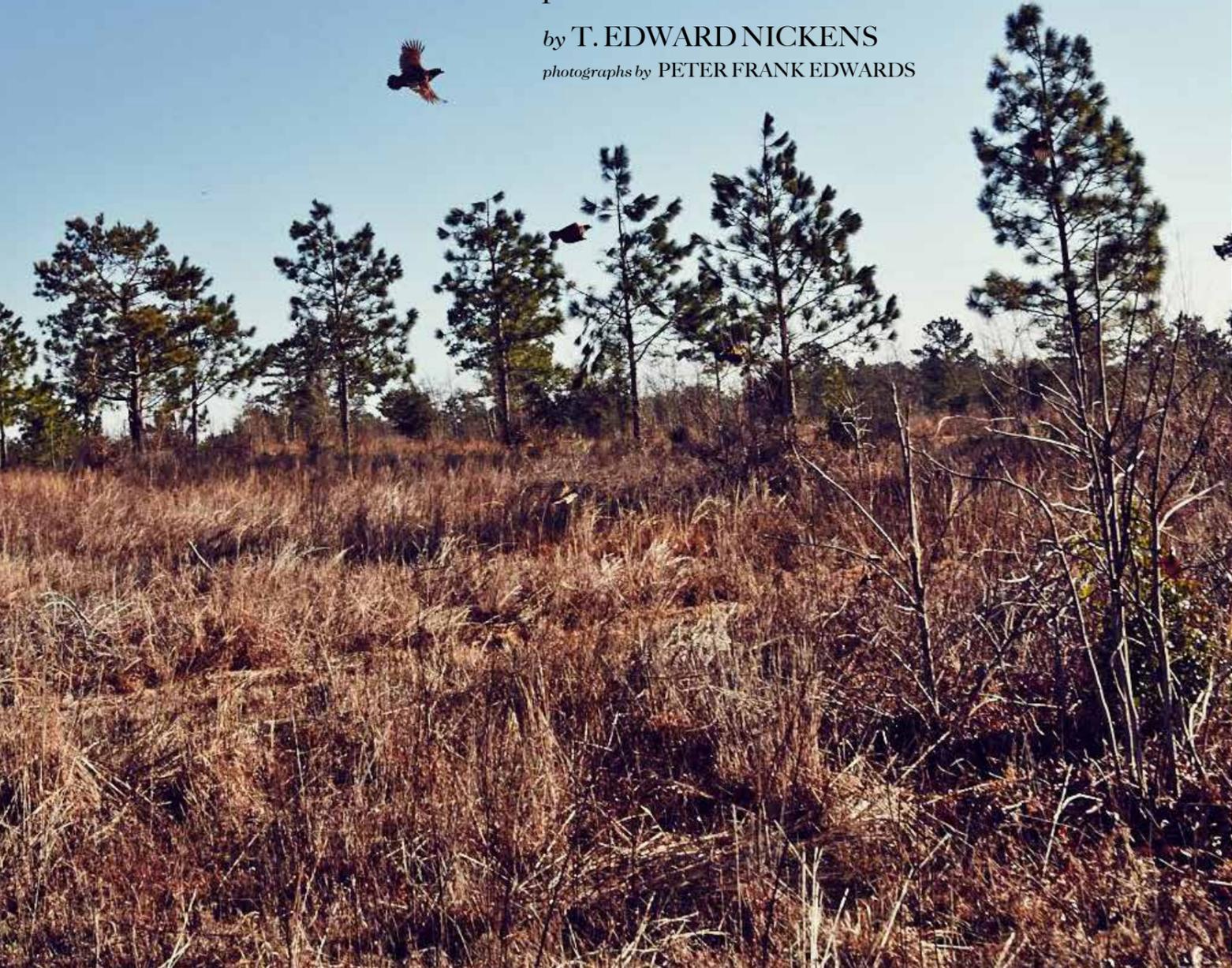


CRAZY FOR *Quail*

Think the golden age of Southern quail hunting is gone forever? Don't tell that to three South Carolina sportsmen who spent twenty long years transforming an old pine plantation into a wild bird haven

by T. EDWARD NICKENS
photographs by PETER FRANK EDWARDS



A towhee is first out of the thicket, nervous and twitchy. I point my left foot toward the opening in the briars and tighten my grip on the gun. Next comes a sparrow, streaking for open sky, and two blinks later, the birds blast from the brambles. ¶ By “birds” I mean quail, of course, and they flush as they always do, all of a sudden and all at once, with that thunderous detonation that startles predators from bobcats to Cooper’s hawks to shotgun-toting hunters who flinch, as I do, when the covey rise explodes underfoot.

I swing too quickly and I know it in the instant before I pull the trigger. I miss, twice, and watch them fly. Little blobs of a dozen shades of brown—ginger and bronze, chestnut and cinnamon—on rounded wings that send them into a rocketing flight toward the stream bottom below.

I should know better than to rush the shot. But I don’t wear the hair shirt for long. Unlike with most wild quail hunting, unlike anywhere else that I have ever hunted wild bobwhites before, I am comforted by a near certainty: This won’t be the only covey of the day. In fact, it’s most likely not the only covey of the next fifteen minutes, because I’ve found myself on what is certainly one of the finest wild quail plantations in the entire range of the iconic bobwhite.

At Pineland Farm, a sprawling private spread of several thousand acres near the Santee lakes of South Carolina, three ardent hunters have worked for twenty years to bring wild quail back in numbers that would have sent Nash Buckingham into a full swoon. Here, hunters can move more than twenty-five, and sometimes more than thirty, coveys a day.

Those are numbers many hunters might—and often do—doubt. But using a combination of techniques developed by North Florida’s Tall Timbers Research Station and a gutsy trial-and-error approach to land management, Toddy Smith, Mac Stidham, and Edwin Cooper III have turned a Hurricane Hugo–ravaged former pine plantation into a family retreat and hunting camp that is helping to rewrite the books on what is possible with wild quail management.

In the 2011–12 South Carolina season, the state’s quail hunters averaged 0.46 covey flushes per hour. Most quail hunters in pursuit of wild birds would be happy to find, say, three coveys in a hard day of hunting. At Pineland, a typical day’s hunt consists of a morning and an afternoon horseback circuit of about three hours each. Last season, Pineland’s best day was thirty coveys, a figure ticked off twice last year. (These numbers relate to coveys moved; because wild birds are more difficult to find, more difficult to pin down, and more difficult to hold than pen-raised birds, coveys are counted when they flush wild or flush when a shot goes off from another covey.)

Granted, land management and quail hunting at Pineland are highly refined passions. The farm is home to some of the finest bird dogs in the South, and hunters on horseback following as many as four dogs means hunters can cover a lot of ground. But the fact that there are this many quail shatters preconceptions.

“When we tell people this, when we show them the covey map with all those dots, they do not believe it,” Smith, a retired attorney and real estate

investor, says. It’s late afternoon, and he sits in front of a crackling fire, reviewing the day’s hunt—number of coveys moved, by which dogs, at what time and location, under what weather conditions—with his smartphone on a website called CoveyIQ. In our three-hour hunt we put up fifteen coveys of wild bobwhite quail, more than many hunters might see in a month of hard searching. “Some people simply refuse to believe it. They always say: You *have* to be putting out birds. But we are not. There hasn’t been a pen-raised bird on this place ever. It is forbidden in our bylaws. You can’t even train a dog out here on pen-raised quail.”

Smith smiles for a moment, sips a bourbon and orange juice. “This can be done,” he says. “And it’s important to us for people to *know* that this can be done. The tide is turning. We’re going to see more and more people doing this.”

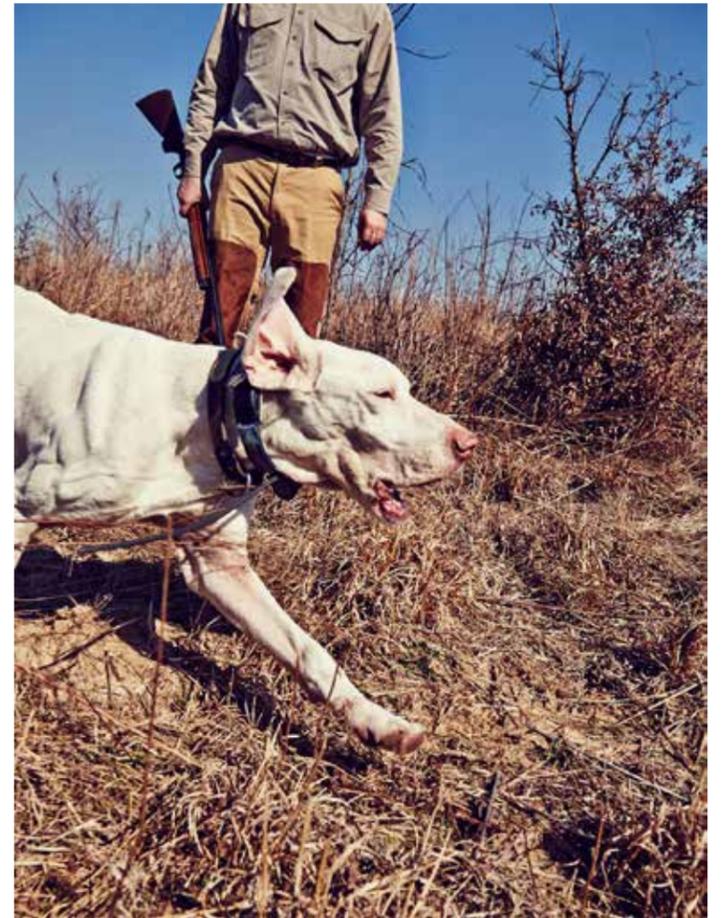
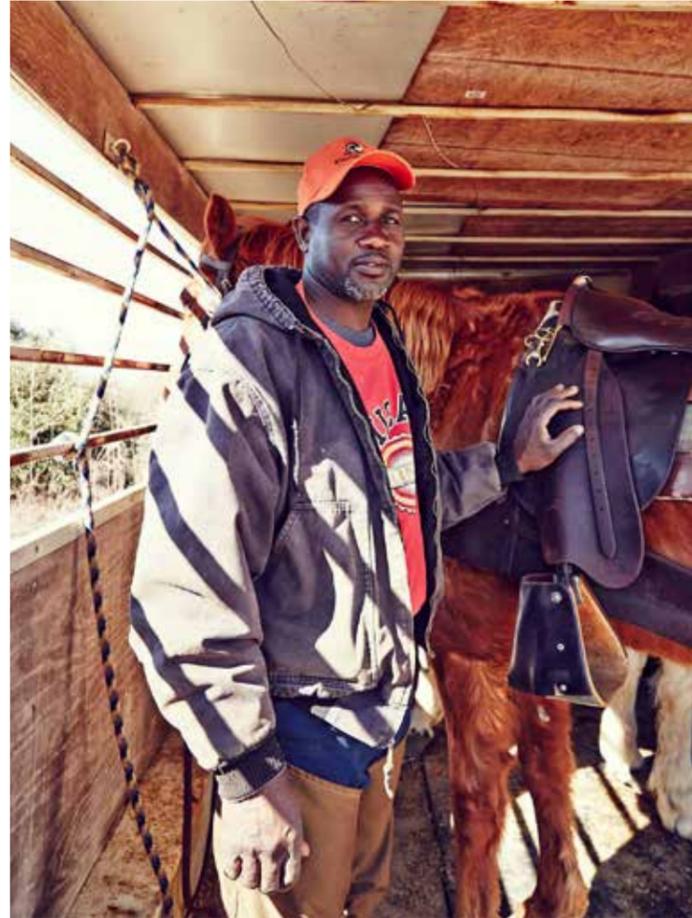
IT HAS LONG BEEN AXIOMATIC THAT THE GLORY DAYS OF SOUTHERN quail hunting have passed. Nationwide, bobwhite numbers have fallen by more than 80 percent since 1967. In large measure, hunters have



TEAM QUAIL
From left, Toddy Smith, Edwin Cooper III, and Mac Stidham prepare to let the bird dogs loose. Opposite: Two pointers lock up on a scent trail.

ON THE HOOF

Quail hunting at Pineland is done on horseback. Opposite: Horse handler Ervin Smith prepares for a day afield; a dog on the hunt.



turned their attention to other aspects of quail hunting, such as pursuing pen-raised birds on shooting preserves, or more recently, managing local populations with a combination of wild and pen-raised birds released early in the season.

But pen-raised quail, no matter how habituated to the wild, don't act like wild birds. They don't confound a bird dog like wild birds, don't run like wild birds, don't fly like wild birds, and certainly don't flush like wild birds. There's nothing wrong with a pen-raised quail hunt, but the dogs and the hunters and the handlers all know: These are not wild birds.

When Smith and a hunting buddy, Mac Stidham, bought Pineland in 1993 from the old Bowater timber company, they inherited a tract of land with a scattering of wild quail and a helter-skelter of storm-wrecked woods. A timber operation took what lumber it could in the wake of Hugo, but most of the land, Smith says, was an impenetrable morass. When state biologists heard that the partners intended to turn Pineland into a quail haven, they were unequivocal: You guys are wasting your time.

"Once we set our jaw to do it, we just stayed the course," says Stidham, an investment executive who grew up chasing quail in Georgia. Tall and lean, he wears a white Stetson and a frequent grin. "We've been successful, and it's largely been a matter of learning what not to do as much as what to do."

In 2006, the partners were joined by Edwin Cooper III, a Charleston attorney and businessman whose interest in wild quail shooting was yoked to his desire to develop a property where he could hunt with his

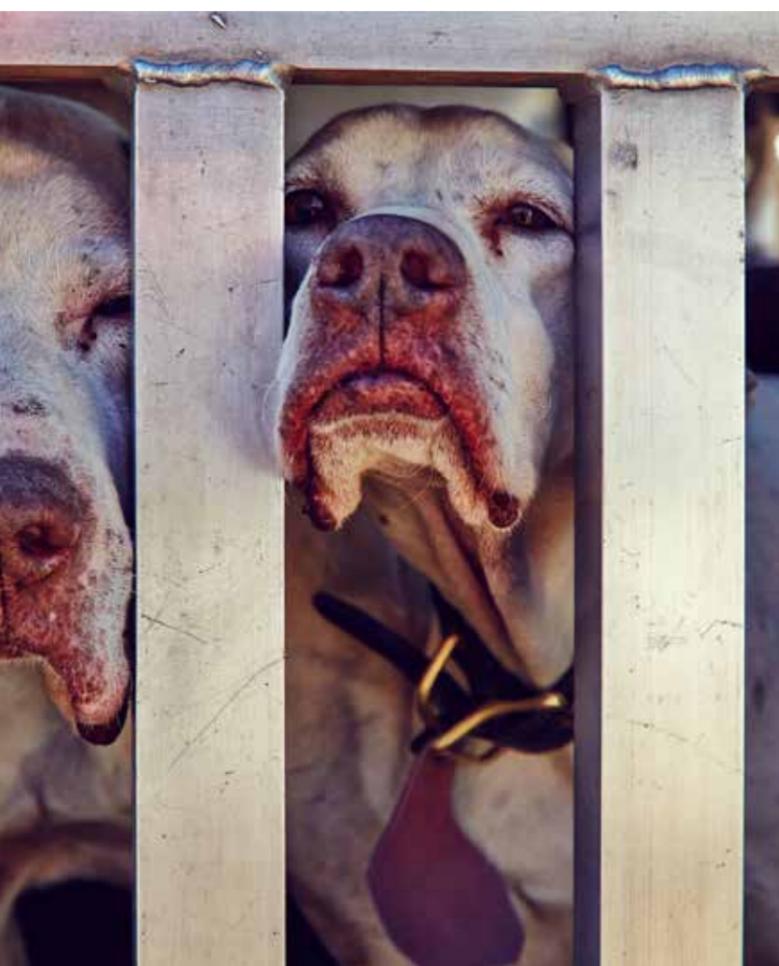
two young boys. "Hunting wild quail on horseback isn't really conducive to bringing kids along," he says. "But everything we're doing for quail is great for deer and turkey and rabbits. That place is so gamey I never run out of fun things to do with my kids."

Today there's a soaring family lodge overlooking a large pond. The kennels hold not only bird dogs but also retrievers and hounds. There are a couple of duck impoundments and miles of ATV trails. And once a year the partners open the doors to an annual bluegrass festival—dubbed Birdfest. Both Smith and Stidham are musicians, Smith explains, "and the only way we could get folks to listen to us play was to throw a party." The festival's name actually harkens not to quail but is in honor of a beloved old mule named Bird. Smith shakes his head, grinning. "Bird was a holdover from another Pineland experiment," he says. "At one point we bought a wagon and mules because we thought that's just what you did on a big quail spread in the South." By the time they figured out that wagons and mules weren't suited for their fast-paced style of hunting, folks had already fallen in love with Bird. The mule even made an appearance at Smith's daughter's wedding. Unbeknownst to the bride and the bride's mother, Bird graced the reception bedecked in lace finery. "It takes some explaining why we have a mule head over the fireplace," Smith says, laughing, "but ol' Bird was just part of our family."

Still, Pineland exists for quail, of that there is no question. "My dad and my granddad were big bird hunters," Smith says, "and I remember when they told me they found twenty-one coveys one day, and I remember



Having quail and finding quail are two different things. "People undervalue the dog part of this equation," Stidham says. "The most important thing you can have is a bird-finding bird dog"



WILD PRIZE
Clockwise from top left: A bird in the hand; retired collars and bridles; whistles at the ready; bird dogs raring to go. Opposite: Jack, a pointer, leads the hunters down the trail.

CHOW TIME

Smith, Cooper, and Stidham swap stories after a successful day.



thinking: *How could that be?* But that's an average day for us now. These are the good old days."

But they don't come easy. The coveys or the quail.

IS THERE ANYTHING FASTER THAN A WILD BOBWHITE QUAIL? AND I'm not speaking necessarily of flight speed—although 0 to 40 miles per hour in a single second is fast indeed—but all of it, the coming around the briar patch corner and there's the bird dog, all knotted up and trembling so you know there's no time to waste and it's a rush to get there before the birds run, and then you step to the dog and there they go and now they're gone and everything seems to happen on two sides of the same instant.

This is how it happens when Smith and I are on the horses, edging a low, tangled "brood patch" planted to help young poults hunt for protein-rich insects. We look up to find three white dogs locked on the field edge, like pearls on a string. This time I give the flush half a breath before I mount the gun, let the covey open up as I find that one bird whose flight is just a bit slower, or whose trajectory is just a bit less vexing, and I push the barrels through the flight pattern, butt-belly-beak-*bang*, and the bird folds.

At such a moment it's hard not to consider a sort of ledger of the Pineland experience. On one side is this tiny little bird, emblematic

Wild Bird Prescription

Pineland's success, Toddy Smith insists, "isn't because we're any smarter than anyone else. We've just been at it a long time, and we've listened to a lot of smart people, and we've made all the mistakes." For example: At one point, the partners thought they needed more edge habitat, where two different kinds of vegetation meet, so they planted pine strips along and through fields. "They were great for about four years," Smith recalls. "Then they grew too thick. Complete waste of time." Heavy disking to knock hardwoods back definitely kept shrubs at bay but depressed the growth of all the good grasses and forbs, as well. For a while, the partners thought they needed to grow food for quail, but the deer mowed down the sorghum patches. Then there were the years when plans called for fire alone to control hardwood encroachment on grasslands. That didn't work, either. Today, Pineland's formula rests on four principles.

1. PLANT BROOD PATCHES

"To have quail, you have to grow quail," Smith says, "and this is where it starts." A product of research at Tall Timbers, brood patches are two- to five-acre plots of partridge pea and ragweed that provide habitat for the protein-rich insects that young quail require. The Tall Timbers prescription is that something on the order of 15 percent of the farm's land base should be managed as brood patches.

2. BURN REGULARLY

On average, every Pineland acre is burned with pre-

scribed fire every other year. That controls hardwoods and allows a flush of seed- and insect-laden grasslands and brambles to thrive. Sweet gum, maple, and other woody pioneers are persistent, however. Keeping them in check requires herbicide applications, as well.

3. PROVIDE FEED

Pineland has moved from "patch" feeding, in which grain was placed at certain covers—briar patches, lespeza plots—to a "feed line," in which grain sorghum is spread in a more or less con-

tinuous line. That makes birds circulate and move around to get food, which means more opportunities for bird dogs to lock up with quail scent. Birds are fed year-round.

4. CONTROL PREDATORS

With the land kept relatively open, and numbers of quail, turkeys, rabbits, and other grassland-loving species on the rise, egg predator numbers skyrocket. Predator control is a piece of the puzzle. "The more the better, and as much as you can afford," figures Stidham. "Do as much as you can, but do something."

of the South's agrarian past but also of the possibilities for restoring a native species and a treasured means of relating to the land. On the other lies the enormous effort and not insignificant expense required to turn back time on a near-landscape scale. When it comes to managing private lands for wild bobwhite quail, the seminal questions are basic: What does it take in terms of acres and money?

When I pose this question to Smith and Stidham, they each go silent for a moment. They spend many waking hours mulling over this. "One thing I don't like to hear is, you have to have ten thousand acres and spend a mountain of money to even think about wild quail," Smith insists. It's not inexpensive, he'll admit. But neither is traveling the world for golf or curating a personal wine cellar. It's about pruning a passion with single-mindedness. "The larger the tract," Smith says, "the more diversified you can be in terms of timber or crop production. If you have four hundred acres, it'd better all be bird habitat."

The more fundamental limiting factors have less to do with acreage than with attitude. What keeps other people from doing this, both Smith and Stidham agree, is a lack of patience. People want results quickly, and refashioning a landscape for a native bird takes its own sweet time.

And having quail and finding quail are two different things. "People undervalue the dog part of this equation," Stidham says. "The most

important thing you can have is a bird-finding bird dog." Pineland's best bird dogs at the moment come from a breeder in Rhode Island whose dogs cut their teeth on grouse and woodcock in coarse New England cover. "It takes these Northern dogs some time to appreciate the particulars of a greenbrier thicket," Smith says. "But then they are the birdiest animals I've ever seen."

LATE IN THE DAY AND THE HORSE SHADOWS are twenty feet long, inky shapes slipping across shrub and brush. It's a hypnotic pursuit, with the canter of the horse, the creak of the saddle, the smell of lather and wet muck. But there's little time for reverie.

A bird dog named Rim is locked up in a wide-open patch of sorghum as we kick the horses into a gallop. But then, while Stidham and I still have a foot in the stirrups, the birds flush. It's a big covey for this time of year, fifteen birds or better, and every one of them is hell-bent for elsewhere. Rim holds the quail for as long as he can, but a few million years of predator avoidance have the birds on a hair trigger.

Stidham chews his lip, his face shaded by his worn Stetson. "That's what you get for hunting wild birds," he says, as if he's giving himself a talking-to. We watch the last of the quail vanish into woods. "That right there is what you get."

He looks up at Smith, who's logging the covey into his iPhone. They both shake their heads. When Stidham turns in the saddle, he wears a grin nearly as wide as his hat.

That's what you get. ©