Definitely plan on layered clothing that can cope with thorns. Same with boots, and snake protection is good to have. A few days of warm weather can produce snake activity, but they tend to stay near their dens located in rocky areas. A good sunscreen is advisable and something for potential windburn. The San Angelo, Texas weather forecast is available at [weather.yahoo.com/forecast/USTX1199.html](http://weather.yahoo.com/forecast/USTX1199.html)

#### Travel

Airline service is available with American Eagle and Continental at San Angelo Regional Airport which is about 40 miles east of the lease. Midland/Odessa airport is about 90 miles to the west and is serviced by many major airlines.

James Collier provides quality hunting dogs and offers comfortable, country lodging. Hunters are welcome to bring their dogs. Contact James at [www.collierkennels.com](http://www.collierkennels.com) or 1-940-626-1443, cell 817-706-4419.

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Ron Taylor is an occasional contributor of articles on upland bird and deer hunting to outdoor magazines including *Gun Dog Magazine* and *Texas Trophy Hunter*.