

SHOOTING SPORTSMAN

READERS & WRITERS ADVENTURES 2017



“Come hunting with friends
you’ve not yet met.”

— SILVIO CALABI, EDITOR AT LARGE





Firesteel Creek Lodge

ISABEL, SOUTH DAKOTA

OCTOBER 28 - NOVEMBER 1, 2017

WILD PHEASANT, SHARP-TAILED GROUSE, HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Join *Shooting Sportsman* Contributing Editor Bruce Buck for three full days (Oct. 29, 30 and 31) of hunting for wild pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge on some of the West's finest open country. Experience the superb small group hunting and camaraderie that the *Shooting Sportsman* Readers & Writers Adventures have become known for. This trip will include unparalleled access to the

best wingshooting along with excellent dining, off-the-charts hospitality and a charming lodge, and will have you eager to book next year's hunt before this one comes to a close.

If this sounds like the group you've been dreaming of hunting with—and becoming life-long friends with—we encourage you to sign up today. Space is limited. Price is **\$4,249** per person based on double

occupancy and is inclusive of all hunting, lodging, meals, licenses, four boxes of ammunition and ground transportation from our designated airport in Bismarck, North Dakota. Flights to and from Bismarck, taxes, gratuities and shipping of birds is not included. Travel insurance is suggested.

Firesteel's Family Plan

WITH THE LINDSKOV FAMILY, IT'S ABOUT MAKING A LODGE A HOME

BY RALPH P. STUART

One hundred sixty acres. By today's ranching standards, not a large spread. But in 1932, when he was just starting out, Bill Lindskov was grateful for the land. It was his piece of South Dakota ground, and he was determined to make something of it. During the next 49 years he did just that—successfully ranching, farming and growing his legacy. More importantly, he raised a family, and he taught his children the values of faith and friendship and the benefits of hard work.

When Bill passed away in 1981, the ranch, which had blossomed to 8,000 acres, was taken over by his son Les. Just 31 at the time, Les had worked side by side with his father, and the life lessons had not been wasted. He used his penchant for hard work and business acumen to take things to the next level—actually, the next many levels. Today the Lindskov Ranch covers more than 200,000 acres and is one of South Dakota's largest and most diversified ranching and farming operations.

Lucky for hunters, Les and his wife, Marcia—along

with their four boys and their families—consider themselves stewards of the land. They feel an obligation to responsibly manage their property as well as the wildlife that inhabits it. It was this mindset to look beyond the bottom line that years ago inspired the Lindskovs to implement farming and ranching practices that would benefit wildlife. And when they were happy with the results, they decided to share the bounty with those who would appreciate it. Thus was born Firesteel Creek Lodge.

Many readers of *Shooting Sportsman* are familiar with Firesteel Creek. If they have not yet visited, they likely know of the lodge from the ads in the magazine and from the annual descriptions of our Readers & Writers Adventures. Year after year, Firesteel Creek has been one of the most popular destinations we've offered, and this fall will mark the seventh time we have visited. Remarkably, it is still one of the first trips to fill up—and often with hunters who have been there before. It says a lot about a place when hardcore sportsmen are lining up to return.

That I had never been to Firesteel before this past fall was almost embarrassing. Every winter at the SCI Convention I would visit with Les Lindskov, his son Mark, and several of their hunting guides, and they would tempt me with reports of great bird numbers, phenomenal dogwork and

improvements being made to the habitat and lodge. Finally the lure became too strong, so I cleared my schedule for a September hunt on which I would catch the sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge openers and have the option of hunting pheasants.

When the appointed day arrived, I flew into Bismarck, North Dakota, where I was met at the airport and driven 2 ½ hours south to the lodge, in Isabel (pop. 141), South Dakota. The main lodge was built as a home in 1916 and once served as a stagecoach stop on the Bismarck-to-Deadwood line. About 12 years ago it was moved 50 miles to its current location overlooking Firesteel Creek (thus, the name) and extensively renovated. Now it serves as lodging, the operation's dining hall and a gathering place after the hunt.

In addition to the main lodge, two adjacent buildings provide rooms, and once I'd stowed my gear in the newly constructed "Hungarian Building," I sought out Mark Lindskov, manager of the hunting business. Mark was glad for the distraction of a tour, and he showed me through the living quarters and gun-cleaning areas before heading outside to see the dog kennels and 5 Stand layout. The tour ended on the lower floor of the main lodge, where guests were shooting pool, lounging by the stone fireplace and watching a football game before dinner. And there behind the bar was Mark's father, Les, pouring drinks and joking with the guests. It

was clear that the Lindskovs are hands-on hosts who pride themselves on hospitality.

Further proof was in the kitchen, which we passed through en route to dinner. There we were greeted by Les's wife, Marcia, Mark's wife, Jessica, and a couple of other women making preparations. The ensuing meal had such a family feel that, after finishing, I automatically carried my dishes to the sink. Marcia thanked me, and then quickly ushered me out. "Now wouldn't you like another bowl of peach crisp?"

The next morning I was excited to get into the field, but Firesteel's hunting hours don't begin until 10. I forced myself to linger over an extra cup of coffee at breakfast. Around 8:30 hunters and guides began gathering in the parking area, and it was a bit of a controlled fire drill as everyone sorted out who they would be hunting with. Once guns, gear and other sundries were loaded into the rigs, the caravan proceeded down the drive, each group bound for one of the dozen former ranches that make up the Lindskovs' hunting area.

That day I was hunting the Schuh Ranch with head guide Steve Bruns, who, like most of Firesteel's guides, is a professional dog trainer. Steve and his brother, Dave (also a Firesteel guide), operate Minndakota Kennel, where they breed and train German shorthairs. Steve also runs pointers—"English," as he calls

them—and in his spare time is a rodeo rider. With his chiseled jaw, ever-present cowboy hat, and gait of a man who's spent countless hours in the saddle, he looks like he could have just stepped out of a Marlboro ad.

As we were driving, I asked Steve what first attracted him to Firesteel. "I used to hunt in other places," he said, "but I always felt limited. Then I came out here, and I couldn't believe it. No one else has this . . ." He extended his arm in a sweeping motion, indicating the sea of land around us.

"Yes, but how do you hunt this?" I asked. "How do you even know where to begin?"

"What we always do first is ask clients what they'd like," he said. "What's important to them? Do they want only wild birds? Are they after a particular species? Do they want to see their dogs work? We try to give everyone the hunt that they want.

"Once we know that, we can start with a plan . . . and then a hunt will break out. We let the birds tell us what to do."

He explained that he likes to use his English first, as "depth finders" casting about. Once the dogs find a few birds and a pattern is established, he puts his shorthairs on the ground to zero in on particular areas.

"Of course, this year has been a bit tough," he said, "as there is good cover everywhere and the birds are spread out. They're not concentrated in prime spots like they were last year during the drought."

Great.

We pulled off the main road into a vast pasture ribboned with draws and bisected by a fenceline. Lance Knoshal, a Minnesota farmer who helps Steve during his down time, off-loaded the Polaris Ranger that would serve as our chariot.

Zip and Toga were the first English on the ground, and they wasted no time setting off through the grass. They worked the cover thoroughly, crisscrossing into the wind and sorting out old scent. A half-hour later we were beginning to get anxious when a sharptail flushed along the fenceline and settled within sight near the crest of a hill. With the temperature already in the 70s, Steve was happy to water and kennel the dogs while I walked up the bird. I was able to close to 20 yards before the grouse jumped—and as it met the wind coming over the hill, I tumbled it like a woodcock that hesitates on the rise.

The next sharptail was 75 yards away in the lee of another hill. It flushed out of range, caught the breeze and sailed into a brushy draw. Steve and I grabbed his shorthair Hemi and worked around and up from the bottom, in the process sending a 150-class whitetail bounding for the horizon. Hemi nailed a perfect point, and the sharptail fell to an easy crossing shot at 30 yards.

We returned to the truck for a hearty field lunch, and then drove the Ranger about a mile to another brush-choked coulee. In less than 10 minutes Steve's

solid-liver shorthair, Gretchen, locked up. Instead of another grouse, however, it was a long-tailed rooster that rumbled out of the grass—and I elected to pass. I held my fire five minutes later when a second cockbird jumped within range.

Gretchen pointed once more on the edge of an earthen dam, and this time a covey of Huns burst forth. I dropped the trailing bird with my second shot. We followed up the covey, and I scratched down a second Hun. Now came the dilemma: With two sharptails and two Huns in the bag and one bird to go for my limit, did I want to look for another sharptail or try to complete the “trifecta” with a pheasant? I spent the rest of the afternoon regretting that I’d passed on the roosters as we searched in vain for another.

That evening, after packing away a thick ribeye and two helpings of crème brûlée, I stole a few minutes with Les to talk about life, family and his motivations for running a hunting lodge. Turns out that Les is not only one of the most successful men I’ve ever met, but also one of the most grounded and genuinely appreciative of what he has. “My family and I are blessed in that we don’t have to do this,” he said, referring to the hunting operation. “But we enjoy it. We have met wonderful people from all walks of life. Some of them have become great friends, even coming back for our kids’ weddings. They’ve become like family.”

But why a lodge operation in the first place? “Because I’m a hunter, just like you, and I’m also a wildlife nut.” He explained that through the years, as the ranching side of the business has grown, the family has always kept wildlife habitat in mind, planting grasses, food plots and cover such as hedgerows and windbreaks. (In the past two decades they’ve planted 150,000 trees.) They also have left crops standing on the edges of grainfields to benefit wildlife, and they have put a lot of acreage in CRP that could have been farmed.

“For us,” Les said, “it’s all about sharing the experiences that we’ve been able to enjoy—giving our guests the hunts that they want and that they want to return for.”

It’s little wonder that Firesteel Creek enjoys such a loyal clientele.

The next morning I was again teamed with Steve Bruns, who had a hunch that we might find sharptails on a grass-and-sage flat on the Jung (pronounced “Young”) Ranch. He was right, and in little more than an hour I had my limit of three. We spent the rest of the day touring—working through draws and hedgerows and along the edges of hilltop grainfields, frequently watering the dogs and switching between shorthairs and English as the temperature climbed toward 90. Eventually I gathered a Hun in a picked chick-pea field, and then a rooster in

standing milo. The trifecta!

And everywhere I looked there was food: from fields of sunflowers and corn to endless acres of millet and wheat. I could only imagine how many birds were hidden out in the crops—or would be drawn to the waste grain after the harvest.

On the final day I hunted the Blackstone Ranch with Troy Tilleraas and his enthusiastic Labs. Unfortunately we managed only a couple of pheasants and a sharptail before the temperature dropped, the wind picked up and a soaking rain drove us back to the truck, and then to the lodge to warm up.

Seeing us arrive, Les came over to check in. He was almost apologetic about the weather and hoped it hadn’t ruined our day.

I reassured him that I had gotten to see some great dogwork and enjoy some good shooting. “Besides, Les, I know there are some things even you can’t control.”

Knowing the Lindskov family and their desire to please, however, I silently wondered whether they might even have that figured out by the time I returned . . .

This story originally appeared in the May/June 2014 edition of *Shooting Sportsman*. Ralph Stuart is *Shooting Sportsman*’s Editor in Chief.



Rio Piedra Plantation

CAMILLA, GEORGIA

NOVEMBER 15-19, 2017

UNLIMITED BOBWHITE QUAIL

Rio Piedra Plantation is one of the most acclaimed hunting lodges in America. Teams of two hunters will pair with a guide to follow pointing dogs through classic quail cover. (Bags will not be limited.) Back at the lodge, guests will be lavished with world-class service and amenities. Rio Piedra has long been a favorite among *Shooting Sportsman*

readers and we are thrilled to be going back. *Shooting Sportsman* Contributing Editor Bruce Buck will once again be hosting this wingshoot and we hope you'll join us this year at Rio Piedra — recognized as the Orvis Endorsed Lodge of the Year in 2001, 2002 and 2010.

Space is limited. Price is **\$4,471** per person based

on double occupancy and is inclusive of all hunting, lodging, meals, licenses, 10 boxes of ammunition, gratuities and ground transportation from our designated airport in Albany, Georgia. Flights to and from Albany, taxes and shipping of birds is not included. Travel insurance is suggested.

The Business of Bobwhites

THE RETURN OF RIO PIEDRA PLANTATION

BY VIC VENTERS

In 1540 the army of Hernando de Soto clanked across a river that the Spanish conquistador dubbed Rio Piedra (“River of Rocks”) in what is now South Georgia at a place known as Sisters Islands. “We serve an al fresco lunch there for our guests on pretty days,” said 69-year-old Bill Atchison, owner of Rio Piedra Plantation, whose grounds encompass the fording site on the Flint River. “Can you imagine seeing de Soto crossing with 600 soldiers, 200 horses and 300 pigs?”

To his benefit, Atchison can; the romance of the Old South isn’t any more ancient than the mid-16th Century, and during the past decade and a half he and his wife, Annie, have harnessed the area’s beauty and mystique—and that of its signature gamebird—to rejuvenate an ailing quail plantation and transform it into a premier destination for wingshooters who pay \$1,000 a day to hunt bobwhites in grand Southern style.

A quick look at lodge reviews on Orvis’s website shows more than 300 unsolicited five-star reviews from a legion of happy hunters who have

visited. “Everyone loves Rio Piedra,” said *SSM* Contributing Editor Bruce Buck, who has hosted three of the magazine’s Readers & Writers Adventures there. “That shoot sells out almost every time.” Under the Atchisons’ ownership, Rio Piedra has won the Orvis Wingshooting Lodge of the Year award three times and is the only Orvis-endorsed lodge to have done so. According to Dan O’Connor, ex-Orvis employee and now general manager of North Carolina’s George Hi Plantation: “In the 10 years I ran the Orvis Endorsed Program I always thought Rio Piedra was the gold standard.”

Not bad for an owner who admits he “stumbled, tripped and sort of backed into” the high-end quail-plantation business in 2000. The year before, Atchison had been a Fortune 500 executive in Atlanta at The Coca-Cola Company’s corporate headquarters, where he was Vice President of Field Sales and Marketing. It was a grueling “seven-day-a-week” job and, although he was ready for a change from the company where he had worked for 32 years, Atchison was terrified by what he regarded as the “boredom of conventional retirement.”

Atchison had grown up rabbit hunting with his dad in northern Michigan and had taken to quail hunting in the early ’70s while living in San Antonio. But owning a sporting lodge wasn’t a lifelong dream or even a plan. The opportunity

arose while Bill and Annie were entertaining Coca-Cola clients during a quail hunt in South Georgia. “We met a guy who was a guide and an assistant manager at an operation,” Bill said. “He wanted to be a manager, and he knew about some land that was for sale. We agreed to take a look.”

That look took the Atchisons to Camilla, in the northern tier of South Georgia’s plantation belt, where a small-but-high-quality lodge operated on the grounds of an old turpentine plantation whose name had once been Rio Piedra. It was a money suck for its owners—freighted with debt and hobbled by revenue that didn’t come close to covering expenses.

After a year of negotiations the couple purchased the operation—which included the lodge and about 2,000 acres of well-managed habitat. The initial idea was to run the business as absentee owners from Atlanta. “But that didn’t work,” said Bill, who quickly discovered that he and Annie were now part hoteliers, part restaurateurs and part recreational directors. Atchison took an early retirement package from Coke, and the couple moved south.

“We did not have a crystal-clear vision of what we would or should become,” recalled Atchison, who believes the initial business plan was muddled and unfocused. “We had not decided how we were going to differentiate ourselves in the market. We had not decided what we wanted our

customer offering to look like. All we knew for sure was that we didn't know much about our new business or the industry."

The first priority for the new owners, however, was to staunch the bleeding. "The initial guest count was a trickle," Atchison said, "about 10 to 15 percent of capacity at the time and not economically viable."

The Atchisons renamed the place Rio Piedra Plantation after its historic moniker and embarked on a marketing campaign—hosting writers, advertising in upscale wingshooting magazines, building an attractive website, exhibiting at hunting shows, and developing relationships with travel agencies and, importantly, Orvis.

Marketing quickly doubled traffic, but Rio Piedra still was hemorrhaging cash. There also were missteps in the early efforts to build the business. A program to attract local corporate customers brought in day hunters but also sparked a clash of cultures. "The day hunters were mostly interested in numbers—'How many did you get this morning?'" Atchison said. "The out-of-state visitors who were staying several days had come for the genteel Southern experience they had read about for years. The prospect of going to a killing mill did not appeal to them. Even casual conversation between the two groups was stilted."

The Atchisons dropped the day-hunter program after a year, but that experience—and listening to their early clients—

helped them discern what affluent bird hunters wanted and expected from a high-end Southern shooting lodge. That was a "total experience" built on refined-but-relaxed accommodations, fine dining, gracious Southern hospitality and, most paramount, what Atchison calls "real hunting," which put a premium on free-ranging, hard-flying birds; good dogwork; and amiable, knowledgeable guides. "It took two or three years for that vision to become clear enough for us to execute against it," Atchison said. "Once we got the customer offering locked down, the operating-level decisions got easier."

The Atchisons also soon realized the importance of fine food and drink. "We set out to create the best restaurant between Atlanta and Tampa and offer meals that are unsurpassed in the industry," Bill said. The couple hired (and have retained) Dirk Flachsmeier, a talented culinary-school-trained chef from Germany who steered the menu up and away from typical deep-fried hunting-lodge fare. "I happen to be a food person," said John LeBlond, a retired attorney from Philadelphia who has hunted at Rio Piedra several times in the past decade. "And the food is top-notch. That's important to me."

The Atchisons gradually expanded the lodge to include private dining rooms, added five standalone cabins and constructed outdoor fireplaces for hunters to mingle around at the end of the day. The intent,

Bill says, was not to gin up the head count but make "evening ambience" a focal point. "Our goal has been to create a Deep South plantation feel in a five-star setting."

The quality of hunting has been aided partly by geography and partly by active management. Sited near private plantations in the area, Atchison says his bobwhite population benefits because wild birds do not recognize property boundaries. "Bobwhites move back and forth between private plantations and Rio Piedra for a number of reasons, ranging from food sources to predator movement to weather patterns," he said. "So there is some variability in the number of coveys found each day. The birds here have to be hunted, not merely shot."

No wild-bobwhite population in the Southeast can withstand pressure at commercial levels and still provide quality hunting, so Rio Piedra augments populations with summertime releases of eight-to-10-week-old reared birds, with periodic top-ups. Those quail that grow to maturity in the wild or survive even a couple of weeks soon present on the wing if not the pure explosiveness of a wild-bird flush, then a very creditable approximation of it.

Since the initial acquisition of the property, the Atchisons have tripled the size of Rio Piedra's upland hunting areas with purchases of both contiguous and non-contiguous property on both banks of the Flint River. A ferry service across

the scenic Flint links the two sides. Typically a guide in a Jeep Wrangler drives a pair of hunters into the uplands. “There are now 34 hunting areas,” Atchison said, “meaning a guest could stay for over two weeks and never walk the same ground. Our emphasis has been on creating an environment that is uncongested and as natural, real and tranquil as bird hunting was at the plantation 100 years ago.”

Amid wiregrass, towering pines and ancient live oaks draped with Spanish moss, quail are hunted on foot behind a brace or two of pointing dogs—often pointers but possibly setters, shorthairs or Brittanys from Rio Piedra’s kennel of more than 100 dogs. One of the most popular improvements has been adding flushing cocker spaniels (“toothy little ruffians,” according to Atchison). “We brought in cockers seven or eight years ago as a way to erase a couple of negatives,” Atchison explained. “One was safety. Walking out in front of the Guns to flush was potentially an occupational hazard to the guide. It could also be an annoyance to the Gun who was trying to shoot a bird and miss the guide. And we quickly learned cockers are a whole lot better at flushing than humans. Shooting instantly became more challenging.”

Adds John LeBlond: “For me, the cockers make the hunt!”

Two years after purchasing Rio Piedra, the Atchisons built a winter home on-site where they stay season long to oversee day-

to-day operations and interact with the guests. “The owners stay on top of everything,” Bruce Buck said. “Every morning Annie will come in to check on her guests.”

Adds Reid Bryant, who today manages the Orvis Endorsed Lodge program: “When we see lodge owners who are present to the degree that Bill and Annie are, it almost goes without saying that it will be a great operation.”

Atchison says it took six years for Rio Piedra to show a profit. “It was a long slog getting to year six,” he said. “Then the recession hit. But we have been—we are not ashamed to say—increasingly profitable ever since.”

Atchison credits this to customers who return and spread the word about their experiences. “Our repeat business has grown to well over 90 percent,” he said. “And today new groups coming here are motivated mainly by what they have heard word of mouth. That makes us less reliant on the expensive marketing tactics we had to employ earlier.”

Though Rio Piedra is thriving nowadays, Atchison says he and Annie continue to polish its “premium brand offering,” to ensure it remains so. This year that includes expanding the kitchen, making room to add a pastry chef and a sous-chef. They also have added more dining areas for guests to spread out in. “It’s not about adding capacity or increasing guest count—we capped that years ago,” he said. “It’s about creating

an open, spacious and relaxed atmosphere.

At its core, though, Rio Piedra is a hunting destination, and Atchison says he and his land managers are redoubling efforts to improve habitat specifically for wild quail. In addition to the annual prescribed burning and timber thinning that long has been a staple of quail management in the Southeast, this year Atchison has brought in heavy equipment and herbicides to remove hardwood brush that shades out both nesting cover and food-producing weeds and forbs—costly techniques mostly employed by those with deep pockets at private wild-bird plantations.

Atchison casts back his eyes for inspiration. “When de Soto passed through here 476 years ago,” he said, “he saw one huge longleaf-pine forest that stretched all the way out to Texas. Our habitat would look very familiar to him.”

And also to the gamebird that defines the South.

This story originally appeared in the September/October 2016 edition of *Shooting Sportsman*. Vic Venters is *Shooting Sportsman*’s Senior Editor.



Pine Hill Plantation

DONALSONVILLE, GEORGIA

FEBRUARY 22-26, 2018

BOBWHITE QUAIL

Join *Shooting Sportsman* Associate Publisher Thierry Bombeke as he hosts a regal hunt for this regal gamebird. This five-day, four-night adventure includes three days of authentic South Georgia bobwhite quail hunting (February 23, 24, and 25) from mule-drawn wagons. Pine Hill's reputation for producing explosive covey rises on its 6,000-acre spread

has become renowned for a reason. If you bring a .410 here, you'd better be good. The luxury lodging and world-class cuisine earned Pine Hill the 2013 Orvis Lodge of the Year award and are just what you've come to expect from the *Shooting Sportsman* Readers & Writers Adventures.

This adventure is **\$5,050**

per person based on single occupancy and is inclusive of all hunting, lodging, meals, licenses, four boxes of ammunition and ground transportation to and from Tallahassee International Airport. Flights to and from Tallahassee, taxes, gratuities and shipping of birds is not included. Travel insurance is suggested.

The New Face of Hunting

A COUPLES HUNT FOR QUAIL AT PINE HILL PLANTATION

BY GEORGIA PELLEGRINI

It's gonna be a hard run, but you can make it," Hilton says to Ida and Ada as we sputter up a hill in the forest. Hilton is the driver of a black glossy wagon, and Ida and Ada are his well-dressed mules, sporting metal-studded bridles and red velvet ornaments. I'm just another one of Hilton's daily passengers in the Southeast Georgia woods at Pine Hill Plantation. Hilton, now in his 70s, has been talking to his mules since he was a child. He has been carrying passengers with his mules for almost as long.

We are driving through 6,000 acres of natural quail habitat: elegant longleaf pines nestled into wiregrass understory. Hilton, Ida and Ada are carrying a group of quail hunters, while other hunters are ahead on horseback. This is the way quail hunting has always been done on grand plantations, and it is even more popular today on plantations that were abandoned as cotton-growing land and converted into quail habitat. Pine Hill Plantation,

founded in 1991, offers this classic Southern quail hunting experience for those seeking a chance to relive what is one of the most romantic hunting traditions on private plantations in the South.

I'm a more inquisitive passenger than most and a Northerner to boot, but Hilton doesn't seem to mind. As I sit in the front seat next to him, he tells me that "Gee" and "Haw" and "Whoa" and "Get up here" are some of the commands he uses to direct his mules. It appears to work. And it also appears telepathic. He has full conversations with Ada and Ida, and there seems to be a true symbiosis, a journey through the woods together that is so familiar by now that they almost share a pulse.

I wonder how, in a time when the "Southern" experience is now so carefully constructed for tourists, someone so authentic, so utterly a product of the South, has ended up right next to me, philosophizing on life in a black-lacquered wagon with two mules. For me, though not for the others in the back seat, hunting is almost an afterthought. There will always be quail hunting, but there will never be another Hilton. Hilton is a Southeast Georgia philosopher, the kind who has stories that will make you forget your destination and savor the journey. I soon realize that even though this land has been transferred

from one owner to the next, Hilton has always stayed with it. He is more a product of the South and of this very place than of any of the tradition he reenacts on a daily basis.

As we climb the hill, two hunting guides ride on horseback, as they have all afternoon, leading the way from covey to covey. Their bird dogs are ecstatic with the scent of quail in the air. Soon, almost instinctively, Ida and Ada come to a halt, as if they have been here before. They lower their heads and begin to snack on the brush. The passengers in the back of the wagon file out, decide who will shoot first this time, and follow the guides toward a covey. Hilton and I sit and watch while Ida and Ada chew at the wiregrass, lifting their upper lips to display their pink, glistening gums.

"That'd make a good utility pole, get good money for that, don't be biting on it," Hilton says, scolding them for gnawing on one of the big longleaf pines.

We hear shots in the distance. One of the retrieving dogs that has been held back with us on the wagon tears loose and runs for the flushing covey. "Uh, oh. You in trouble dog," Hilton says, shaking his head and watching him dart off toward the shots. "He ain't but ten months old . . . He need a attitude adjustment." Then we hear commotion between the hunters and dogs

as they search for the fallen bird. “I saw one dead bird,” Hilton says as a matter of fact.

We hear shots again. Then the other dogs left in the pen hooked to the back of the wagon burst into wails of excitement. More shots are heard, and more feathers flicker in the light, falling to the pine-needled forest floor.

“They bringing back some bird stew. With that shot there ain’t nothin’ but ash,” Hilton says, meaning the bird has been decimated. I get the impression that he has seen it all before.

The shooters and guides walk back now along with the dogs, panting lightly, sporting their red and blue electronic collars. And we all pile on and continue to the next covey, to flush some of the wildest quail I’ve seen at a commercial hunting preserve.

As we drive the wooded paths, there is just the percussion of horses’ hooves and the thumping of the mules plodding, exhaling and sputtering. Someone asks if they can take our picture. Hilton and I lean in. “I’m grinning like a mule eatin’ briars,” he says, his eyes shining and squinting from years of driving in the Georgia sun.

Time passes in the woods like a well-choreographed dance. There is more sputtering, flushing, shots and floating feathers. And as the sun sets, it casts the most elegant light between the pine trees, a mystical light that settles over

the woods like a blanket and changes, moves and flickers as we all leave slowly, while the night fog rolls in. I step down from my perch beside Hilton and leave with the others for the next phase of the Pine Hill Plantation experience.

It is a February night, the Eve of St. Valentine’s Day, and six couples sit together in the warmly lit dining room of a red brick house over plates piled high. Wine glasses reflect the lamplight, and the room tinkles with laughter. The group of hunters is comprised of bankers, fashion executives, housewives and retirees. This particular hunt was put together for couples, a way for husbands to include wives in the experience. They have traveled from as far as New Hampshire and Texas to be here. Most of the couples have never met before this night, yet all of them have come to the same conclusion that this is where they want to celebrate romance, walking through the Southeast Georgia woods—quail hunting.

What is most significant about this group, though, is that many of the women have never hunted before. They have only supported their husbands’ pastime from a distance, perhaps mildly curious, perhaps not, raising their children and occasionally sending them off to hunt with their fathers until the children eventually lost interest and moved on to

college and then careers. Or at least that’s what they tell me—that many of their children are too busy with their lives to find time for hunting anymore.

Somehow, though, the wives have decided that it is their turn, and they have chosen to spend Valentine’s Day not at a spa or a high-end restaurant but at this well-heeled hunting destination with those extra bits of charm that only the South can deliver. They dine and laugh well into the night, and in the morning they don their khaki and bits of hunter orange and pile into SUVs with their favorite dogs to join their husbands for the very first time.

After a short journey in Hilton’s wagon once more, we reach a clearing in the woods and the women climb out with their gleeful husbands in tow. We move together out into the high grass in the late-morning light, the men soon fading into the background. After only a few yards the dogs freeze into points, and we slow, walking in pairs, approaching the covey from two sides. We clutch our shotguns, some timidly at first, with a sense of excitement that only comes with a first hunt.

We wait with the trembling dogs until out of the silence a large covey of quail rises sharply at an angle, faster than I have ever seen quail fly. The women bring their elegant shotguns to their cheeks and fire. A few of us connect, and the quail fall more slowly than they rose into

the wiregrass. The eager dogs spring off to retrieve them, as the husbands look on, realizing perhaps that they may have just found a new hunting partner. Watching the women's enthusiasm unfold as the dogs drop the quail in their hands, it is clear that not only are they new hunting partners but they also are the new face of hunting.

They are confirming a trend—that even as the total number of hunters in the US has been declining in the recent past, there has been an increase in the number of women hunters across the country. But in the process they are changing the world of hunting as we know it, not just because they are women, but because they are different kinds of women than we have seen hunting in the past. These aren't women who have been regularly getting their hands dirty and are just interested in becoming one of the guys. These are denizens of the well-heeled suburbs and the city—high-heel-sporting, lipstick-wearing women who now are picking up their shotguns with red nail polish on their trigger fingers. Ten years ago they may have been content with going to the farmer's market or grocery store and being the home cooks. But somehow a Saturday trip to the farmer's market for a pint of strawberries with an eco-friendly reusable shopping bag doesn't seem to cut it anymore.

It is a good time for hunting,

a period of rediscovery, where quail harvested with their own manicured hands brings them the same satisfaction that it does for men. Today's hunting women are seeking to experience things more viscerally, the way their grandmothers did, often outdoors, often hunched over, weeding, curing, burning or digging. By picking up a shotgun, no matter how strapped to city life they are, they are demonstrating that there is a need in all of us for something more real than designer food at designer restaurants.

It becomes ever more obvious to me over the course of the weekend that the power to help young people enjoy the outdoors, the future of hunting, lies with mothers and wives. There will be different ways that these new hunters ease themselves into the experience. For some it will be a romantic Valentine's getaway with fine wine and bird shooting at a Southern plantation. For some it will be simply following behind others in the woods in order to experience nature. Or maybe it will be simply talking with a wagon driver and his mules who are the embodiment of the traditions that surround an honored sport. However it manifests itself, it becomes clear that our ideas about hunting and food and lifestyle are reforming in a way that they haven't

since our ancestors worked every day to simply survive.

In the end I say goodbye to Hilton with the deep sense of nostalgia that Pine Hill Plantation instills. I hope that there always will be opportunities to walk the woods, but I know that there will never be another Hilton—a genuine product of a bygone era. “Back when I was seven years old, I started hooking up mules. This was all farmland. I plowed these tracks,” Hilton says, looking calmly past the pointed ears of Ida and Ada and into the surrounding woods.

The land isn't farmland anymore, but it is more magical than ever. It has been transformed to ideal quail habitat lined with longleaf pines, the kind of pencil pine trees that are tall and elegant and seem to stand like columns, reaching up so high they pierce the periwinkle sky.

This story originally appeared in the January/February 2013 edition of *Shooting Sportsman*. Georgia Pellegrini is a chef who lives in New York and Austin, Texas. She operates women's adventure trips and a food, travel, lifestyle and hunting website: georgiapellegrini.com. Pellegrini is the author of *Food Heroes* and *Girl Hunter*, available wherever books are sold.

Contact us today to get your adventure started.

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