





{ Birds }

READY, AIM, *FIRE*

Along the Florida-Georgia border are 80 quail hunting plantations that add up to 300,00 acres of a privately owned accidental reserve. Land managers and scientists burn tens of thousand of acres and employ other tactics to mimic natural conditions, preserving a wealth of biodiversity, including the embattled bobwhite quail.

BY T. EDWARD NICKENS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB HOWARD



Opposite: Dr. Bill Palmer, director of Tall Timbers' Game Bird Program, shoulders an over-and-under shotgun as a covey of quail bursts from cover under tall north Florida pines. Above: Finely trained bird dogs are a beloved part of quail-hunting heritage. The dogs "point" birds by locking into a statue-still stance when close to the quail, enabling hunters to prepare for a shot.

“Careful, boy. Watch what you’re doin’ in there.”

Jimmy Patterson certainly looks the part of a huntmaster. He is a big man decked out in a red vest and suede leather chaps, part dog handler, part hunting guide, part choreographer of the Southern plantation pageant unfolding in this Florida savanna. “Easy, boy,” he coos at an English pointer stalking through broomsedge and blackberry. The pointer twitches with checked energy, then freezes in its tracks. In an instant Patterson stands up in his saddle and signals with a lifted red cap. “Point over he-a h!” he yells, and we’re off the horses, pulling guns from leather scabbards.

Lane Green goes right while I stride to the left of the bird dog, fingering two shells into the shotgun. “Careful,” Patterson cautions again, and this time I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or the dog. He slashes at the thicket with a leather flushing whip. A few feet away, two mules shuffle in their harnesses. Hitched to a large wheeled wagon that carries another six bird dogs—the pointers are rotated every 30 minutes to keep them fresh and hunting hard—the mules seem to know what’s about to happen.

Suddenly the covey flushes with a sound that has startled predators across the ages, a roar of whirring wings all out of proportion to a six-ounce bird. “Mark!” Patterson hollers, as a shotgun blasts. “Mark again! Mark!” Another shot, and another quail tumbles from a corolla of russet feathers that floats above the savanna. A yellow Labrador retriever leaps from the mule-drawn wagon and vaults into the thicket. When it reappears, it holds a bobwhite gently in its mouth.

In early February, near the end of Florida’s quail hunting season, this is the year’s 491st wild northern bobwhite shot at the 6,500-acre Foshalee Plantation in north Florida. This is an accounting Patterson tallies with clerical fervor, for here in the sprawling Red Hills along the Florida-Georgia border, chasing bobwhite quail with dogs and mules and horses and guns is a fundamental part of what some might consider a counterintuitive reality: Hunting the birds goes hand in hand with conserving the species. And with taking care of a vast landscape flush with other animals tied to this imperiled ecosystem.

Northern bobwhite numbers are in freefall across most of the bird’s range, but not here. Between Tallahassee, Florida, and Thomasville, Georgia, about 80 quail hunting plantations—most with roots that reach back to the Gilded Age—comprise 300,000 acres of rolling open pinewood savannas, carpets of golden wiregrass, ancient lakes, and river swamp. This landscape seems lifted from another time. As southern land prices collapsed after the Civil War, wealthy industrialists from the North snapped up huge Red Hills land parcels. Fueled by a growing interest in bird hunting, the trickle of Yankees swelled into a flood. The first luxury hotel was built in Thomasville in 1875, and soon quail plantations were chockablock between the Ochlockonee and Aucilla rivers.

Today the region’s quail-crazy landowners spend small fortunes on their hunting passion. Some are the scions of original late-19th-century plantation owners, families that guard their identities—and properties—jealously. Others have come into their uber-wealth more recently—think Ted Turner and a raft of dot-comers. Just about all of them employ plantation managers and request advice from biologists charged with fine-tuning their lands for quail. They burn tens of thousands of acres in prescribed fires to mimic natural conditions. In effect, the region has evolved into a massive, privately owned, accidental reserve of biological diversity. More than 100 bird species are found here, including Bachman’s sparrows, Henslow’s sparrows, and brown-headed nuthatches,



This page, from top: The sprawling quail plantations of the Red Hills region demand birds dogs with serious stamina. Many of the private farms are 10,000 acres or larger. Four Tall Timbers birds will provide a tasty meal, and more. Meticulous records are kept of quail shot on the sprawling research facility, part of a massive, long-term monitoring project. Opposite: The pinelands’ open aspect comes from fire. In 1978 Tall Timbers oversaw the first prescribed burn on Florida public lands. Today the state burns approximately two million acres per year.

three of 20 Red Hills birds considered “species of greatest conservation need” by state wildlife agencies. The plantations are home to the largest population of federally endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers on private lands anywhere. They are a stronghold for gopher tortoises—a federally threatened species across its range except for the state of Florida—and rare Florida pine snakes.

Yet this is no longer a timeless landscape. Development is pressing in on the Red Hills. Between 1980 and 2009 Tallahassee’s population more than doubled, from 81,548 to an estimated 177,879, and tens of thousands of rural acres were lost to low-density residential development. The nationwide economic slump is hampering families that annually spend hundreds of thousands of dollars maintaining open lands with frequent fires that are the foundation of the region’s ecology. Many plantation owners are growing older, and their conservation ethic may or may not be shared by heirs and new owners. A loss of expanded tax benefits



for conservation easements could make it more difficult to secure new open-space agreements. “Our job of selling conservation and stewardship is only getting more challenging,” says Lane Green, executive director of Tall Timbers Research Station, a privately funded, 4,000-acre Red Hills research facility whose work is the foundation of conservation efforts in the region.

All of which is forcing plantation owners, scientists, and local conservationists to wonder: Will bumper crops of bobwhites be enough to sustain this landscape—and grassland wildlife species other than the beloved quail—in a future increasingly dissimilar to its post-Reconstruction roots?

To some, quail hunters might seem an unlikely ally for conservationists. Nationwide, bobwhite numbers have fallen 82 percent in four decades, putting the bird at the top of Audubon’s list of Common Birds in Decline (www.stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid/index.php). Yet the habitat maintained by the quail plantations closely resembles much of the native South, where sweeping pinewoods underlain with grasslands once covered 150,000 square miles from Virginia to Texas.

“We’re not apologetic about being gung-ho for quail,” says Bill Palmer, director of Tall Timbers’ game bird program. “In this area we have huge pieces of open country protected forever, and rare wildlife species that are not just persisting but

thriving. The greater conservation community is beginning to understand the broader benefits of what happens when hunters spend hard-earned dollars—and a lot of them—to raise a wild bird in its natural environment.”

What can be done in the Red Hills is land management on a scale difficult to achieve in many places. On a typical plantation, woods are burned as frequently as every year or two. “Our primary concern is knocking back the hardwoods that encroach on open grasslands,” Robbie Green tells me one morning. The wildlife habitat manager for Mistletoe Plantation, a 3,000-acre tract on south Georgia’s serpentine Ochlockonee River, Green steers his truck between six-foot-wide firebreaks harrowed into the ground. “The tool for that is fire, and a lot of it.” In addition to prescribed burns and selective logging, plantations rely heavily on supplemental feeding of quail and detailed monitoring of populations to boost the production of birds.

While the gunpowder approach to Red Hills conservation has been an overall success, there are concerns about ignoring the needs of non-game species, removing too much timber in order to boost quail numbers, and a focus on ridding the landscape of any element that isn’t quail-friendly. “Quail have a checkered past in the region,” says Julie Wraithmell, wildlife policy coordinator for Audubon of Florida. “There can be a narrow-minded emphasis on predator control, which neglects the fact that bobwhite are part of an ecological system.”

Trapping and removing predators is one conflict with a long history in the Red Hills. In a one-year period in the early 1930s, bounties were paid at Foshalee Plantation for 255 rattlesnakes, 506 opossums, 160 “pole cats” or skunks, 277 hawks, and a pair of weasels. Many plantations still trap raccoons, foxes, bobcats, and other quail eaters, while hardwood trees such as live oaks that might harbor rat snakes and opossums, or provide perching sites for hawks, are routinely felled.

Unfortunately, newer landowners are trending toward even more intensive single-species management than in the past. “I’m afraid it’s becoming more of a numbers game,” says Green. “Many newer owners are more interested in quail than anything else.” Each time a plantation changes hands, he says, the education process of what the Red Hills is, and can be, starts anew. The good news is that the raw material for conservation success—open land—is still available. “There’s been a constant tug-of-war between more quail and a more holistic approach to management,” Wraithmell says. “The northern bobwhite could be the saving grace of our fire-dependent landscape. But it will be up to individual landowners to strike the right balance.”

Two tiny sparrow feet kick up sandy soil on the far side of a fire-blackened pine trunk. I sprint toward the tree’s rootball 20 feet away. Despite three flushers wading through the savanna and the beckoning sounds of Bachman’s sparrows twittering from a boombox, this bird has twice eluded capture. If I can beat it to the far end of the log, I’ll have a chance to flush it back toward our nets—and into a database scientists are using to study this declining species.

I race the sparrow, leaping over broken branches, and reach the rootball a split-second before the bird, waving my arms and whooping like a cowboy. The little brownish-gray bird vaults aloft, turns 180 degrees to flee the yodeling Pecos Bill figure, and wings swiftly into the mist net.

“Got it!” Jim Cox hollers. “That’s some fine sparrow herding, gentlemen!” While Cox, the vertebrate ecologist for Tall Timbers Research Station, delicately unravels the bird from the net, I catch my breath and look around. Old-growth longleaf pines soar overhead, massive columnar trunks capped with gnarly crowns pruned into gothic silhouettes by hurricanes. Gallberry shrubs stud a carpet of wiregrass that unfurls out of sight, tawny gold in the day’s early light. In 1979 Jep and Paddy Wade donated a 206-acre easement for what is known as the Wade Tract, one of the country’s few remaining fragments of old-growth longleaf. Here, Tall Timbers scientists conduct a dizzying array of studies—from longleaf regeneration to Bachman’s sparrow population dynamics to gopher tortoise demographics.

Cox is particularly interested in the Bachman’s sparrow, a bird with very specific life requirements. Ground nesters like quail, the sparrows key in on open grasslands where the first flush of new growth after a fire provides easy movement at the ground level but an umbrella of vegetation overhead to protect them from predators. If a grassland doesn’t burn again within 18 months or so, Bachman’s sparrows nearly abandon them.

An avid birder’s dream list of grassland species is similarly tied into specific niches of pine savanna habitats. Brown-headed nuthatches excavate nesting cavities in decaying stumps and snags, features many quail plantation managers are quick to remove before they can harbor snakes and raptors. Red-cockaded woodpeckers hollow out the heartwood of mature living pines. Henslow’s sparrows, whose numbers have declined more steeply



Since 1996 the bobwhite quail population on Tall Timbers’ research lands has increased tenfold. Riding their tail feathers are a host of non-game birds, from endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers and Bachman’s sparrows to wood storks and Henslow’s sparrows.

than any other North American grassland bird, overwinter in southern pinelands, and burning the woods in early spring can wipe out their habitat. “Quail can carry the water for a lot of these species,” Cox says. “There are ecological subtleties that require attention, though, and species that require slightly different habitats that we need to keep in mind. You don’t want to get fixed on one approach.”

Management issues aside, the greatest challenge to the Wade Tract, and to the Red Hills in general, is keeping the landscape intact. Drive north on U.S. 319 a few miles outside Tallahassee and the helter-skelter of sprawl overwhelms you. Fast-food restaurants and shopping centers crowd both sides of the road. Then, in an instant, there’s a hard line in the Florida sand. Route 319 turns into the Kate Ireland Parkway as the highway enters the first lands protected by conservation easements. For the next 19 miles the road rolls through tunnels of live oaks draped with Spanish moss and edged with rolling pine savannas. This is a landscape Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto would remember, and it continues until the last easement peters out, just south of Thomasville, Georgia.

The parkway’s namesake is equally unforgettable. In a landscape largely defined by gunpowder, fine horses, and \$5,000 dogs, an outspoken, sharp-shooting, 80-year-old woman gets much of the credit for kick-starting the Red Hills’ conservation agenda. No surprise, Kate Ireland did it on her terms.

“You may wonder how an old woman like me shoots quail,”

she asks one day at lunch, with a glance cocked like a bird dog’s stiff tail on point. Ireland is fuming over knee problems that have her sidelined; it wasn’t so long ago that she shot a wild turkey while hunting with a broken arm in a cast. Now a doctor’s visit is keeping her out of the woods for another day. “I bought an electric Bad Boy hunting buggy, and I can ease right there

beside those pointers and BAM! They don't mind a bit.

In the late 1980s, when Ireland first began buttonholing fellow landowners about preserving the Red Hills landscape through conservation easements, plantation owners had a common reply: What do you mean, protect the land? they would say. It's already ours.

"But I was talking about something different than ownership," Ireland says, looking up from a plate of stewed oysters to gaze through tall windows that overlook a pine-studded expanse of lawn. She has an exuberant wave of gray hair and blue eyes that do not waver when fixed on a subject. "I was talking about understanding the land to the depths, and making sure that the next generations will keep it intact and carry on the traditions we have here."

Ireland, from a venerable Cleveland-based coal mining family, has since become one of the most forceful proponents of conservation easements in the region. And she's just as straightforward about the inspiration for keeping the land intact. "Quail, quail, quail, and quail," she says. "That's why I got involved with conservation. I am intrigued by the little curiosities, the woodpeckers, the songbirds. But what I care about is how to make land more agreeable for quail. If we don't have the quail, the other animals won't be there. Pure and simple."

Such a forceful presence carries weight in a place like the Red Hills. "In a community like this, you need that one person to step out and really take a chance," says Kevin McGorty, director of the Tall Timbers Land Conservancy, the land trust associated with the Tall Timbers Research Center. "Kate put her land where her mouth is, so to speak, and donated 4,000 acres in easements. She used that as a bully pulpit, going peer to peer to talk about



WHAT YOU CAN DO

In 2006 Congress expanded federal tax incentives for conservation easements donated between 2006 and 2009. These incentives raised the deduction a donor could take from 30 percent of income per year to 50 percent, allowed qualifying farmers and ranchers to subtract up to 100 percent of their income, and extended the carry-forward period for a donor to take tax deductions for a voluntary conservation easement agreement from five to 15 years. These benefits expired in 2009, but conservationists are fighting for an extension. "We're in this for the long haul," says the Land Trust's Russ Shay. Contact your legislator and urge support for renewing the benefits.

For more information: www.landtrustalliance.org.



As the number of hunters falls nationwide, many wonder what will happen to wildlife species—like the northern bobwhite—that have enjoyed the support of a vocal constituency.

conservation. Ever since, the red on the map has been growing.”

The map McGorty refers to is a large document perched like an unfinished painting on an easel in his office. Each Red Hills quail plantation is outlined, and red blotches denote properties protected with conservation easements held by the conservancy. All told, easements cover 133,907 of the region’s 300,000 acres, and spell out parcel-specific timber-cutting guidelines, endangered species prescriptions, and if and where new homes can be built—a key concern for land-owning families with multiple heirs. It’s not a perfect solution; disagreements over allowable activities, mainly logging, sometimes wind up in the courts. Still, conservation easements “are one of the best tools we have to keep development out of the Red Hills,” agrees Wraithmell. Already, the Tall Timbers Land Conservancy secured half of a 200,000-acre conservation goal. “It’s a tremendous accomplishment,” McGorty says. “But we’ve picked most of the low-hanging fruit.” The second 100,000 acres, he admits, will be a tougher row to hoe, since the most willing landowners are already a part of the conservancy.

Meeting that challenge will require convincing more Red Hills property owners that each parcel of quail-hunting paradise exists as part of a greater, and irreplaceable, ecological treasure. After all, a dearth of driveways and drive-throughs is only one aspect of a healthy, intact Southern pine-lands ecosystem. The ability to manage the land, say Charles Chapin III, is equally important. Chapin is on the easements review committee of the Tall Timbers Land Conservancy, and works on his 3,700-acre El-

soma Plantation, just south of Thomasville, Georgia, will start to burn the woods in a few days. “If a golf-course community was nearby, I’m not sure people there would be happy about that,” he explains. “Losing the ability to burn on the scale required here is one of the great dangers of losing smaller properties to development. When you carve up the landscape, you lose the marvelous ambience of like-managed properties, yes. But you lose as well the genetic diversity of wildlife, the ability for aquifer recharge, and the basic values of open space.”

Those are values beyond simply getting a property “all quail-ed up,” as some locals call the region’s traditional approach to conservation. Managing for broader ecological goods and services will require a more holistic view of what the Red Hills has to offer than a season’s tally of shot quail. Hope lies in the fact that here, so many human hearts have been tuned to the call of birds—be it the bobwhite’s lilt-ing whistle or the Bachman’s trill.

“We just love every aspect of what this land offers,” says Russell Chubb one morning. “We have wood storks and sandhill cranes, gopher tortoises, and gators. Plenty of gators.” Chubb wears khakis with a faint crease, and is prone to lifting his head to watch the trees sway when he hears the wind sighing through the pines. Springwood Plantation, set under Spanish moss-draped oaks and pines two miles from the hardtop road, was built in 1915 for the Thorne family of Chicago, onetime owners of Montgomery Ward department stores. It was used for less than six weeks a year, but Chubb now works year-round to keep the plantation up. In his mind, that means taking it back.

“This isn’t a quail plantation so much as a forest ecosystem—sort of a wildlife preserve where you’re allowed to hunt,” Chubb says. “We are consciously not a quail shooting machine.” Timber cutting on Springwood is minimal. Native long-leaf pines soar over wiregrass and bracken fern. While it’s an atypical approach to managing a quail plantation, it’s a balanced brand of Red Hills reconstruction that many conservationists cheer—and hope other plantation owners emulate. “Before man,” Chubb says, “no one was managing for basal areas or quail chick production, and the forests and wildlife were doing just fine. That’s pretty much our way of doing it now. Let nature prevail. I can be happy with whatever quail are left over.” ■

Contributing editor T. Edward Nickens most recently wrote about his first backpacking trip with his son in the Appalachians of Virginia.