



Georgia Snow

A Classic Hunting Experience In The Southern Pine Woods **BY MICHAEL ALTIZER**

Gunners Rick Van Etten (left) and Tom Weaver prepare for a shot as guide Matt Dollar (center) moves in to flush a covey pointed by a brace of the plantation's English setters.

On the first flush of the morning, the Editor and I both swung to the covey as it rose, with he and the Guide 20 yards ahead of me, and the birds going directly away between them. As we both fired, a single quail momentarily disappeared in a centered cloud of feathers.

At the shot, I immediately picked up the thundering whir of a second flush to my right and swung toward the sound as, this time, the Publisher swung on a towering double again going straight away. Again, we both fired at nearly the same instant and once more a bird was centered in yet another burst of feathers floating in the cool morning breeze.

With the echoes of the shots still spreading through the south Georgia woods, Editor, Publisher and Guide all turned and looked around toward me with the same probing question on their faces and then asked nearly in unison, "Did you get it?"

"Hang on...I think so," I replied. I peered into the small digital screen on the back of my camera, zoomed in tight to the shots I had just taken and was relieved to discover first one, then two clouds of feathers, both in-frame, each with a Gunner and the Guide.

I don't know why I should have been surprised that the Editor and the Publisher of a magazine called *Gun Dog* would both be good wingshots. But when birds started falling from the sky amid clouds of feathers, I had a much clearer understanding of what my friend Bill Bowles, general manager and co-owner of Wynfield Plantation, means when he speaks of "Georgia Snow."

HUNTING WYNFIELD PLANTATION

I was here at Wynfield Plantation with Rick Van Etten and Tom Weaver, the editor and the publisher, respectively, of *Gun Dog*, along with Wynfield guide Chuck Turner and some of the finest bird dogs this side of Sirius. It may seem odd, but with their full schedules it is a rare occurrence for Rick and Tom to actually find time to get out into the field together, and this was the first time we all three had ever managed to be at the same place at the same time.

What brought us all here from Iowa, Pennsylvania and

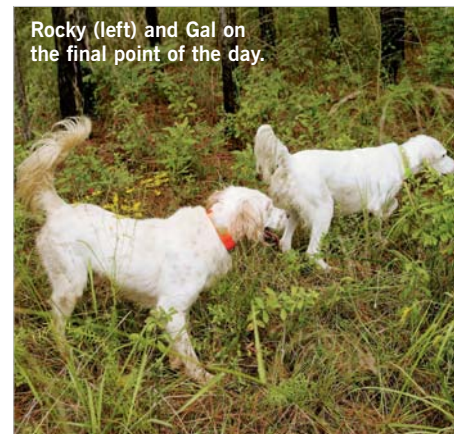
Georgia Snow



Gun Dog Publisher Tom Weaver connects on a single in the Georgia pine woods.



The author moves in on a point.



Rocky (left) and Gal on the final point of the day.

Tennessee was the opportunity to quail hunt. And, of course, our friends here at Wynfield.

We were 15 miles due west of Albany, Georgia, just off Highway 62, amid the sweet Georgia pines, scented sedge grass and stately live oaks adorned with Spanish moss on a refreshingly cool and lightly overcast October day. So now, having had the first covey of the morning duly covered with shotguns and lens, Rick and I switched roles as he took up his camera and I my gun, a little straight-stocked 16-bore English side-by-side which was by coincidence (or not) the same age as my father and engraved, "A. Hill and Son, Horncastle."

No one I have found so far seems to know much about this little double or her makers, but once John Skinner, head gunsmith for the Orvis Company in Manchester, Vermont, had done a proper gun fit for me and had done

a nip and a tuck and fitted her with a custom leather butt pad, she fit me like my dad's old shooting vest, and because of that, the birds of southwest Georgia suddenly discovered that life had become a little more complicated than before.

At least they did on this day. But let's give credit where it's really due. The dogs upstaged us all.

Not too surprising, actually. For in addition to being named the 2005 Orvis Wingshooting Lodge of the Year, Wynfield Plantation is also an integral part of the Orvis Endorsed Dog Breeding and Training Program, accommodating over one hundred of the finest bird dogs in the world, from classic English pointers and English setters to German shorthairs, English cockers, Brittanys, springer spaniels and of course their signature Wynfield Labrador retrievers.

The care and training put into these dogs is simply as good as it gets. And Wynfield's recently completed state-of-



The kennels at Wynfield Plantation are roomy, well-ventilated and immaculate. The smaller building at right is the new state-of-the-art Whelping Center.

the-art Whelping Center assures any gunner and their family of some of the finest bred and best cared for puppies available anywhere in the world. Evidence of the quality of these dogs and their care and training continued to impress us that day, and as we indulged ourselves with dinner at the Main Lodge that evening, we eagerly looked forward to the next day's hunt, wondering if anything could top what we had already experienced.

If only we had known.

The next morning, following a classic Southern breakfast with thick-sliced bacon, two kinds of sausage and eggs, biscuits, fruit, grits and homemade peach preserves, we were back out on the Plantation.

This time our guide was Matt Dollar, a tall, soft-spoken gentleman, and he had chosen a beautiful pair of English setters for us this morning—Rocky, a veteran who, coincidentally, graces the cover of Wynfield's catalog, and Gal, a young trainee who at two years old is already more impressive than any dog I had ever hunted with before I first came to Wynfield.

These two setters performed their duets like virtuosos, each steady to wing and shot, honoring the other's points to perfection and never failing to find our downed birds. Even when I nicked a beautiful hen just as she disappeared behind an inconveniently placed pine bough, Rocky stayed with that bird and found her for us minutes later and nearly 70 yards away.

But the final act was a performance which none of us will ever forget. With the day waning and our limits nearly filled, Gal suddenly locked up hard on point just as she and Rocky crossed paths while quartering back and forth through a small pine thicket.

Rocky froze immediately as he backed her, mere inches off her right flank. Rick, with his camera still in hand,



These Lab pups were produced within the plantation's signature breeding program.

groaned in frustration, for he was out of film, and he knew that I had long since stashed my digital camera away, all its memory cards full. So we just stood there gazing in admiration and amazement at this Osthaus painting come to life, until Tom quietly asked, "Mike, can you clear any of the images off your digital camera?"

Thank goodness the Publisher, at least, was on his game. Of course I could. But would the dogs maintain their point long enough?

"Matt, how long will they hold?" I whispered.

"They'll hold." Matt spoke with the quiet, assured confidence of a man who knows and trusts his bird dogs.

So handing my little gun to Tom, I retrieved the camera from my game pouch, powered it up and quickly began searching for a few images I felt I could afford to dump. By now, a couple of minutes had passed, with Rocky and Gal still as steady as statues, although they must surely have been wondering why these alleged gunners were just standing there, seemingly doing nothing.

Two minutes more and I had cleared a dozen or so

Georgia Snow



Wynfield Plantation was named the 2005 Orvis Wingshooting Lodge of the Year.

The main lodge offers corporate meeting facilities...and wonderful meals.



Woodstork Lake, behind the lodge, is home to a variety of gamefish and waterfowl.

IF YOU WANT TO GO...

In addition to quail hunting, Wynfield Plantation offers lodging and corporate meeting facilities, sporting clays and trap, plus "weekend getaway" golf and clays packages. For more information, call the plantation at 229-889-0193 or check out its Web site at: www.wynfieldplantation.com.

frames and quietly eased three feet to my left and began photographing. Suddenly I spotted the quail, a shy little cock bird tucked in tightly next to a low-slung pine barely three feet in front of little Gal's point. Moving two feet closer, I shot one more frame. Another minute spent. Angle still not right, I dropped to my knees as easily as possible and shot two more frames as the breeze shifted and the dogs slightly repositioned.

"Okay, try to get around to the other side." I backed out, circled the dogs from behind and came in from the far corner. This angle was not nearly as pleasing as what I already had, but I shot two more frames anyway, then circled back around to Tom and Rick, who were standing as transfixed as the dogs. For his part, Matt just stood there with his two feature performers, a quiet, comfortable smile on his face. It had been nearly eight minutes, and the brace of setters

still held.

Three more frames and my last memory card was full again. I nodded to Matt and eased the camera down onto its strap across my left shoulder as Tom passed the little Hill back to me with an approving nod.

In a perfect world the bird would have now flushed, rising right to left until he was silhouetted against the sunset, and one of us would have swung and dropped him cleanly with a single, well-placed shot in one final cloud of Georgia Snow. In fact, when the bird finally did flush, I eased my gun forward from its ready position and began my swing.

But I had looked too deeply into his eyes while shooting those pictures, and I told my partners that as the bird had darted past, going low through the thick undergrowth in the dimming light, I simply couldn't catch up with him.

But I think that really, we all knew better. *