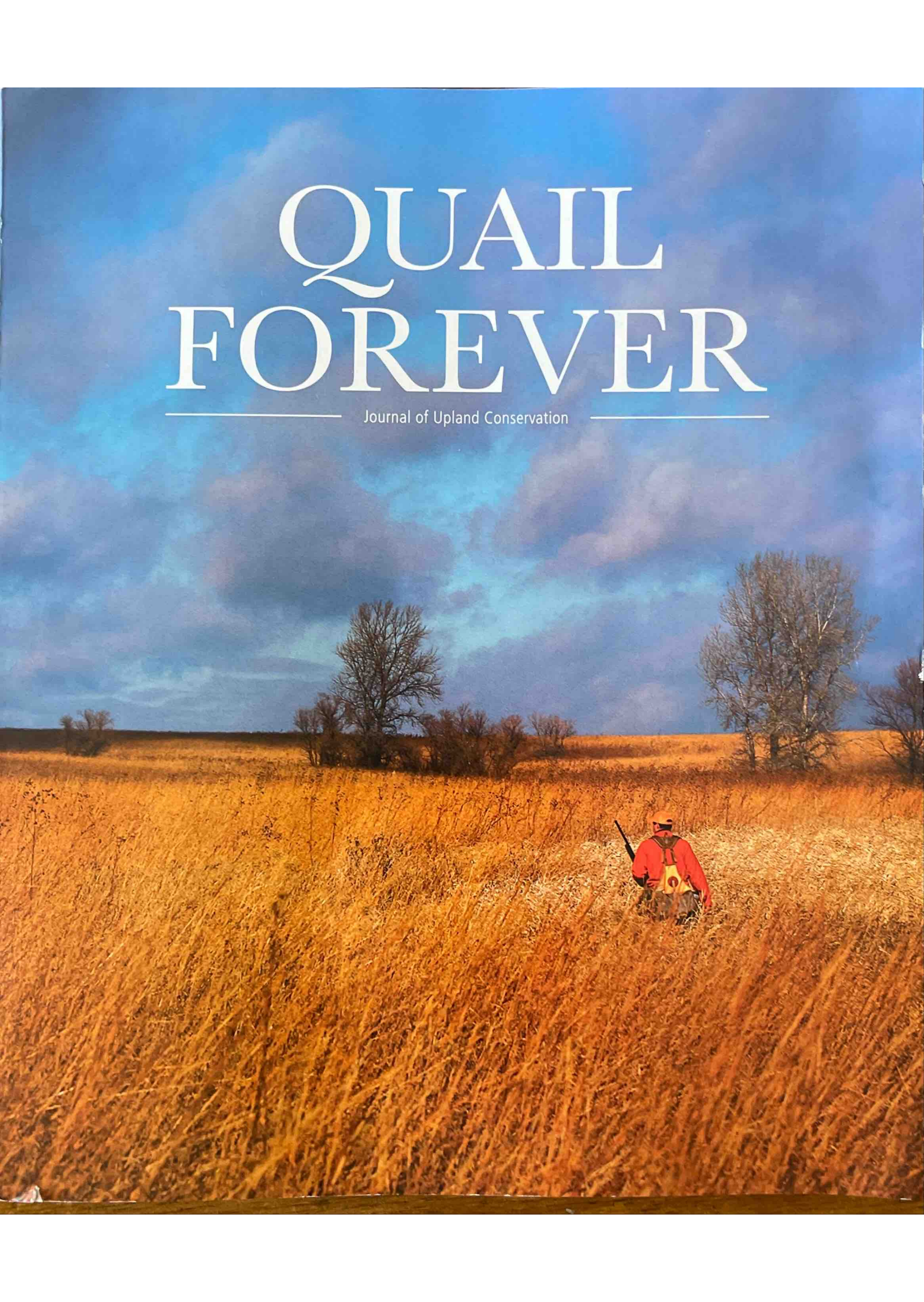


# QUAIL FOREVER

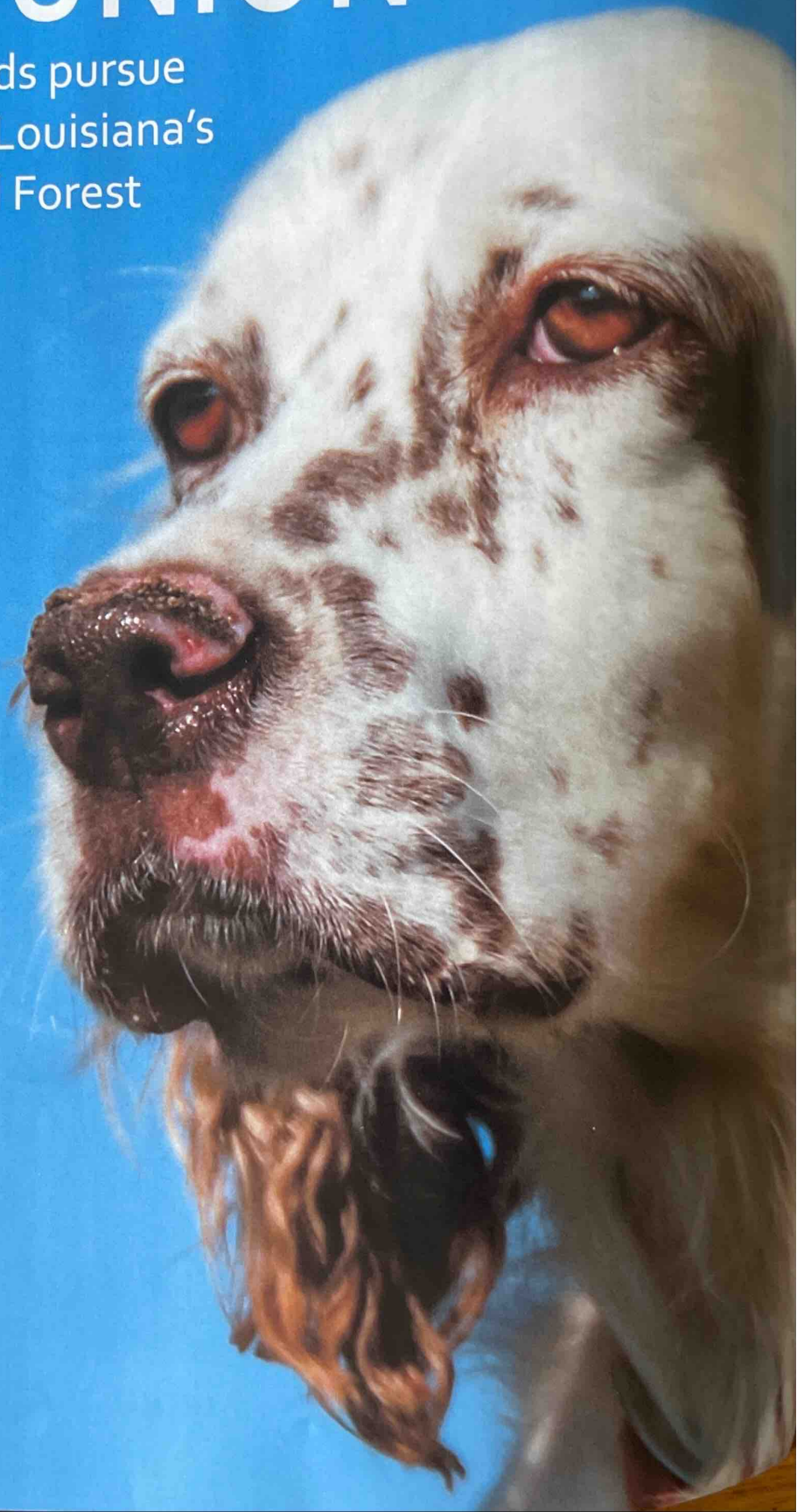
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BY OLIVER HARTNER

# *Rapides Parish* **REUNION**

Old and new friends pursue  
bobwhite quail in Louisiana's  
Kisatchie National Forest





SHUTTERSTOCK

Five summers ago, blankets of black clouds gathered and swirled and concealed the sun. Bright bolts of lightning and rolling thunder announced the approaching gale, and an eerie calm preceded the pouring rain and violent wind that ripped through Kisatchie National Forest like a buzz saw. During the days that followed, teams of timbermen harvested the hearty pines and hardwoods felled by the storm. They uprooted the stumps, then conservationists came behind them and burned the tinder nest of debris. The flames licked the ground clean, then seasonal showers saturated the soil and clusters of clump grasses sprouted from the soot. A few years later, Jacob McKnight found acres of piney savanna holding natural coveys of bobwhite quail. His compelling report merited an eleven-hour drive from South Carolina to Louisiana — my native state — to corroborate his story and reunite with an old friend.

After 15 years away from Louisiana's francophone region, my journey required turn-by-turn directions from Google Maps. State highways heading west

through Acadiana cut a corridor through the sugar cane crops ripe for harvest. Two-lane roads opened up to four lanes before reaching the interstate, and I made up some time having gotten a late start to the day. Jacob sent an address to his in-laws' lake house called "Puddin' N' Pop's," and when I'd arrived, little time was left for pleasantries. I aired my Boykin Spaniel "Fowler" and greeted Jacob and his pack before adding my dog and our field kit to the cargo of his idling truck.

Less than 20 minutes into our trip, Jacob turned off the blacktop onto a dirt-pack road. He parked on a paddock where logging trucks once received their loads of timber, and upon opening the passenger door, Fowler leaped from my lap running mid-air before her feet found the earth. In the truck bed, Jacob's trio of English setters, Tripp, Birdie, and Radar, quaked with excitement. "I didn't have the chance to scout this area again before callin' ya, but if birds are still here they'll find 'em," he said. Jacob sifted a pinch of loamy soil into the air, and once the grit falling from his fingers determined our path, he

deployed the setters into the scent cone.

Radar froze 100 yards ahead of us after less than an hour of wading through waist-high broomsedge. I heeled Fowler while we closed the distance, and Tripp and Birdie circled round to honor his point. With light steps, we moved into position while closing the breeches of our guns. "Whoa-now...whoa...whoaaaa," Jacob said reinforcing the discipline of his dogs before saying to me, "Send her in." I released Fowler and she bounded through the brambles, causing a covey of 30 or more quail to detonate in all directions. Before their wings gathered enough wind to carry them out of range, Jacob's first shot connected, and a left-right crosser fell to my follow-up. Radar retrieved a hen to Jacob while Fowler delivered a hearty cock-quail to me. She wagged her whole body as I rewarded her with praise and a pat-down — both our hearts still pounding from the spectacle.

It was late November in Louisiana, and temperatures logged a high of 75 degrees with about as much humidity or more. Grassy-sweet smells still perfumed the air instead of the leafy-detritus fragrances of fall. I removed my strap





ISTOCK

vest, and the poplin sweat-soaked shirt clinging to my back felt cool against my skin. Our empty water bottles started us moving back toward the truck. Once we got there, we dropped the tailgate to marvel for a moment over that covey we'd contacted, and the gifts we received from it, then made hay for a little country store to provision the lake house.

The knobby tires and diesel engine of Jacob's Ford hummed a highway lullaby, but before it sung me to sleep, he asked, "You know who I think about sometimes? Ol' Dave Murray. You remember Dave?" My cheek turned a half-smile, and I looked down at the black band wrapped in memorium around my wrist with "SGT. David J. Murray" etched into it. "I remember him every day," I said. Jacob didn't know we'd served in Iraq together in the same platoon. Once the truck rolled to a stop, we dedicated this hunt to our forever-young friend, sealing our pledge with long pulls from a bottle of bourbon buried at the bottom of an ice chest. Jacob wasn't the gangly teen I'd known 20 years ago, and I was eager to learn what he'd been up to. He'd physically changed, now bearing a broad-shouldered build and a squared jaw accentuated by a thin blonde beard. But his bright eyes and penchant for

country mischief revealed the boy I'd once known. He'd moved to Oklahoma and guided quail hunts out west before returning to Louisiana. He raised setters...then he raised quail...and was now raising kids with his wife Caroline, who I'd not seen since elementary school.

We returned from the grocery late-afternoon and stocked the cupboard of "Puddin' N' Pops" before heading back to Kisatchie to scout another location. The cover was denser and the terrain more technical, but multiple quail replied to our whistle. Jacob marked the direction of their faint replies before we navigated back to the truck by vesper light. Jacob thawed a frozen batch of seafood gumbo at the house, and we discussed tomorrow's plans over dinner before turning back the sheets.

Morning dew soaked the grass and wetted the wavy coats of the dogs as they ranged out ahead of us. Birdie locked up near a lone stand of head-high cover, and once the other setters arrived, they honored her point. Fowler bounced around a tangled towering mass of leafy debris shrouding a tree trunk, and as a covey exploded from under it, Jacob's friend Sisco had a safe shot and reaped a hen. Radar delivered it to Jacob, and veiled in sarcasm, Sisco said, "Since

you're guiding, I'm gonna have you carry my birds." We pressed further and the setters froze on another point a couple hundred yards from the covey rise. A pair bolted from the cover, and without a safe shot, I pulled up while Sisco collected another quail. "Here you go. Carry this one too," he said while adding it to Jacob's gamebag.

"You sure these ain't put-out quail," I said, hitching a ride on Sisco's humor. Jacob looked at us and said, "Y'all can both go home for all I care." Sweat beaded on our brows as the sun neared its summit, and we headed for the truck eager for a respite after our long morning stroll.

Back at Puddin' N' Pops, I'd eaten myself into a belly ache over a hearty Louisiana dinner of deep-fried quail with biscuits, rice, and gravy. I saw to Fowler and had a nightcap with Jacob and Sisco before settling to bed. At first light, I loaded Fowler and our gear into my SUV and saw Sisco in the driveway getting ready to leave. We exchanged contact information and another firm handshake before parting ways. Not being a fan of Irish goodbyes, I woke Jacob and we decided not to allow another 20 years to pass before finding ourselves afield together. I muted the radio for a moment during the eleven-hour drive, taking account of this trip in contemplative silence. I thought about the connectedness between the critical elements that culminated into this remarkable hunt — elements that intersected at a perfect place along the continuum of space and time. The friendships. The destructive storm. The conservationists. The dogs. The quail. I thought about how much better it would've been if Dave Murray could've joined us...then soon remembered he was also there.



*Oliver Hartner is a Quail Forever member based in Columbia, South Carolina. Accompanied by his Boykin Spaniel "Fowler," he explores rural parts of the Palmetto State and beyond. His work appears in Covey Rise, USA Today's Hunt and Fish Annual, and South Carolina Wildlife.*