



Reflections on Gentleman Bob and the Mud Bat

Story and Photos
by
King Montgomery

Robert Ruark and his wonderful book, *The Old Man and the Boy*, were a tremendous influence on me. I had the privilege of reading Ruark during my formative years, while learning to fish and hunt. One of my favorite quotes from the book describes the flush of a covey of bobwhite quail: "...the world explodes, and a billion bits of it fly out in front of you, tiny brown bits with the thunder of Jove in each wing." These words rang true, I later discovered, while hunting these legendary, gentlemanly gamebirds with my father's Model 12 Winchester.

But I did not grow up with an "Old Man" of my own to teach me about the outdoors. My father was an Air Force pilot and worked too long and hard to spend time with me on the river or in the field. He would have been a fine outdoor mentor—as a teenager, he'd hunted and trapped in rural Kansas to help feed his family and earn money during the Great Depression—but he simply did not have the time.

My outdoor education took place with my neophyte friends. We learned to hunt birds the hard way—by trial and error. Remarkably, we blundered into covey rises of quail without the luxury of bird dogs to point and flush. I cherish those memories and can see, hear and feel them to this day.

Hooked at an early age, I went bird hunting at every opportunity, depending on where my nomadic military family took me. By the time I became a serious sportsman, however, wild quail were mostly a thing of the past. Game preserves, particularly those in Virginia, provided most of my wing-shooting experiences before my



The bobwhite quail once sounded the siren call for me.

This American woodcock is a migratory shore bird that decided to move from the beaches into the forest from Canada to the Deep South.



wife, Elizabeth, and I moved to the southern coast of Maine. The relocation left “Gentleman Bob”—the wonderful bobwhite quail—behind in more gentle, temperate climates.

Before I left the South, during winter, I spent a memorable few days wing shooting at The Webb Farm in the Sandhills of south-central North Carolina. The farm comprises 1,500 acres of wiregrass and longleaf pine; open, hardwood canopies, small

scattered fields and rock-bedded streams help make this Pee Dee River Valley quail-hunting venue truly unique. During my time there, I discovered the Webb family relies on sound biology and decades of quail management to deliver a real experience. Wild quail coveys are combined with surrogated and early release birds; quail are raised on site and are not placed in convenient locations for easy hunting. Like stocked trout that make it through a few

seasons, these quail become a little wilder and shooters realize the difference.

My wing-shooting recollections also favor the wild American woodcock. This particular bird—which suffers monikers such as the mud bat, mud snipe, bog sucker and timberdoodle—is slightly larger than a bobwhite and has its very own personality. Whereas Gentleman Bob exemplifies quiet, steady sophistication, the mud bat is frivolous and unpredictable, often confusing hunters with its erratic behavior.

I was a southern quail gunner for years but became hooked on woodcock hunting when I moved north. I’d first met the enigmatic shorebird on a snowy February day in Maryland on boggy ground along the tidal Potomac River. My fascination with the woodcock grew when I moved to Maine in the heart of the bird’s migratory routes out of Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. The woodcock has stolen my heart and stimulates my more atavistic taste buds. I quickly learned not to overcook the bird, or it will taste like overcooked liver.

The flush of a woodcock is nothing like the rise of a quail; the mostly solitary bird doesn’t covey up. True, its jump is a bit noisy like that of a quail, but the woodcock often helicopters, rising straight up, hesitating for a brief second before accelerating on a course to safety. Easy shot, right? Oh, so wrong! Woodcock and north country’s stately ruffed grouse, invariably go in the opposite direction hunters might expect.

Sometimes, a woodcock flush comes early, beyond effective range, or it pops up after you’ve walked by a deceptive bird. The result of nearly stepping on a tight-holding bird is similar to triggering a Bouncing Betty—the old antipersonnel landmine used in World War II. In the instance of hunting woodcock, the startled hunter will take shrapnel—barbed comments from hunting buddies if he or she misses the shot. There are many such casualties in upland bird hunting.



The Webb Farm in North Carolina has hundreds of acres of perfect bobwhite quail habitat and the going is easy on gunners and dogs.

Lexington, a fine Gordon setter owned by Maine guide Frank Lepore, at Setter's Point in Bethel, Maine



When woodcock and grouse seasons open on October 1 in Maine, it's time for me to stumble through birch or aspen whips which grow so close to one another I can hardly mount and swing my gun on a rising bird. I say hello to the thick, speckled alders that grow bunched and impenetrable in damp ground, where earthworms and other woodcock delicacies burrow under the soft earth. And my favorite, the wild red raspberry bushes; their delectable summer fruit and not-so-nice, stiletto-like thorns tie your legs, rip off your glasses and hat, and generally wreak havoc on your body, gun and dog.

I embrace the obstacles, the difficulties surrounding these hunts. Last sea-



A delicious quail dish prepared by the Primland chef.

son in Maine, I discovered there were still plenty of woodcock in the tangles, Down East and in the Rangeleys. I love the smell of gunpowder, gun oil, decaying leaves, and a wet bird dog in the morning. I love a crisp, invigorating day in the fall, whether on the Southern quail grounds of my younger days or in the mixed conifer and

deciduous second-growth covers of the far North. Once, the bobwhite-quail siren of my youth called me; now the mud bat and the ruffed grouse lead me on.

King Montgomery is a longtime contributor to *VAS*. He and his wife, Elizabeth, live in Kennebunkport on the scenic southern Maine coast. He is a columnist for *The Maine Sportsman* magazine. Contact him at kingangler1@aol.com.

Author's Recommendations:

Virginia

Orapax: Jane and Neal Kauder, (804) 556-2261, www.orapax.com.

Primland: (866) 960-7746, www.primland.com. There is a mobile Primland app available on the website.

Shady Grove Farm: Neil Selby & Leslie Carter, (540) 439-2683, www.shadygrove.com

Rosehill Farm Preserve: (540) 432-1930; www.rosehillfarmpreserve.com.

North Carolina

The Webb Farm: Bill & Debbie Webb, (910) 995-0207, www.thewebbfarm.com.

Maine

Setter's Point: Dennis Jellison, (207) 357-4687, www.setterspoint.com.

Weatherby's Lodge: Jeff McEvoy, (877) 796-5558, www.weatherbys.com.

Jim Price