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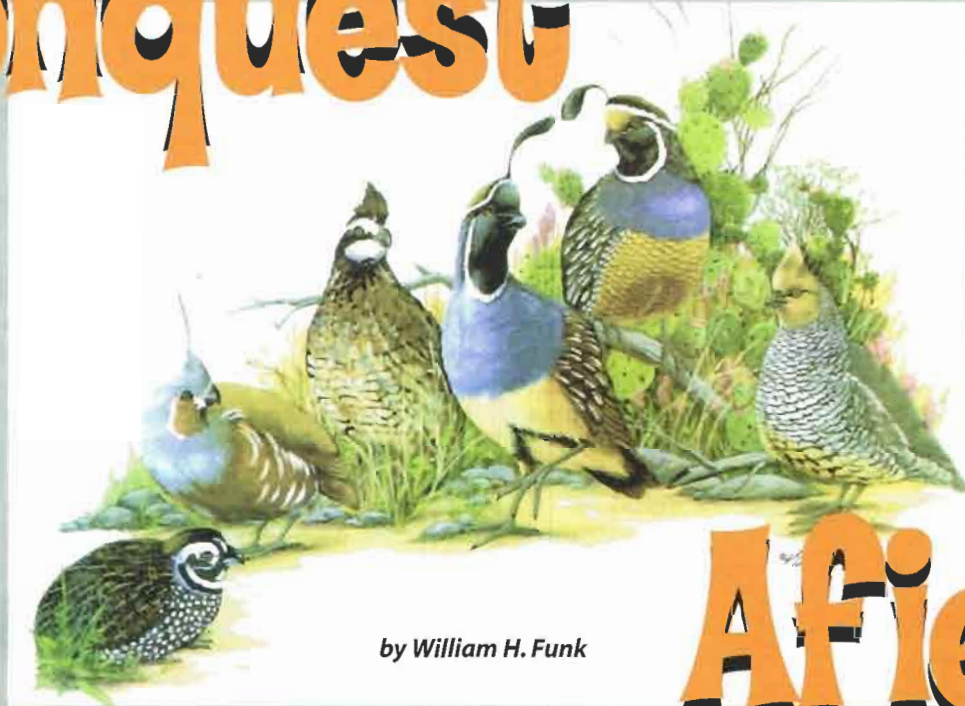
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IN THE LAST ISSUE, IT IS HEREBY PRESENTED IN ITS ENTIRETY.

Conquest



by William H. Funk

Afield

One Man's Cross-Country Obsession with Quail

My father never meant to set any kind of record when he undertook to amass a mounted collection comprised of every upland game bird native to the continental United States and Alaska. The idea of a “gal-linaceous grand slam” was a slow-dawning realization on his part, a recognition that his consuming love of bird hunting could also be an opportunity to permanently display these splendid animals for himself and his posterity. With the overall decline in southern quail populations, it may also come to serve as silent tribute to a gracious culture that in his lifetime seems to have ground finally to an end.

I grew up a quail hunter, as did my father and his father. The long love affair of the rural South with *Colinus virginianus*, the bobwhite quail, is as central to the culture as fried fish and Confederate memorials. Quail are very much a part of our literary heritage as well, lovingly portrayed in the works of such regional masters as Roarke, Babcock, Hill, Rutledge and Buckingham. With a father and paternal uncle already avid bird hunters (“bird” in the rural South invariably refers to the bobwhite), young William “Spike” Funk was soon enough exposed to the formalistic, honor-bound tradition of this most gentlemanly of outdoor pursuits.

Capable of gusts of speed of up to 40 miles per hour, these “feathered bombshells,” as the prolific ornithological anthologist Arthur Cleveland Bent described a covey rise, offered a genuine sporting experience along with opportunities for enjoying three critical facets of Southern life: camaraderie, dogs and good eating. In the 1950s and 60s, south-central Kentucky, where Funk was born and raised, was still a region largely devoted to small family farms, each field of seasonally variable crops

bordered by lush fencerows that provided quail with protected staging areas for foraging. Birds were everywhere then, and even folks living in town were free to knock on doors and trade a farmer for half the resulting game bag in exchange for permission to hunt his fields. It had seemingly always been that way, and thus it would apparently remain forever.

Of course, the abundance of the old settler days was long gone. Save for a few inbred pockets on public land, the deer had been shot out long ago, as had the wild turkey, and bears were an ancient memory found only in obscure place-names like “Bear Wallow,” as exotic sounding to their inhabitants as “Elkton” or “Buffalo Lick.” But the bobwhite quail was prolific, thriving on the row crops planted for produce and animal feed that had formed the bulk of local agricultural output for over a century. The population of Kentucky’s bobwhites in the 1950s likely exceeded that of the 1550s, as the land uses particular to small-scale farming meshed perfectly with the biological needs of the quail. With the birds abounding, the peculiar culture of Southern quail hunting, evolving from the desperate search for meat during Reconstruction to the refined pastime of leisured gentlemen, was allowed to take root and flourish.

This pleasant arrangement began to fall apart in the late 1960s with the advent of industrial agriculture, a monolithic entity deliberately created by petrochemical and farm equipment manufacturers to increase production while shrinking the number of small farms. The inevitable result of federal and state farming policies favoring corporate food production over the combined efforts of independent individuals, agribusiness concentrates on extravagant machinery and heavy applica-

tions of pesticides and artificial fertilizers to achieve ever-increasing yields. Economics dictated that only substantial tracts of contiguous farmland would be viable proving grounds for this new strategy, as the capital outlay in combines, sprayers, tillers and chemicals was impractical for the small landowner. The end of Jeffersonian America, accelerating since the latter 19th century, was finally at hand.

And so, the fencerows were bulldozed and the self-reliant family farms bought up and amalgamated by the conglomerates to form enormous monotype fields—thousands of acres in size—of chemotherapeutic row crops. Corporations, not people, were now the legal owners of the soil, corporations with headquarters in alien cities remote from these fields both in distance and in caring. Successive federal farm bills continued to reward the large and wealthy at the expense of the small and unconnected, and the bobwhite quail began his long, gradual disappearance from the once-diverse landscape he had graced for so long.

My exemplar, the Kentucky poet and philosopher, Wendell Berry, said it best 15 years ago in his seminal essay, "Conservation and Local Economy"—

My part of rural America is, in short, a colony, like every other part of rural America. Almost the whole landscape of this country—from the exhausted cotton fields of the plantation South to the eroding wheatlands of the Palouse, from the strip mines of Appalachia to the clear-cuts of the Pacific slope—is in the power of the absentee economy, once national and now increasingly international, that is without limit in its greed and without mercy in its exploitation of land and people.

Hand in hand with the corporatization of agriculture came the widespread destruction of agriculture in any form as booming suburban and exurban development sprawled insidiously over the countryside. Shoddy subdivisions and indistinguishable hilltop McMansions increasingly polluted the viewscape, forever depriving the country of some of the richest farmland on earth while backing the wildlife further and further into a corner. And the plague continues to gather speed: each new "Quail Run," a spread of flimsy hutches—some with shingles already missing—clustered around a muddy fountain and a network of stinking blacktop roads, necessarily means the permanent end of wildlife habitat in that area. Even the ugliest clear-cut can grow back into a forest in a century or so; the haughty monocultural fields of the corporations may (or rather will) someday be returned to their true owners; but lands developed for residential or commercial use are eternally severed from their human and natural heritage.

Outside of war and natural disaster, great changes seldom occur abruptly. The bobwhite's slow slide from a routine to a rare member of the local avifauna was accomplished over decades of pesticide application and habitat destruction, but as with all cases of regional extirpation, the sudden realization that "there aren't any birds around anymore" came as something of a surprise. For years quail populations been winking out with the loss of each small farm, and today southern Kentucky, like most of the rapidly industrializing "New South," has only vestigial numbers of wild quail outside of carefully managed private preserves. The glory days of the past 175 years were a receding memory in the minds of a generation whose children would never know the mythic, trembling approach to setting dogs, the covey's thunderous rise, the weary return home and the shared memories that lasted lifetimes. We had inherited, in Faulkner's despairing words, a "lightless and gutted and empty land."

Though much is taken from us, much remains. After dental school, Funk spent two years in Kansas with the Army, during which time he reg-



Author's father, at his dental office, posing with some of his collection.

ularly partook of the generous opportunities for hunting bobwhites as well as such fanciful creatures (to a Kentuckian) as the ring-necked pheasant and greater prairie chicken. The upland game thrived on pockets of unimproved little bluestem and gamagrass, and Funk invited his father out to sample this remnant of prairie richness that once stretched from the Ozarks to the Rockies.

When he acquired the means, Funk bought a 94-acre parcel of exhausted farmland on what was then the outskirts of Bowling Green, an undulating former cornfield that skirted a bluff overlooking a sluggish creek and the ruins of an old Shaker dam. Over the next 20 years, through constant trial and effort, research, experimentation and refinement, he slowly converted the rocky, nutrient-starved red-clay fields into a game preserve aimed primarily at the bobwhite quail, as if seeking to restore to this isolated outlying piece of earth some semblance of the pleasure and providence he had known while hunting with his father.

Funk planted lespedeza and native grasses, encouraged blackberry and foxtail millet, bush-hogged the relentless sumac and cedar saplings, and sought the academic wisdom of state and private game biologists. He was inexpertly advised to plant sericea and Russian olive, decisions he now regrets—the restoration, as he puts it, is a continuous "work in progress"—but generally the farm now provides everything its modest quail population could ask for.

Wider horizons beckoned. One evening a few years ago, during the stultifying heat of August, Funk was perusing a field guild to western birds and turning to the section on quails noted the bizarre lengths to which nature's adaptive whimsy had gone to distinguish the five trans-Mississippi species of quail. He had earlier received some feathers from a doctor friend in Montana for fly-tying, and now became increasingly interested in their provenance. With "the season" having become so disappointing here, why not try someplace else? He thought he might look into airline tickets, research a suitable guide and check out the possibilities. Like generations of restless Easterners before him, finding themselves surrounded by the constricting limitations of habitat loss and the slow depletion of wildlife, he would go west.

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In the fall of 1999, he arrived on the burning plains of southern Arizona to find another world waiting. His guide was a retired bank robber and former gunslinger with a visceral knowledge of local quail habits, and despite or perhaps because of this imposing history, they became immediately comfortable with one another. (Leon, the guide, broke the ice en route to their first hunt by relating the tale of a jovial evening that took place long ago in an Alaskan tavern: "It was a great night," he concluded. "Everybody got shot but me and nobody got killed.") Quail hunting in 90° temperatures wasn't something Funk had ever dealt with, nor was the local necessity of hunting strictly around water sources—stockponds and streambeds—as there was no morning dew to whet the birds' whistles.

Funk had brought along two year-old Meg, one his three Brittany spaniels, and worried at first that the prickly pears and other hostile desert flora would eviscerate his dog before she became accustomed to this new terrain, but such was the bird dog's inherent natural grace, allowing her to weave in and out of the chaparral and mesquite thickets, that at day's end, he would proudly locate no signs of injury. Not even diamondback bites. The bulk of the pack was composed of Leon's own Brittannies and short-haired pointers, toughened veterans of this harsh desert landscape.

And they found quail. They found birds like Funk had only seen in Kansas; birds in numbers that resembled the prime shooting of his Southern boyhood. But the familiar bobwhite wasn't the only inhabitant of this scorching terrain. Quail species including Gambel's, Mearns' (a/k/a Montezuma or harlequin) and scaled (a/k/a blue or cotton-top) abounded, and in a series of highly enjoyable visits with Leon in a number of Western states, Funk collected fine adult male specimens of all three species, had them carefully mounted, and displayed them at his home and dental office.

The bug had bit. With Arizona's resident birds in the bag (excluding the critically endangered masked bobwhite, a subspecies of the South's *C. virginianus*), Funk began casting about for new additions to what was already beginning to look like a substantial collection.

So he went to eastern Washington's arid Columbia Plateau in pursuit of the valley or California quail, a species whose prominent nodding top-feather and large coverts proclaim its close kinship to the Gambel's quail. The only bird left to add was the mountain quail, America's largest and most atypical member of the quail family, fabled for preferring harsh steep terrain and a solitary, secretive existence.

I was privileged to be invited along on this last quest, traveling with Dad from Kentucky to the smog-strewn wilderness of LAX and all the way up to the Klamath country of southwestern Oregon. Dad had arranged for a guide and early one morning, Bob arrived at our hotel in Medford with his 4X4 truck, his corpulent female Labrador retriever and his blacksmith's handshake. Bob outlined the basic strategy as we motored out to nearby federal land. The dog was to range out ahead (I felt sure we could keep up given Moxie's—the dog's—extravagant physique) over the dry lava beds and sere grasses that composed mountain quail habitat in the area; we would follow closely behind until she scented them; the birds would typically run as we drew near; and

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we were to pursue hotly behind until they flushed. Easy. Frankly I didn't believe that Moxie would hold out for long when she was hoisted from among the anvils and hammers in the back of Bob's cluttered truck carryall, tongue lolling, but she set a daunting pace indeed, hopping over igneous boulders and dodging the dry scrub, sniffing and searching, tail wagging with sloppy enthusiasm. We followed

her closely, as advised, while the day grew hotter and drier. Western specialties like acorn woodpeckers and mountain bluebirds kept distracting me and I began to fall behind, squeezing my Model 12 between my knees while I adjusted binoculars. Suddenly Moxie froze, cocked her lumpish head, plunged into a coffee-berry bush and raced out the other side, trailing a plump dun-colored bird with a spiked head. After a frantic stumbling chase Dad got off a fine shot with his old Charles Daly double-barrel and there was our mountain quail, with bold white stripes streaking his ruddy shanks and a soft gray back and cowl.

Back home, he admired his collection of quail and pondered the next move.



The author's father taking a moment with his dogs after a long day of quail hunting.

While attending Centre College in central Kentucky during the 1960s, Funk had met a side-hill farmer, moonshiner and part-time marijuana grower named Eldon who introduced him, eventually, to the ruffed grouse. Hunting the ragged mountains of Jackson County was another experience entirely from the genteel search for the bobwhite he'd been raised on, but after several excursions into those myth-shrouded hills, using hickory saplings to pull himself up the precipitous slopes, he got the hang of it. On a lightning-scorched ridge in late November, the first snow of the year stinging his face, a big cock grouse leapt from a tangle of greenbriar with a cyclonic roar and entered our family's history.

That experience and that bird, mounted in drumming position on a hollow log, stayed with him. And so when the quail quest was successfully concluded, he thought he might expand his search a little deeper into Family Phasianidae—he would assemble a collection of the country's grouses.

Early the following fall, he was in Montana hunting sharp-tails, the fastest flyers of all upland game birds. The next year he traveled to Alaska after ptarmigan and spruce grouse. The year after, he was in Idaho after sage grouse and two years ago he returned from Colorado with a beautiful blue grouse, making his collection complete. But to be on the safe side he returned to Idaho after our non-native partridges, the chukar and Hungarian (or gray), coming home triumphant.

What next? An active conservationist, in the 1980s Funk had been elected to serve on the Kentucky Fish & Wildlife Commission, a pulpit he used to reintroduce the wild turkey to its former habitat. Today turkey populations are stable or growing statewide, and a few years ago,

having followed the vegetated corridor of the nearby creek, they turned up in huntable numbers at Funk's farm. Numerous spread tails and dangling beards, taken on the premises, now adorn his home. The occasional American woodcock is also found in the bottom below his house; add a common snipe from southern Illinois and he had a couple of resident upland shorebirds to round out a comprehensive collection of upland game birds.

Throughout these exploits, Funk's weapons of choice have remained his scarred old 20-gauge and an equally veteran 16-gauge, both side-by-sides. An early admirer of English pointers while stationed in the rolling prairie of central Kansas, he gradually made the switch to Brittany spaniels when he realized that pointers were too far-ranging for the close confines and limited visibility arising from the tall native grasses of his Kentucky farm.

Today Funk has three young Brittanies, Meg, Jill and Snub, the last so named because of her excellent hindquarters confirmation (spell it out backwards). The older dogs, Meg and Snub, have accompanied him to Arizona and Texas, taking to those desiccated landscapes

like natives and turning up quail species they'd never been exposed to as if they'd lived with them all their lives. Like all good dog owners, Funk wishes he could let his charges roam free or at least be somehow placed in suspended animation during the off-season ("I wish I could freeze-dry them over the spring and summer," he says), but realizing their inherent longing to roam—and maybe bust up nesting quail—he confines them to a spacious pen in the woods behind his house.

My mother Pam has been and continues to be remarkably forbearing of Dad's hunting wanderlust, raising nary an eyebrow over the exorbitant traveling expenses. ("So what's all this cost you so far?" I asked once. "I don't want to know," he replied.) Whether he set any sort of record is wholly immaterial. As all men would in an ideal world, he has been fortunate enough to have had the health, the finances, and the familial support to pursue his inimitable dream, an aspiration which took him to the farthest reaches of America and to the very taxonomic limits of our avian heritage.

The end of any heartfelt quest, as Audubon understood upon completing his *Birds of America*, can be an anticlimactic or even dispiriting event. While some rest on their laurels and slowly succumb to inertia, lack of drive has never characterized my father—his antidote to boredom or despair, like Falstaff's, is always "More life!" Last April, back in Kentucky for turkey season and looking over his striking display of mounted birds, I had asked him what if anything was next on his sporting agenda, in the back of my mind perhaps already anticipating the answer. His response neither disappointed nor surprised me. "Well, I enjoy fly-fishing," he'd said immediately. "There's a lot of different trout out there."

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