

Theatre IV | Maple Festival | Coal Camp Art

VIRGINIA

L I V I N G

Hunt Season

TRACKING
THE BOBWHITE
AT BLANDFIELD

by CLARK C. JONES

WWW.VIRGINIALIVING.COM

FEBRUARY 2010 \$4.95



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEWART FEREBEE
STYLING BY JULIE VANDEN BOSCH

DINING

|||||||
The Red Hen's
storybook charm

HOME

|||||||
A groovy
Greek Revival

FOOD

|||||||
Winter dishes
to pair with beer



A SHOOTING

PARTY



The small, quick
BOBWHITE
*has long been a favorite
quarry for hunters.*



OWING TO DEVELOPMENT AND MODERN
FARMING PRACTICES,

THE QUAIL
POPULATION
HAS FALLEN

IN RECENT DECADES—BUT PRIVATE,
CONSERVATION-MINDED PRESERVES SUCH AS

**BLANDFIELD
PLANTATION**

IN ESSEX COUNTY HAVE BECOME A REDOUBT FOR
WILD BIRDS AND WATERFOWL AS WELL AS THE
SPORTING FOLK WHO PURSUE THEM.

By Clarke C. Jones | Photography by Stewart Ferebee





A LONE ENGLISH SETTER CHARGES THROUGH THE BROOMSTRAW.

“Yowl! Specter!”

HOLLERS UPLAND MANAGER AND TODAY'S GUIDE, DAVE POMFRET.

Mounted on Blackjack, his Tennessee walking horse,

POMFRET WATCHES

AS SPECTER QUICKLY TURNS AND THEN DASHES INTO A STAND OF YOUNG LONGLEAF PINES.

The setter needs little encouragement—he is a field trial champion and knows his business. Head held high, he searches for a familiar scent. As he races to the edge of another field, the setter's nose finds what it seeks, and suddenly he halts—motionless—and transforms himself into a speckled statue. Dave raises his hat, a signal to his assistant, Darin Strickland, and the six-person hunting party he's been ferrying behind Pomfret in a modified “bird buggy,” that Specter has found birds. The hunters have been sitting eight feet up in the back of the buggy, watching the dog's performance. Now everyone watches Bill Royall and Pam, his bride of two weeks, step down from the buggy and carefully approach the bird dog on point, 75 yards away. The couple moves cautiously toward Specter, as if they have just entered a minefield. There are quail somewhere in front of the setter, but in the thigh-high grass it is anybody's guess where.

Pomfret dismounts and walks between the two Royalls. “Move up with me,” he says to the couple, calmly. It is hard for the gunners to stay calm, knowing that any second there will be an explosion just at their feet. In an instant, the earth seems to erupt in a mass of flying brown darts. It is unsettling, to say the least, but the Royalls, having recovered from a previous covey rise, focus their 20-gauge shotguns on prospective targets and let loose with a volley, and each brings one down. In all the excitement of the flush and gunfire, Specter has not budged. The dog is “steady to wing and shot,” in hunting parlance, meaning once he goes on point, he does not move until he receives a command from Pomfret

to do so. It's a stellar performance.

Just as you think the curtain has fallen on this action, a small bit of chocolate fur bolts into the picture. Strickland has released Kayla, Pomfret's Boykin spaniel, and she knows her job just as Specter knows his. Kayla's mission is to find the downed birds and retrieve them to “hand,” which means she brings the quail to Pomfret. This dog not only knows her job, she loves her job. In seconds, Kayla sweeps the field like a four-legged vacuum cleaner and comes bounding back with one of the birds, then repeats the feat.

For the next three hours or so, until the sun begins to set, this outdoor scene will play out again and again on the 3,500-acre Virginia estate known as Blandfield Plantation. Along with Royall, Pam and Pam's brother, Mark Kiecker, the hunting party includes a few of Royall's close friends: Judge Isaac Freeman, who proves to be an old hand at bird hunting; Richard Farland, who can hit just about anything flying; and Blair Farinholt, an avid waterfowler. Working in pairs, the hunters, led by Specter's pointing and Pomfret's guidance, flush quail. Bill Royall is impressed. “The birds are fast and plentiful,” he says. “This is as close to wild bird hunting as I have ever experienced on a preserve.”

For the quail hunting enthusiast or waterfowler, Blandfield Plantation seems to be a must-hunt destination. The sprawling property, just off Route 17 north of Tappahannock, has a rare mix of qualities—breathtaking views, impressive historic structures and abundant birds and waterfowl. The long, gravel drive winds past

the restored Blandfield manor home built by Robert Beverley and completed in 1773, past waterfowl and quail habitats to finally end at a hunting lodge designed after the old Parramore Island Coast Guard Station on Virginia's Eastern Shore. The 5,000-square-foot lodge is perched on a cliff overlooking a 600-acre marsh and the Rappahannock River.

Blandfield looks like an estate that's always been grand and well tended. But as anyone who's owned or managed big properties might suspect, that wasn't always the case. In the early 1980s, the estate was in somewhat sorry shape. The manor house had fallen into a state of disrepair, and the land seemed poised to become a high-end development. Then Mr. and Mrs. James C. Wheat Jr. and their son, James Wheat III, purchased the property. Wheat III, known as Jimmy to his friends, is a graduate of Hampden-Sydney and the University of Virginia who worked in the investment banking industry for years, including a stint with Wheat First Securities—a later iteration of J.C. Wheat & Co., an investment bank founded by his grandfather in Richmond in 1934. (Wheat First Securities, after a merger and an acquisition, was eventually absorbed by Wachovia Securities.) He says that after his father died in 1992, he spent

10 years working to pay off roughly \$1 million of debt on Blandfield so that he could repurchase the land from the original investors.

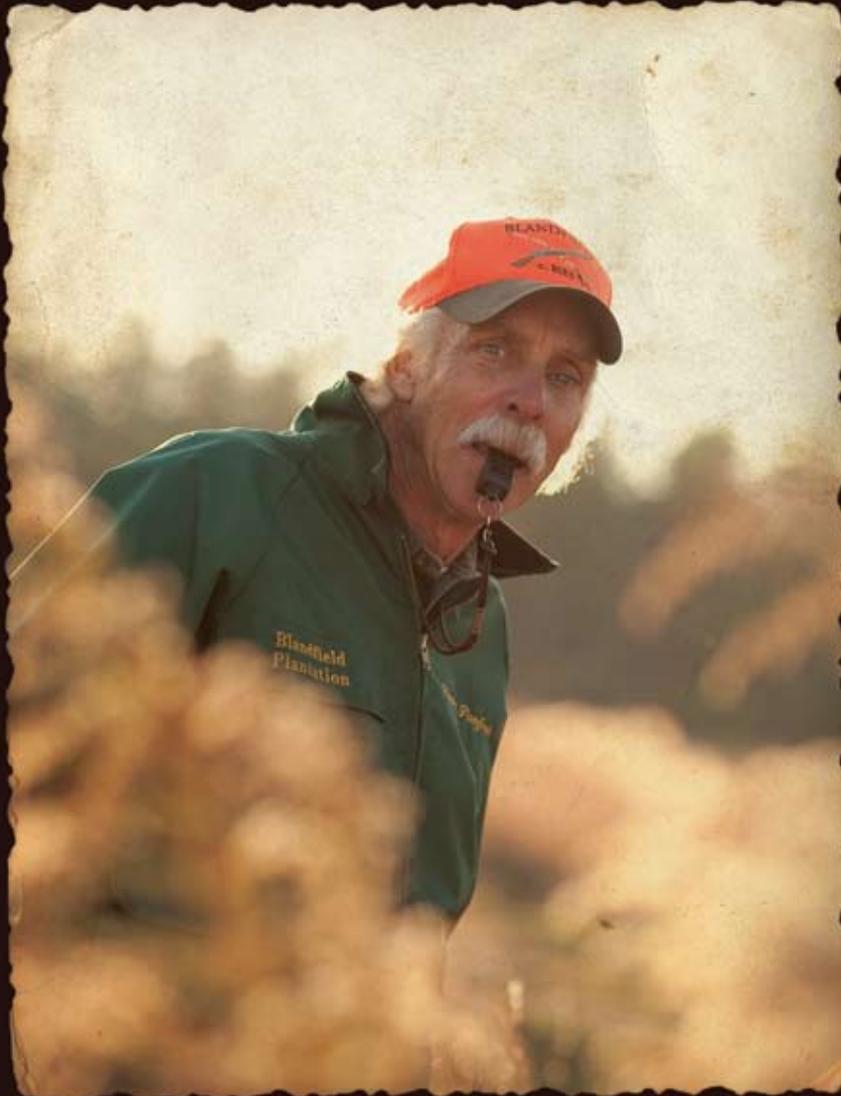
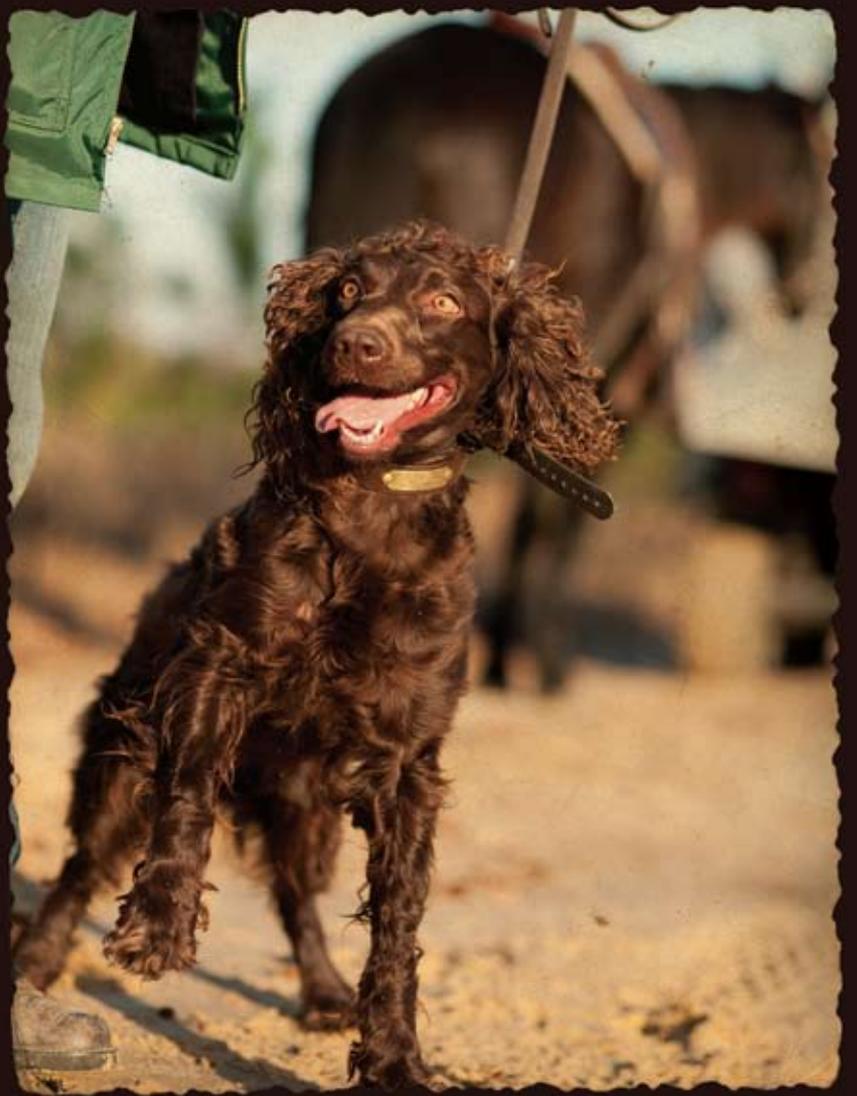
As an outdoorsman, conservationist and operator of a hunting business, Wheat III says that his goals for Blandfield are “to keep this place in the same, pristine condition it was in 200-plus years ago and to offer guests an experience that cannot be duplicated. Although our family originally bought this place as a place to hunt, our long-term objective was to act as stewards of this property and its future, and not to just live on its past glories.”

Wheat III, who has served on the boards of the Nature Conservancy and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, says he has undertaken several measures to boost the habitat for wild birds on his property. He has thinned standing pine to help create an understory conducive to quail habitat, initiated a predator control program, and planted longleaf pines and early-warm-season grasses. Well-run shooting preserves are mindful of the high rate of predation of both wild and pen-raised quail. Everything wants to eat a quail: Snakes, skunks, and raccoons want the eggs, while foxes, hawks, feral cats and the common house cat will attack the chicks and adults. Darin Strickland, Dave Pomfret's assistant, points out that due to predation, the plantation puts back three quail for every quail a hunter takes out.

Good stewardship, as Wheat III points out, is not possible without good people running the property. Blandfield's waterfowl manager, 70-year-old Bobby Swineford, is an expert duck- and goose-hunting guide—he's been managing waterfowl hunts since 1984. He's also a double A shooter on the sporting clays circuit. He was one of the first people Wheat hired when he started Blandfield's waterfowl hunting operation in 2001.

According to Swineford, waterfowl need three things to flourish—food, water and rest—and they get all three on Blandfield's large marsh, impoundments and ponds near the Rappahannock River. It is a genuine sanctuary, or rest, for waterfowl. “We have places on the property where we hunt ducks and geese,” says Swineford, “but we

The sprawling property has BREATHTAKING VIEWS, HISTORIC STRUCTURES and abundant birds and waterfowl.



Clockwise from top left: The hunting party in the "bird buggy"; Kayla, a Boykin spaniel; the Royalls traipsing through grass; upland manager / guide Dave Pomfret.

also provide places on this property where we never hunt or disturb them. We have built impoundment sanctuaries for waterfowl that no one disturbs, not during hunting season, not when hunting season is over, not ever!” Woe to the individual, employee or guest, who does not get that message.

Pomfret, Blandfield’s upland manager, also knows his business. Hired by Wheat two years ago, Pomfret, who is in his mid-60s, has been a professional bird dog trainer and trialer of pointers and setters since 1985. In the summer, Pomfret, like a number of serious bird dog trainers, heads north to continue dog training—in his case, to his home in North Dakota. When you quail hunt at Blandfield, he says, you are not following behind some plodding dog that bumps or blinks birds. You may be shooting over Daisy, the 2007 American Pointer Club National Champion, or Specter, an English setter, who is both a Field Champion and an Amateur Field Champion, or Tripper, another Field Champion setter. In other words, the dogs used for quail hunting may often have a higher pedigree than the people who are hunting with them.

These days, the manor house is used for weddings, meetings and charity events—but it’s the quail hunting and waterfowl gunning that are Blandfield’s biggest draws. John Corey, of Richmond, a frequent hunter, says that Blandfield compares more than favorably with other East Coast private preserves. “I was in south Georgia last

February, quail hunting, and went on my second Blandfield quail hunt about two weeks ago. In both places we hunted over released birds. I can say without a doubt that Blandfield [had birds that flew higher and] more birds in the [covey] rise than in Georgia. Dave Pomfret seemed very organized and focused on providing a successful hunt. Also, the thinning and clearing at Blandfield in the timber areas have improved the hunting and shooting without obstruction—unlike the terrain in Georgia. I think Jimmy

Wheat’s operation has surpassed the ones I have experienced, and that, along with being less expensive, provides a better value for me.”

Colinus virginianus, or the bobwhite, has often been called the “Prince of Game Birds.” Rather than flush wildly, as a pheasant or grouse might, its defense is to hold in a covey that then erupts all at once, causing great consternation to a predator. It tends to hold fast and not flush until the last possible moment. This allows a bird dog to point it when the dog has located the covey. The bird’s small size and quick flight burst make it both fun and challenging to hunt, which increasingly takes place on private preserves as America’s quail population, over the last few decades, has dropped dramatically.

This is not due to overhunting, as some might expect, but due to loss of habitat and to modern farming practices. Marc Puckett, a wildlife division biologist for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries who has been involved in a number of studies of the bobwhite and its habitat, says that it takes very large tracts of land with diverse vegetation to attract quail. Farm

fields are an ideal quail habitat—or at least they were during the gilded era of quail hunting, from the middle 1800s to the early 1900s. That was the era prior to advanced farming techniques such as chemical fertilization, and a period when the concept of crop rotation was unknown.

Fields that could no longer produce were left fallow, and timber was cut to make way for new fields. The fields that were left unattended grew weeds and early-season grasses, which in the spring attracted the insects that are a major food source for newly hatched quail. Quail thrived in this early agrarian environment. There was plenty of food—and, because farmers used hedgerows to separate their fields, there was good protection from predators.

That is not the case anymore. Development and changes in farming

technology and techniques, among other issues, have adversely affected the quail. For one thing, there are fewer farmland hedgerows offering cover for quail. Farmers have been removing them for years to add tillable acreage to their land. In addition, farmers long ago

started using fescue for grazing stock and as a cover crop. Fields of fescue, a cool-season grass, make poor living space for quail. What’s more, while longleaf pine trees are an ideal habitat for quail, there are fewer of them these days as farmers plant the faster-growing loblolly pines to supplement their farming income. Longleaf pines are also less affected by prescribed burning, which helps rejuvenate quail habitat.

Puckett acknowledges the necessity and benefits of these changes but also believes that farmers, in some cases, could help to boost the quail population. “If a landowner’s number one goal is timber income, then by all means, manage for that,” he says. “But if they have a strong desire to manage for wildlife, look into alternatives.” He points out that both the state and federal governments offer financial incentive programs that allow farmers to cost-effectively take some land out of crop production and leave a percentage for wildlife. “A lot can be accomplished by taking 5 percent of a farm out of production and placing it into field borders, hedgerows, idle crop land and thicket cover,” argues Puckett. He encourages anyone interested in helping bring back the quail population to visit www.dgif.virginia.gov/quail for comprehensive quail management information. “Joining the [Game and Inland Fisheries] department’s new Quail Management Assistance Program will intensify our efforts to help quail,” he says. “It will help us better to track habitat improvements and document successes.”

Put good hunters with good dogs in a favorable bird habitat and you get a successful quail hunt. Having bagged several birds during their late-starting quail hunt, the Royall party heads back to the lodge, high above the marsh, just as the November sun begins to set over Essex County, turning the sky reddish purple. There, they will spend the night and rise early to hunt

The ride back TO THE LODGE IS A GOOD TIME TO reexamine shots missed, *share excuses and salute* shots well made.

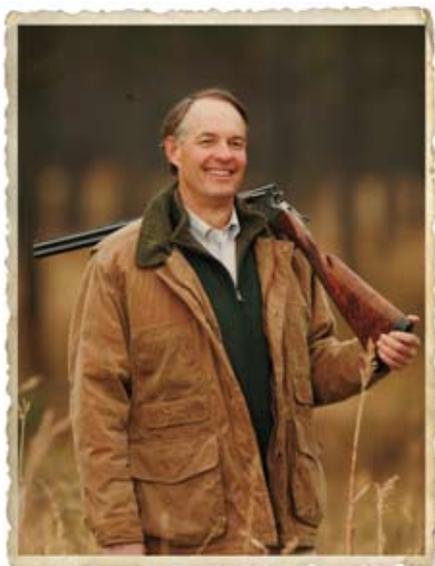
waterfowl in the morning—followed by a goose hunt in the afternoon. The ride back to the lodge is a good time to reexamine shots missed, share excuses and salute shots well made. Asked to assess the afternoon, hunter Richard Farland says he was pleased. “What

really impressed me was that we had many covey rises with anywhere from five to 15 birds. The ground cover was excellent, and the dogs worked beautifully. It was a real pleasure just watching the expert dog handling.”

The group pauses at the stone terrace with its large circular fire pit. Jamie Pauls, Blandfield’s chef, offers refreshments and places oysters on the grill covering the fire pit. The guests take a seat around the fire, enjoying oysters on the half shell, rare seared black and white sesame seed-encrusted tuna with Old Bay waffle chips, cucumber salad, pickled ginger, and roasted vegetable tarts finished with a balsamic reduction and parsley oil—and those are just the appetizers. Later, at dinner, the group will dine on Swineford’s famous lamb chops and beef tenderloin—literally cooked “in the barrel” and served with mint jelly and Pauls’ chimichurri sauce—or grouper pan-seared with purple basil pesto, accompanied by roasted garlic mashed potatoes and hominy succotash. Sitting by the fire, cocktails in hand, the group can hear ducks winging their way into the marsh to roost—just as the moon is high enough to produce a mirror image of itself on the Rappahannock River. It is a scene that’s hard to describe but not easily forgotten.

Earlier, Jimmy Wheat had told me that the hunting lodge reminds him of the times when he and his father used to duck hunt on Parramore Island. There were no TVs, phones or electricity. “It was there I learned to appreciate the camaraderie of hunting,” he says. “Hunting can be good and bad and always unpredictable, [yet] it’s always conducive to conversation, friendship, story-telling and a sense of remoteness”

In other words, it’s an escape from the world for a day or two, and who doesn’t need that? ●





Opposite page: James Wheat III, owner of Blandfield Plantation. This page, clockwise from top left: Dave Pomfret on Blackjack; three quail; Darin Strickland with Specter, an English setter; gourmet treats at the end of the day.