

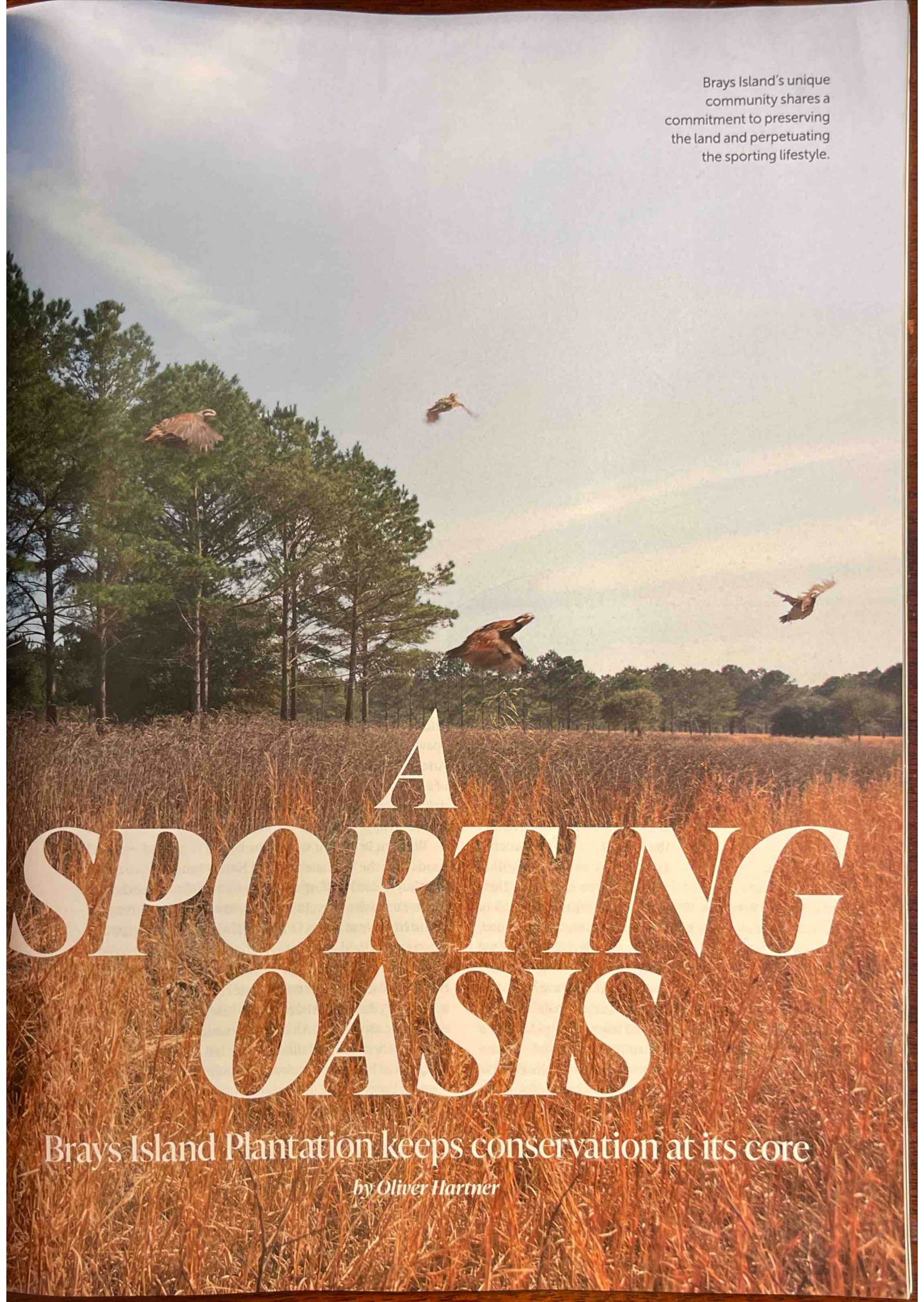
SHOOTING SPORTSMAN

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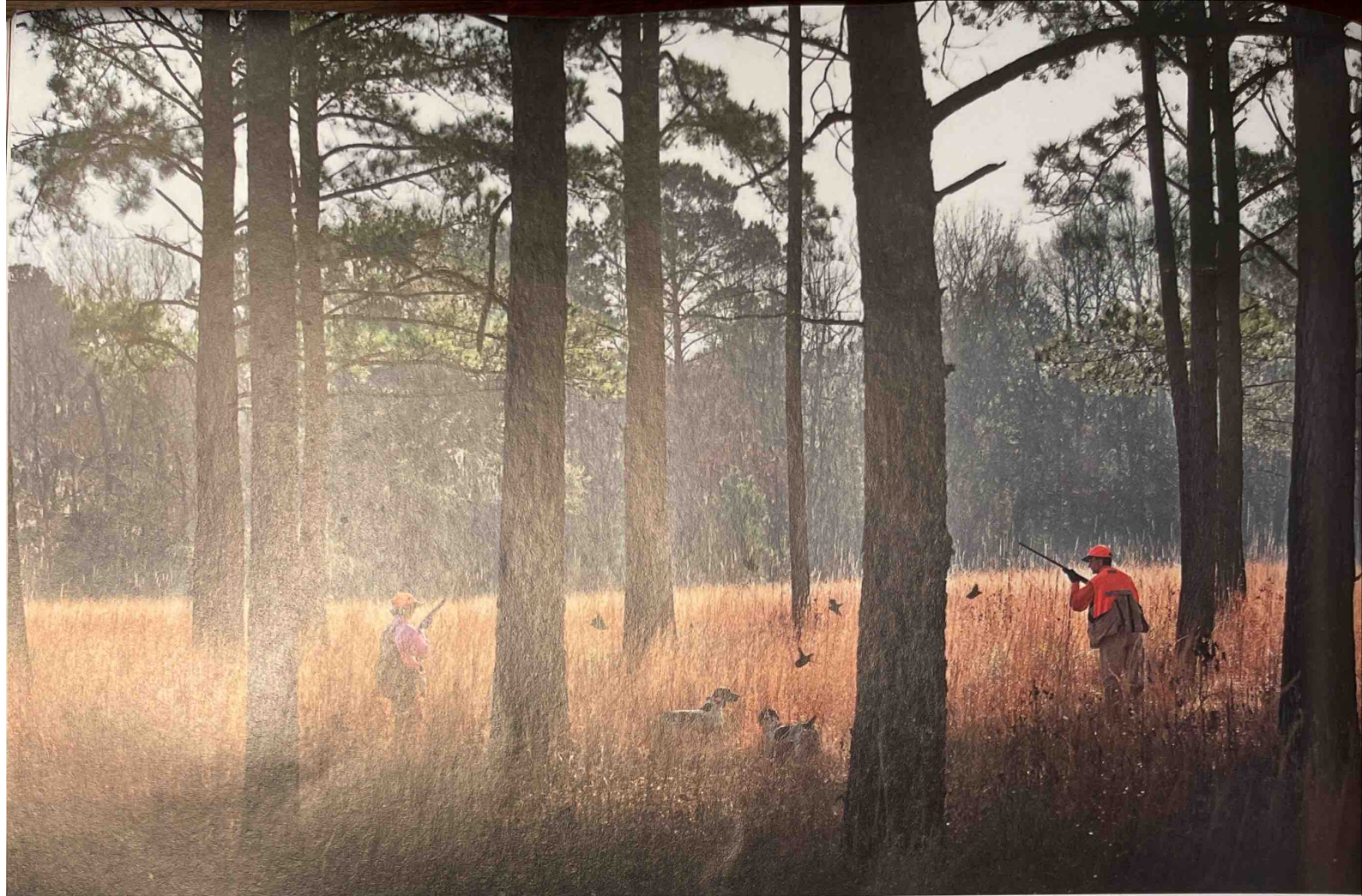


Brays Island's unique
community shares a
commitment to preserving
the land and perpetuating
the sporting lifestyle.

A SPORTING OASIS

Brays Island Plantation keeps conservation at its core

by Oliver Hartner



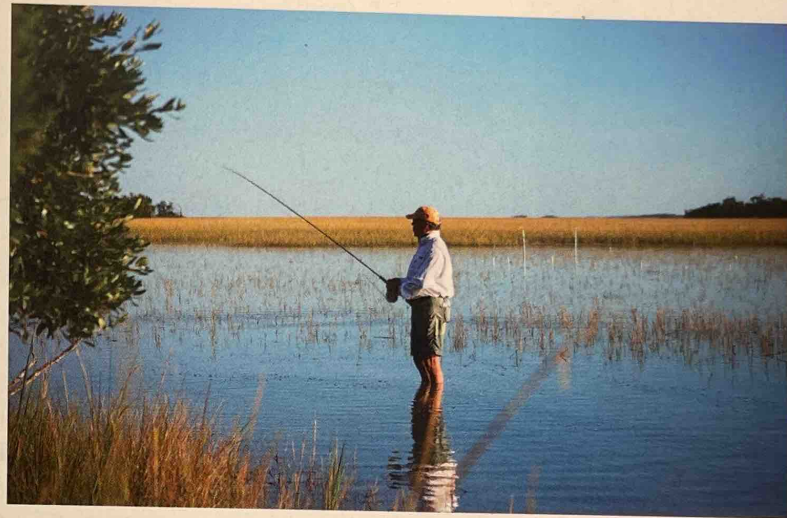
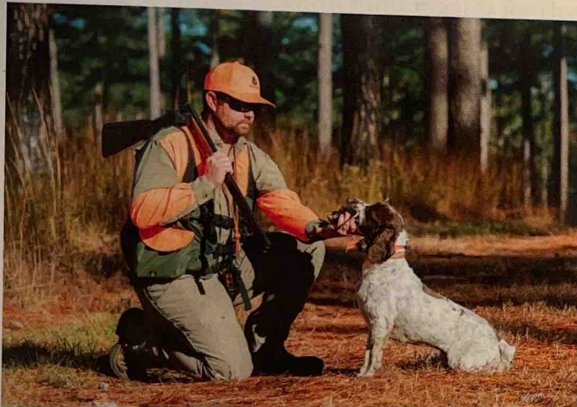
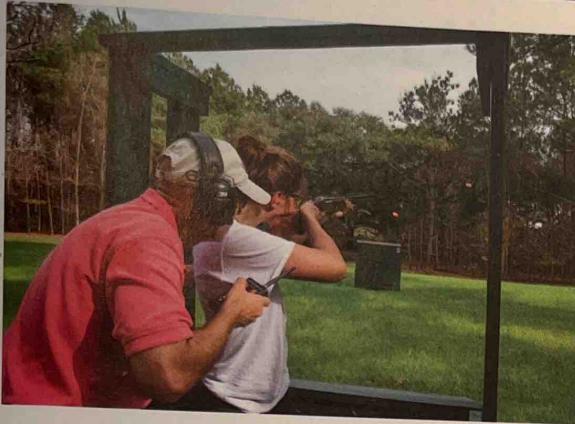
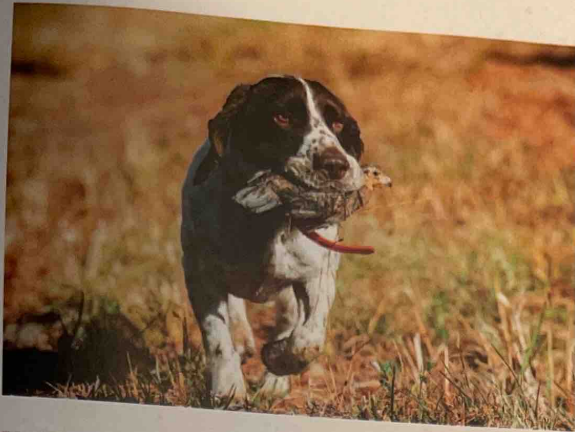
People seem to have wanted a piece of South Carolina's Lowcountry since before recorded history. Native Americans first vied with each other for control of its beauty and bounty. Then several centuries later the Spanish... followed by the British... weighed anchor and rowed ashore, displacing those who had made their

homes here for eons. While a more civilized means of facilitating real-estate transactions has since developed, humans haven't changed, and they still covet their own part of this place. Unfortunately, developers failed by and large to parcel much of the coastal region in a responsible manner to meet growing demand, and the habitat along with the culture it once supported have paid a price. But a pristine oasis endures amid the ruins of our faults—a place where the culture of conservation nurtures the habitat while fostering community and an abundance of outdoor recreation for its residents.

Brays Island Plantation rests at the confluence of where the Pocotaligo River and Huspa Creek bleed into the Broad River, positioning it between two of the Southeastern Seaboard's most iconic cities: Charleston, South Carolina, to its north and Savannah, Georgia, to its south. Within its

5,500-acre holdings, skinny saltcreeks fingering off these larger tributaries carve labyrinths into the spartina grass, offering a haven for flounder, speckled trout and redfish to spawn and grow before venturing out beyond the marsh. Ancient oaks, cypresses and cedars bear witness to epochs of ecological and cultural change, while the Spanish moss dripping from their boughs invites a wandering mind to relax and appreciate the gifts of life.

William Bray—for whom the island is named—traded goods with the Yemassee tribe of Native Americans until in 1715 they ended his life over nefarious bargains he made with them. Centuries later, in the early 1960s, Sumner Pingree found his way to Brays Island well ahead of a precipitous campaign of real-estate development along the Eastern Seaboard. He purchased the land from F.B. Davis, who was raising livestock on its fertile fields, and Pingree farmed it similarly for several decades while growing the property to its current size. All the while he saw sizable tracts of Lowcountry sliced and diced into small, insular parcels or subdivided into neighborhoods by ambitious developers. Pingree knew he could not farm forever and, as the time drew nearer for his holdings to pass from his hands, he felt obliged to ensure they would not be divvied up in a negligent manner. He enlisted the help of Robert Marvin, one of the Southeast's most acclaimed and forward-thinking land planners, and together they plotted a future that emphasized land conservation and the preservation of the sporting life-



Clockwise from opposite: a covey flushes from Brays Island's classic Lowcountry habitat; one of the plantation's English cockers; The Inn, for property owners and their guests; wetting a line in a tidal pond; receiving a quail from one of Brays' well-trained dogs; building community through instruction at one of the many clay-shooting venues.

style. They consulted Clemson University for determining the environmental impacts of their proposed development, and upon completion of the study Pingree and Marvin plotted 325 one-acre circular homesites on the 5,500-acre property, limiting the residential footprint both aesthetically and environmentally. This amounted to a mere 6 percent of the land being held in private hands while the rest would be shared among residents for outdoor recreation.

Pingree subsidized the construction of amenities at great personal expense while attracting buyers who shared his vision, and five years after the initial phases he had 50 homesites sold and a well-established cohort of residents who supported his goals. They collectively bought the remaining lots from Pingree and by late 2007 had them all sold, applying the final brush strokes to his concept and ensuring responsible stewardship of the resource for generations to come.

The aesthetic of Brays Island Plantation introduces visi-

tors to Pingree's overarching plan. A consistent theme of understated elegance permeates the property and its architecture, punctuating the residents' desire to live harmoniously with the habitat and one another. According to Paul Burton, a resident and the Broker-in-Charge of Brays Island Realty: "Sumner's idea was to maintain the look, feel and sustainability of a farm without overburdening the property. The buildings for our common areas and amenities are not opulent to the point of being garish, but rather they are functional and unobtrusive." While there are no minimum or maximum size requirements for homes, residents must landscape their properties with natural barriers within three years of construction and finish their exteriors with earth tones or muted colors. The result blends these homes into the natural setting. The roads traversing Brays Island—though well maintained—are not paved, adding an element of authenticity to the rural setting while



Controlled burning and rotating hunting grounds are part of the program to maintain prime habitat.

emphasizing the values of the community. Pingree's former residence now serves as The Inn for property owners and their guests and features 13 stately rooms apportioned with antique furnishings. A patio pool area stays open most of the year, except during the colder months, and a full bar stocked with top-shelf whiskey (and whisky) operates on an "honor system" where owners pour their own drinks and keep their own tabs. "The purpose of The Inn is to serve as your home until you're ready to build," Burton said, "and it retains the warm welcoming charm of a private home. We keep the atmosphere comfortable and inviting expressly for this purpose." The Inn also operates a private restaurant serving daily breakfasts and weekly dinners that include a gourmet menu of local dishes and formal dining options, all served by impeccably mannered wait staff.

Residents and guests at Brays Island enjoy a traditional set of amenities found at many private resorts—golf, tennis, fitness classes at a state-of-the-art wellness center—but they also have access to seasonal hunting opportunities, shooting, fishing, equestrian pursuits and a Nature Center that focuses on habitat education, eco-friendly horticulture and sustainable agriculture. Such an enticing array of activities almost creates a tyranny of choice, but the shooting and hunting opportunities took precedence during a visit I made to Brays this past December.

I was joined by Paul Burton; Chad McClure, an avid outdoorsman and sales executive with Brays Island Realty; and Francisco Bergaz and Walker Hopkins, both property owners and the proprietors of Rivers and Glen Trading Company. We enjoyed a hearty lunch at The Plantation

Grill before driving to the property's shooting club for a round of sporting clays.

There I met Justin Rhoten, the Director of Shooting Sports, who has worked at Brays Island for the past 18 years. Almost two decades ago he visited his grandfather at Brays, found a part-time job and never left. "I guess you could say my involvement with shooting was a snowball effect," Rhoten said. "It feels like yesterday I was loading the clay throwers and cutting the grass a few times a week, because that was all they needed. Then they added a pro shop to the clubhouse, and I started running that. Now I'm running the entire program along with six employees." The shooting club offers a full complement of challenges, including a two-mile-long, 15-station sporting clays course originally designed by Holland & Holland, a 5 Stand setup, two FITASC Parcours layouts, a skeet field, two trap fields, a pistol range, a 200-yard rifle range and an archery range with 3D targets. Its pro shop facilitates the sales of guns and ammunition for residents and offers any additional kit required for a day afield, including rental guns by Beretta, Caesar Guerini, Fabarm and Blaser.

Several years ago Rhoten took a genuine interest in proper shooting technique and course design, and now he is an NSSA-NSCA Level II Instructor, allowing him to address the needs of most any shooter at Brays. "Our residents use this club as an amenity," Rhoten said, "and while we do serve some folks who are registered competitive shooters, we design our courses to accommodate a broad range of experience. The primary goal of our shooting club is to create a comfortable setting for building community, as

opposed to being a competitive shooting ground.”

The blissful ambiance of Brays' clays course diffused any frustration experienced inside or outside the shooting box; it looked and felt like a manicured park or garden. Most stations had lush green grasses carpeting the ground, while others had water features with targets simulating decoying ducks. Every station was devoid of clay-target debris, wads or plastic hulls. It appeared as if the course saw little use, though Rhoten explained that this certainly wasn't the case. "We throw nearly a million targets a year," he said, "a number comparable to many dedicated shooting grounds. But our small size allows us to be good stewards of the resource as well. We're always evolving and asking ourselves, 'How can we throw as many targets as possible while keeping the grounds pristine?'"

The following morning after breakfast we hunted quail with Chad McClure. Our guide led us to one of 14 quail fields where we disembarked and pushed the cover. A variety of clump grasses without the impediment of briars and brambles grew waist high among a stand of piney timber. Marion Gohagan, who has served as Brays Island's hunt master for the past 15 years, said, "A match is one of the best conservation tools available, and we use a good bit of fire on our fields. We rotate our hunting grounds and perform controlled burning on an annual basis in addition to other maintenance measures." The quail flew hard and fast as they vaulted from the cover in coveys and as singles. A pointer teamed with an English cocker ensured none of the birds were lost when our shots connected, and Scott Miller, Kennel Master at Brays, bears responsibility for their skills and aptitude. With help from the hunt guides, he trains and maintains a kennel of more than 30 dogs—all pointers and English cockers—in the service of Brays Island. Before arriving here

The quail flew hard and fast as they vaulted from the cover in coveys and as singles.

eight years ago, Miller trained dogs competitively, winning more than 100 championships and earning more than 1,000 field- and hunt-trial titles. In 2015 he was inducted into the National Bird Hunters Association Hall of Fame, and he now trains dogs for the plantation's shared purposes as well as for residents wanting to hunt over their own charges.

In addition to upland hunting, Brays has a healthy marsh hen population during the migration and a lengthy deer season, and a limited number of management-based wild turkey hunts are offered, depending on the size and health of the flock.

On the fishing side a private marina with rental options and dry slips along with a guide service give residents access to some of the finest saltwater angling in the Southeast. Redfish, speckled trout and flounder thrive in the tidal ponds and saltcreeks around Brays, and there are seasonal near-shore opportunities for species such as cobia, tarpon and jack crevalle. Twenty intensely managed freshwater ponds hold trophy largemouth bass along with bream, hybrid stripers and catfish.

Brays Island exists in part because of when and how Sumner Pingree planned it. There was a small window of time to execute his concept, and that window has since closed. Land in the Lowcountry with both water access and enough property for the exceptional amenities offered by Brays is no longer available, and existing development makes it no longer tenable. But Brays also owes its existence to the ethos of its property owners and staff, who live out Pingree's vision. It takes a unique community of like-minded people to cooperate with one another and share the gifts offered by this place. Hopefully their commitment to conservation will serve as an inspiration for future property owners to perpetuate the sporting lifestyle while living harmoniously with the natural world. ✦

For more information on Brays Island Plantation, visit braysisland.com.

Oliver Hartner is a South Carolina-based writer covering sporting-life interests. His work has appeared in *Covey Rise*, *Quail Forever Journal*, *USA Today Hunt & Fish* and *South Carolina Wildlife*. He serves on the South Carolina State Committee of Ducks Unlimited as its secretary.

