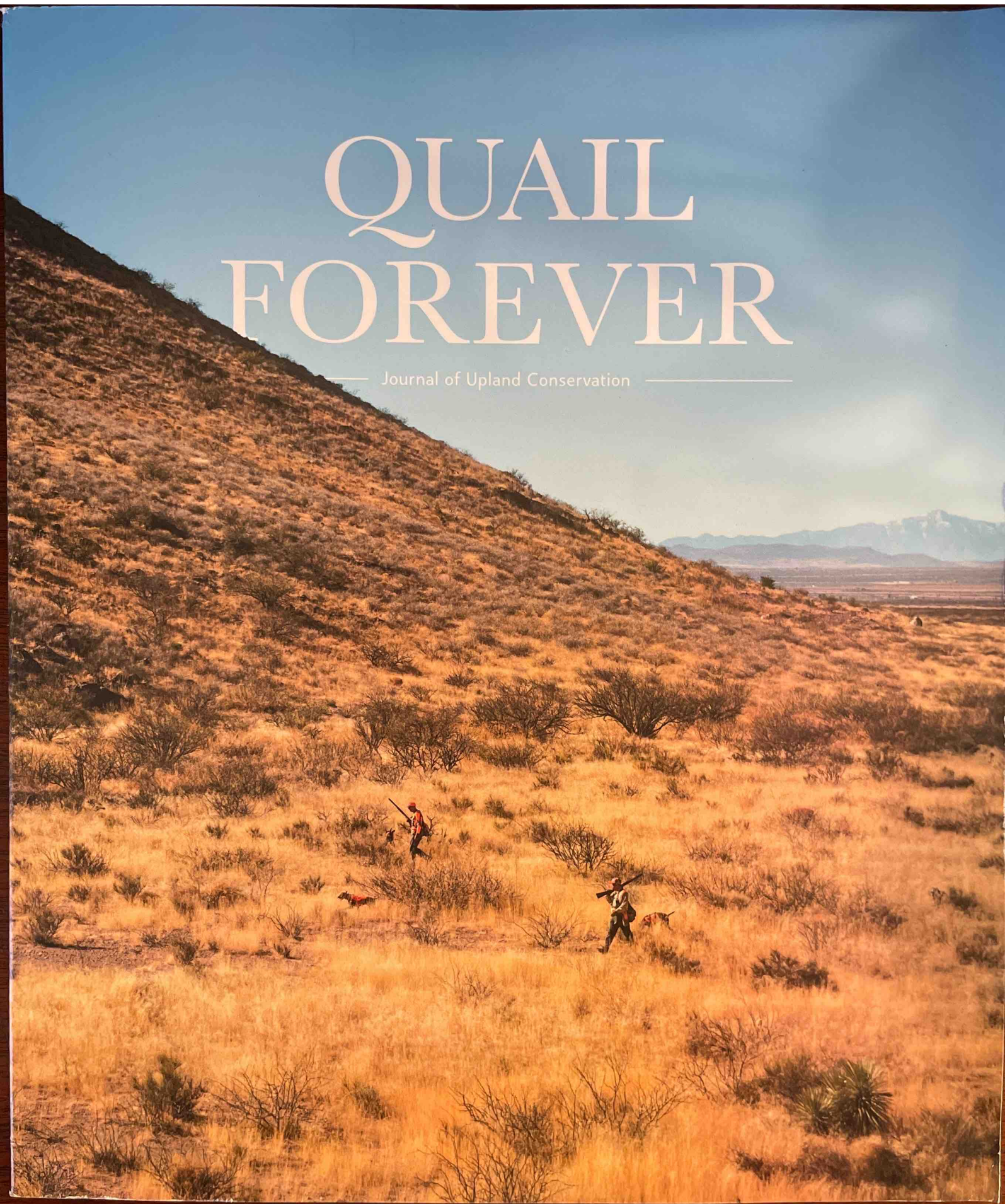
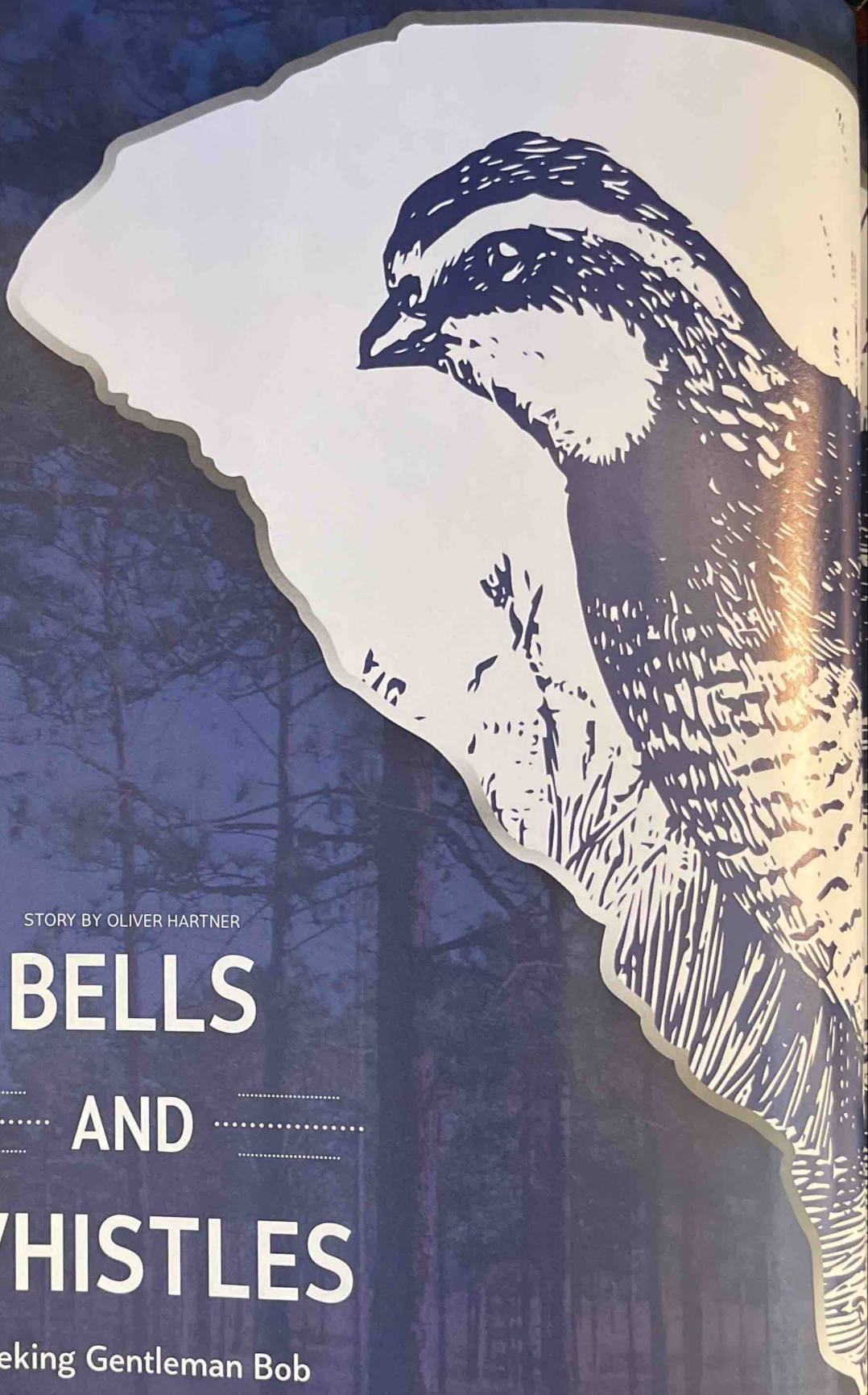


QUAIL FOREVER

— Journal of Upland Conservation —





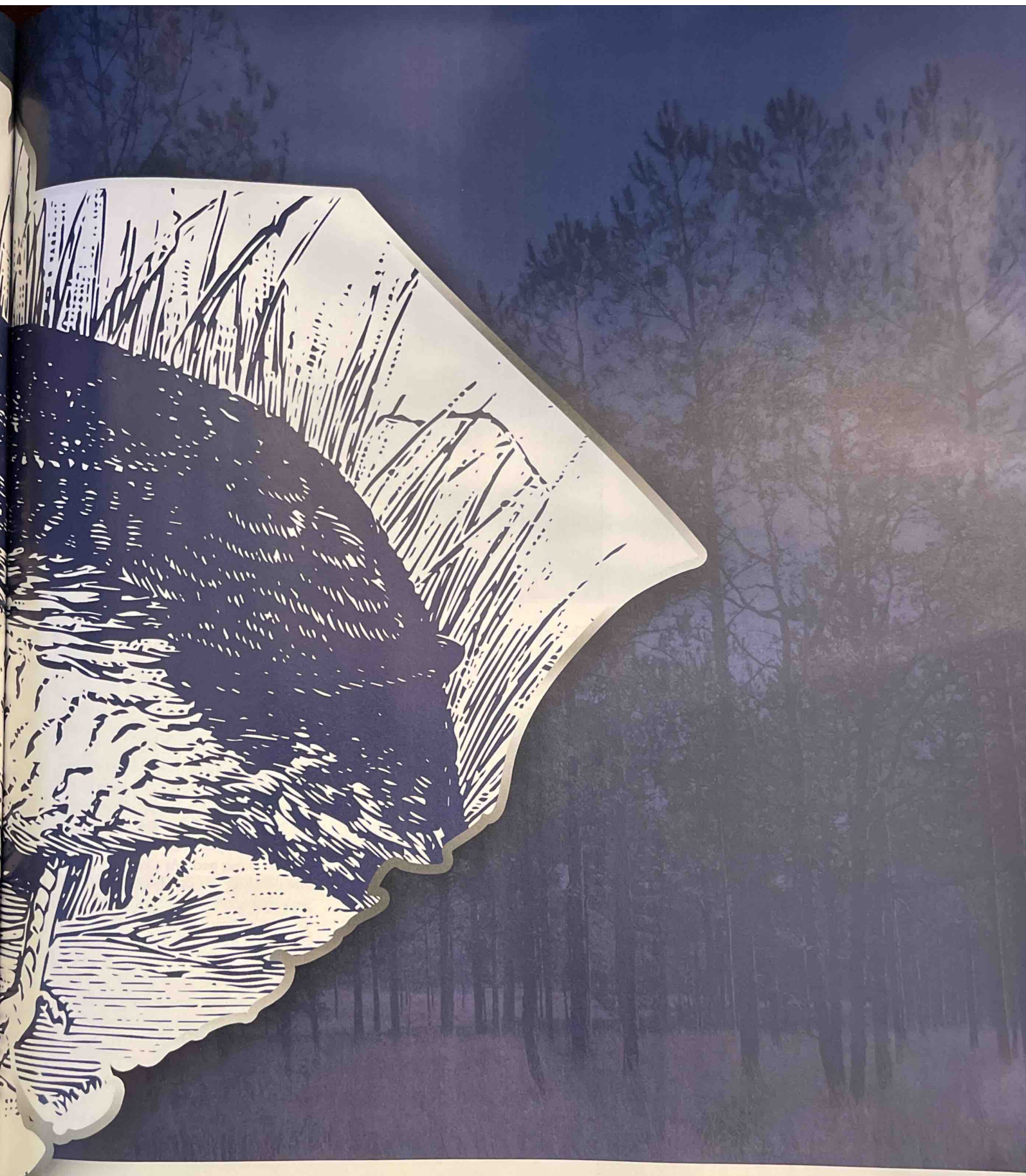
STORY BY OLIVER HARTNER

BELLS

AND

WHISTLES

Seeking Gentleman Bob
in South Carolina



Gone are the days when bobwhite quail flushed wild in cloud-sized coveys between lower parts of the Piedmont down to the Carolina Lowcountry. Many people blame the fire ants. Others accuse the coyotes. Some say God visited his wrath upon them, bringing not fire and brimstone, but torrential rain and tempest winds in the form of Hurricane Hugo.

Considering that the bird hunting bard of South Carolina, Havilah Babcock, lamented their declining numbers as early as the mid-twentieth century, none of these suspects holds the smoking gun. Having crisscrossed this state for over a third of my life, the answer to why bobwhite quail struggle to reestablish themselves seems as obvious as the real estate advertisements for homes built atop manicured golf courses; or the forests choked with understory so thick a rabbit wouldn't dare to live in them; or the agricultural fields planted in a manner to squeeze profit from every inch of soil.

Bobwhite struggle to exist here because of us. But legacy populations in huntable numbers endure because we've acknowledged the problem, and while they hide themselves from everyone but the most determined, these coveys will send your stomach into your throat while tugging a tear from your eyes as a toll for having witnessed it. An insatiable desire to experience such a novelty in my native state found me joining my friends Jason Amick and Ammon Bowen on their Quixotic quest.

An overcast sky in late-November filtered the colors of the cover, greying out the switchgrasses carpeting the piney savanna, and igniting the fiery autumnal hues of the distant hardwood bottoms. Jason lowered his tailgate and tied bells onto the collars of his kenneled dogs. When asked about the absence of an e-collar, he replied, "This is an old thing we do, and I prefer doing it the old way." Jason dropped his dogs — German shorthair pointers named "Sadie" and "Scout" — and we dressed for rough cover, donning briar chaps and leather gloves and thick shirt-jacs with blaze orange trim. Then he put his dogs into the wind with faith and hope that their noses would lead us into coveys of quail.



The jingling of the bells tethered to their collars grew fainter as they ranged out beneath stands of longleaf pines that scraped the sky. Their massive trunks wore a faded layer of soot from a controlled burn while the clump grasses sprouting around them grew nearly to the knee. Jason figured this burn happened a couple seasons ago given the evidence of its recovery, and apart from a few brambles grabbing at our boots, it was an easy walk.

While I had known Ammon for several years, I knew little about Jason or his quail hunting bona fides. They met while playing bluegrass music, and I invited myself on this hunt as a tag-along. When we watered the dogs, I asked Jason about his journey to quail hunting. He explained that he didn't grow up wingshooting but had walked up a wild covey on his father's land near Aiken about eight years ago, and it stole his breath. "I'd heard the quail disappeared, and yet here they were. He didn't manage his land for them, and it shocked me to see that. I felt like quail hunting was something I could really get into." He

tried walking up more coveys — this time on public land while holding a shotgun — and after realizing the amount of ground he needed to cover, decided to better his odds with a bird dog: "I love dogs and had trained other breeds in the past for hiking and obedience."

So, adding a sporting breed and new set of skills to the mix didn't seem like an impossible task," he said. "I trained my first GSP, 'Sadie' several years ago, and then last year, added the other pup, 'Scout' to our pack. At a year old, she's not polished, but she's been on birds, and we've got a lot of time." Jason explained that most times he and his dogs hunt public ground, he leaves with an empty gamebag. But he knows the coveys are there because he's moved them, and with good shooting, they've given him a bird or two. For Jason, it's the satisfaction of seeing his dogs work and the yearning to witness another covey rise that inspires him to return — not the heft of his vest. "People think the quail are gone, but they're not. You've just got to work a lot harder for them."

Finding bobwhite on public land in

BELLS AND WHISTLES

South Carolina certainly requires more boot leather than in years past, but it takes a Herculean effort to sustain their recent gains. To that end, the South Carolina Bobwhite Initiative (SCBI)

launched in 2014, creating a coalition of private, non-profit, and public interests to coordinate efforts for benefitting bobwhite quail. "The SCBI was kind of the 'missing piece' to making real

progress in bringing back the bobwhite population. All these organizations were working separately for the betterment of quail — they just needed to focus their efforts in the same direction," said Mark Coleman, chairman of the SCBI Outreach Committee.

Michael Hook, Small Game Project Supervisor for the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and SCBI Quail Coordinator, added, "When South Carolina became serious about doing something for the quail, the leadership decided to go with a 'quail council' model like Texas because we thought it would increase cooperation between the parties involved, and they were right." Since the SCBI's inception, positive gains in habitat restoration, data collection, and outreach have been realized, giving quail a fighting chance in areas of the state where biologists have said they could thrive. Quail Forever became involved with the SCBI in 2016 and 2017 to bolster the effort.




South Carolina now has four active Quail Forever chapters in each region of the state — the Upstate, Midlands, and Lowcountry — along with four wildlife biologists helping educate and build partnerships between state and federal wildlife agencies. "We had the first quail focus area in the nation on national forest land, and that wouldn't have happened without cooperation and interest in the project from the United States Forest Service, and the Quail Forever biologists on the ground with them," Hook said. The SCBI has four quail focus areas across the state and plans to add more with the help of Quail Forever, federal government agencies, and private landholders. "Where you do the work, the birds respond. Our SCBI motto is 'Bring Back the Whistle,' which is what we fully intend to do," Hook said.

Fading light from a falling sun motivated us to head for home. We exited the cover and returned to one of several gravel roads winding through the forest. Jason navigated our party by compass and map, eschewing the trappings of a smartphone and its




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applications. "I don't need those bells and whistles to get around. I got all the bells and whistles I need out here," he said gesturing to his dogs and the forested horizon. While we'd heard plenty of bells this day, we lost out on the whistle.

And yet, not any of us seemed bothered for having not stirred a covey. I found myself grateful for the opportunity; for having enough strength in my legs and breath in my lungs to put one foot in front of the other with a shotgun broken over my shoulder. And grateful still for the conservation work, both public and private, that made it possible for us to search for wild quail without anyone's hand in our pockets beyond the taxes we paid or the gas to get there. I would be remiss for not mentioning the pleasure of having met Jason and his bird dogs, both of whom performed with exceptional prowess under his handling and tutelage, and for another walk in the woods with Ammon, who reactivated my interest in hunting years ago and remains a brother of my choosing.

It occurred to me while walking down that stretch of road that perhaps many who'd given up on southeastern quail after hunting them in their heyday forgot about these gifts. Or, maybe the ravages of time and age robbed them of their physical ability to continue the pursuit. In either case, I empathized with them, understanding my perspective was framed through a different lens. Those of us in the southeast who still wander

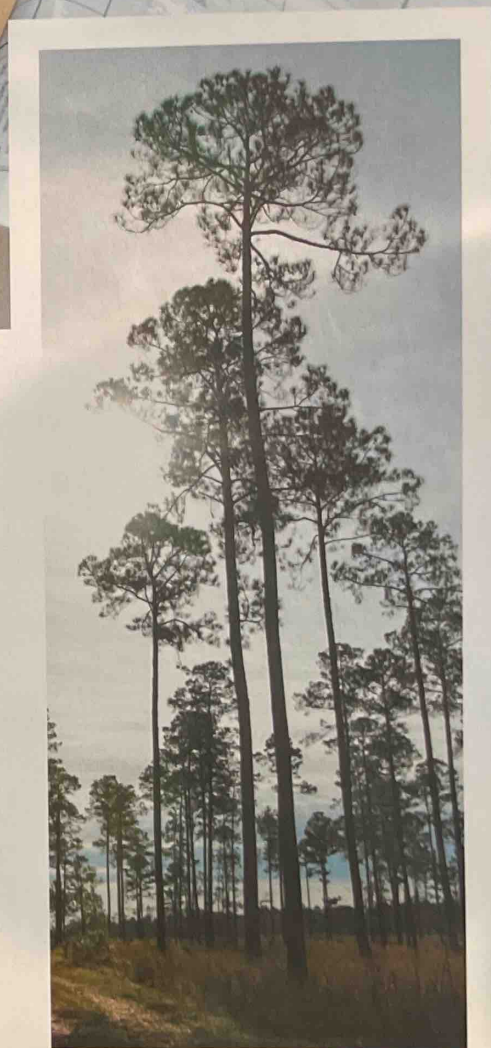


public places in search of Gentleman Bob manage our expectations accordingly, and while we might not make a meal of quail for our effort, we make priceless memories in the process. And those are the tokens we take with us when the roll is called up yonder.

We arrived at our vehicles several miles later with hunger, thirst, and exhaustion affecting both us and the dogs. Round white stickers bearing the SCBI logo were placed beneath the windshield wipers of our vehicles without acknowledgement or fanfare. "Check this out," I exclaimed, feeling honored to have been initiated into this proud order of optimists.



Oliver Hartner is a freelance writer living in South Carolina and a frequent contributor to Quail Forever Journal.





STORY BY OLIVER HARTNER • PHOTOS BY JOEL SIMPSON

A LEGEND LEAVES A LEGACY

One of South Carolina's winningest high school football coaches delivers a victory for conservation

Coach Mooney Player ended his football coaching career with a record of 154-34-7, making him the fourth all-time-winningest coach in South Carolina, and placing him among the top 100 coaches in the nation. Though his reputation as a football coach precedes him, the stories told about Coach Player regarding his love of quail might rival or surpass any gridiron glory he attained.

Record heat beaming down from a summer sun didn't deter Coach Player from the work that needed to be done to improve and maintain the habitat of his family property, the Bobwhite Hills, in South Carolina's Lee and Sumter counties. "Only an outsider or some of the city folks would call it 'quail hunting,'" Coach Player said, preferring the colloquial term "bird hunting" when referencing the pursuit of quail. Though more than 90 years of age may have made him less mobile, his desire to preserve "bird hunting" for future generations remained.



For several years, Coach Player searched for someone who would maintain and improve upon the conservation work he has done while also preserving, and perhaps expanding, opportunities for future South Carolinians to experience a wild quail hunt.

Having wild bobwhite quail in this part of the country requires great care and expense to manipulate the habitat, returning it to its natural state in an era before contemporary tree farming and detrimental development projects. Landowners must often forego the profits realized from a loblolly pine plantation or from slicing off pieces of land that contribute to suburban sprawl. Instead, they must dedicate their time and treasure to encourage the growth of longleaf pines, native grasses, and the hardwood bottoms essential to ground bird survival. This commitment to conservation asks more than many individuals seem willing or able to offer.

Fortunately, Quail Forever developed a plan with Coach Player that satisfied the conservation and preservation interests of all parties involved. Kenny Barker, regional representative for Quail Forever in South Carolina, was introduced to Coach Player by Tim Askins, president of Quail Forever's South Carolina chapter in Mount Pleasant. "Though the state has a total of four chapters, this chapter took that name because they have a 30,000-foot view of big picture projects for the state, and I was

able to meet Coach Player at one of their events," Kenny said.

Coach Player explained his dilemma to Barker and Askins, who then carried the ball further down the field toward the goal line of getting Bobwhite Hills into the right hands.

Quail Forever has created more than 200,000 acres of permanently protected and publicly accessible upland wildlife habitat across the country, and as part of its effort to increase this total by 40 percent, it purchased Bobwhite Hills and is working with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) on both a habitat management and access plan to benefit wildlife and people.

"This acquisition will double the number of opportunities for public draw hunts for quail in the state," said Michael Hook, Small Game Program Leader at SCDNR. On a recent inspection of the property, Breck Carmichael with SCDNR commented, "Bobwhite Hills represents one of the closest things I have seen to a turnkey property for quail. It will require minimal work to have public hunting in the coming years." Training opportunities for Quail Forever biologists, volunteers, and partners will be cultivated on the property along with the habitat.

Bobwhite Hills marks the first property Quail Forever has acquired east of the Mississippi River and south of

Missouri as part of its Build a Wildlife Area® program and Call of the Uplands® campaign. In September of 2021, the South Carolina Conservation Bank voted to fund a portion of the project with a grant of \$850,000.

Quail Forever Grants Director Matt Holland said, "Working with the South Carolina Conservation Bank was a great experience, and they were extremely helpful every step of the way. Their support of this project along with their passion for bringing back bobwhite quail was important to the partnership between Coach Player, Quail Forever, and SCDNR."

Coupled with a generous donation by the Player family, the project is well on its way to being fully funded, and this grant marks the single largest donation in the history of Quail Forever.

When reached for comment, Matt Kucharski, National Board Chair of Quail Forever, said, "Bobwhite Hills and the people who made it happen represent the heart of Quail Forever's mission — helping to conserve quality wildlife habitat and public access for future generations. This land project will help attract new supporters in the Southeast as we propel our signature acquisition program — Build a Wildlife Area — in new and exciting directions." Kucharski added, "This is our first official flag planted in South Carolina, and hopefully we can work with surrounding



landowners and others as time goes on to continue improving the habitat for bobwhite in South Carolina, and perhaps the rest of the Southeast.”

As in the game of football, restoring habitat for bobwhite quail in the Southeast is a game of inches, and it takes dedicated personnel on all sides of the ball to form a winning team. When landowners like Coach Player, conservation groups like Quail Forever, and government agencies like SCDNR and the South Carolina Conservation Bank huddle together, they come up with creative plays to deliver hope for the resource.

Gains like Bobwhite Hills are like a first-and-ten after several lost downs — just before the ground beneath the opposition shifts and momentum begins favoring conservation. “I can’t say enough good things about Coach Player,” Kenny said. “Of all the things he could have done with this property for a financial profit, he chose to do something extra special that would last for generations.” As a South Carolinian who loves “bird hunting,” I believe Coach Player deserves as much adulation as possible for his contribution to this victory.



Oliver Hartner is a freelance writer living in South Carolina and frequent contributor to Quail Forever Journal.

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