



On The Hunt

For many, hunting is synonymous with Louisiana culture. But there's hunting, and then there's upland hunting. James, Jerry and Jim Marcantel — along with special help from bird dogs Sugar and Hank — take us on the hunt for quail and woodcock.

by **KEVIN RABALAIS**



LEFT Hank, Jim Marcantel's German shorthaired pointer, searches for quail in Kisatchie National Forest. RIGHT Jim hunts with his grandfather's .16-gauge Remington 1100.

Beneath the tall loblolly pines near the Ouiska Chitto Creek in Allen Parish, two dogs hunt to the tune of electronic birdsong. Their orange tracking collars chirp in intervals, first from one dog, then from another, until, briefly, the birdsong harmonizes. An occasional pant and loll of pink tongue, a flash of fur and Sugar and Hank's paws drum down the dirt road. Then they slip back into the woods, noses pressed to the forest floor. Separately, they enter new currents of scent.

Jerry Marcantel turns from the dogs and glances up at the pines that have begun to whisper with the first winds of a coming storm. Expected to arrive before noon, the front adds urgency to this morning's hunt. An hour before, in the predawn light of Kinder, it began with a different sense of urgency. Jerry and his brother James, along with James' son Jim, have reached the final weeks of the exclamation point on their annual hunting calendar. Dressed in orange vests and orange hats, and carrying .12-, .16- and .20-gauge shotguns, they walk along the edge of the woods, listening to the distant trill of Hank and Sugar's electronic collars. When the dogs are in motion, the collars chirp every 10 or 15 seconds. When the dogs locate a bird or covey and stop to corner their prey, the sound from these collars — today, programmed to quail song — floods the air.

"Let's get on down the road," says Jerry, who works as an adaptive physical education teacher in Kinder. Getting down this winding dirt road means eventually getting off it. We're in search of thick forest, the kind that snags the ankles and knees and tackles me upon entry, Jerry laughs. "When you get in the vines," he says, "that's when you know you're in woodcock country." Each winter, when these woodland birds migrate mainly from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Louisiana becomes a woodcock-hunting paradise — at least, that is, for those in the know. You don't need to travel far in Louisiana — a glance at most license plates will do it — for a reminder of the social and cultural significance of hunting in our

state. Deer and duck, dove and rabbit, turkey, squirrel: Many hunters pass through these seasons like secular Stations of the Cross. As in any tribe, though, there are varieties of hunters. These range beyond proficiency. The Marcantels are upland hunters. This signifies the hunting of non-waterfowl game birds such as pheasant, grouse, grey partridge and quail. Today, Jerry, James and Jim — with vital help from Hank and Sugar — hunt for woodcock. You could live your entire life in Louisiana and never see one of these broad birds with its brown plumage, distinct beak (slightly curved and as long as an average adult's forefinger), five-inch stature, and 20-inch wingspan. Bulbous and neckless, with their short tail and broad, rounded wings,

they look like they've been pieced together from different species as some kind of hoax. Woodcock are a lot like Natchez, Mississippi — you don't just stumble upon either one on your way to somewhere else. They typically reveal themselves only to those who seek them, often at great lengths, and there's a prerequisite to getting there. For upland hunting, the requisite is a canine partner with PhD-level skills. This may be why even many zealous bird hunters pay little attention to Louisiana's annual woodcock season, which runs from Dec. 18 to Jan. 31. Yet the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) reports that, on average, "about 5,000 hunters harvest more than 22,400 woodcock each season." While those numbers may seem large, consider that there are 400,000 total paid hunting license holders in Louisiana. Then consider that, according to the LDWF, Louisiana registers the highest number of wintering woodcock in the United States. Now try to remember the last time your neighbor invited you over for confit de woodcock. "This is one of the best-kept secrets in Louisiana," says Jim, a physical therapist and former decathlete at McNeese State University. We've moved down the road, per his Uncle Jerry's directive and per the necessities of upland hunting, hurrying along as birdsong now intensifies from Hank's collar. This tells Jim that his four-year-old German shorthaired pointer has cornered a woodcock. Jim slips into the thick forest, pushing vines aside as he searches for Hank. At last, we

find him, motionless, in a small clearing. Jim comes within 15 feet of Hank, who shivers with excitement. "He's birdy," Jim says, grinning and proud as Hank holds the woodcock in place, preventing an escape route. The fact that I can't see, much less smell, the woodcock elicits even more respect for Hank. Fifteen minutes into this hunt, he's given a master-class in the trick — make that art — of upland hunting. Upland hunters move constantly and purposefully through the habitat. They rove in the wake of a dog or dogs whose intelligence, work ethic and stamina prompt me to reconsider our ranking in the natural order. To begin at the beginning of upland hunting, then, means to find a good dog. You then have to train the dog to locate a bird — or, in the best circumstances, an entire covey — and hold the bird or birds in place. Amateur or untrained dogs are prone to spook birds, flushing them before the hunter arrives and has time to move into position for an unobstructed shot. A bird dog might be 15 feet from its quarry while holding it in place. Meanwhile, the hunter could be hundreds of yards from the dog. The upland hunter must close that gap without startling the bird. Across the clearing from Jim and on the other side of Hank, Jerry steps into position. For safety measures, the Marcantels go in two at a time. This time, James stays on the road. "Hey!" Jim shouts, signaling his position. James, a retired high school football coach whose forty-plus seasons yielded three Louisiana state championship appearances and one

victory, responds in kind. Jim signals Hank to flush the bird. Two shotgun blasts shock the air.

“Dead bird, Hank,” says Jim. “Dead bird.” Hank leaps and slaloms through bushes and vines, seeming to make a 90-degree turn in midair before he plunges behind a bush. He rises with the woodcock in his mouth, which he presents to Jim. Less gratified by this experience than eager for another, Hank begins a new search, leaving Jim to admire the woodcock. His satisfaction with the bird in hand shifts to future pleasures, specifically tonight’s menu.

“I like to use the whole bird, rather than just the breast,” Jim says. That decision has become, for him, a gesture of respect for his quarry.

Jim is from South Louisiana, where visitors express surprise at the number of men they find in front of stoves, merry in their aprons. In each of his four woodcock hunting seasons, Jim has expanded his repertoire, experimenting with different recipes that he concocts in the off months. A few weeks ago, he flambéed several woodcocks whole with their insides preserved. He made pâté out of their innards and topped everything off with a whiskey sauce. For that meal, Jim made a radical decision. He served the birds on toast. “That’s how you know it’s not a South Louisiana dish,” he says. “It would have been served on rice. The coup de grâce is to split the head down the middle and to scoop the brains out with the end of your spoon.”

Non-hunters should be forgiven for mistaking hunting as an activity that involves the shooting of wild animals for food or sport. Another ethos sends hunters out into inclement weather before dawn to walk and wait and walk some more or to board boats where they shiver or sweat, sometimes both within the span of a few minutes, only to wait and wait some more. And there’s one singular trait inherent among hunters that you won’t find in our state slogan. This is about community and comradery. It’s about the continuation of culture.

The Marcantels form a textbook example of this. Two of nine siblings, James and Jerry, have been hunting together all of their lives. Their father died when they were boys, so Jim never knew his paternal grandfather. “Hunting and fishing have always been a way to feel a physical connection to him,” says Jim, who hunts with the .16-gauge shotgun — a 1960s Remington 1100 — that his grandfather bought for James and which he used for decades before handing it down. This heirloom of family history and identity ensures that the past echoes in the present of every hunt.

Jim has hunted with his father and uncle for as long as he can remember. After a lifetime of duck hunting, he decided around his 30th birthday that it was time for

ABOVE German shorthaired pointer Sugar delivers a woodcock to Jerry Marcantel. **RIGHT** Hank prepares for a training session in which Jerry and Jim have hidden caged pigeons. **FACING PAGE** Jim describes hunting as a way to feel a physical connection to his grandfather.





a new challenge. He started reading about upland hunting. The first step, he learned, would be to find a good bird dog. He identified one breed, German shorthaired pointers, whose temperament fit his own hunting interests. His hope, unexpressed at the time, would be to train the dog under his Uncle Jerry's guidance. Several weeks into his search, however, he received news that Jerry's bird dog had just died. Without his uncle's expertise, Jim didn't know if he would be able to proceed. He approached his father about what he should do.

"Give him a while," James suggested. From James, Jim had long since learned the art of patience. "Fish slow," James would say on their fishing trips when Jim was a boy. "If you think you're fishing too slow, slow down some more."

"That seems to me a pretty good rule for life," Jim says. While he gave Jerry time to mourn, Jim continued his search for the right dog. He thought he wanted a female, usually less stubborn and easier to train than males, he says, but then he found Hank and, Hank being one of those love-at-first-sight dogs, he took him home. Months passed. He called Jerry.

"What you need to do," Jim said, "is get another dog. We'll train them together." He told Jerry that he had expected to pay \$1,000 or more, but then he had found Hank for \$250. Still grieving, still uncertain about whether he could muster the energy required to train a new dog, Jerry gave Jim what he thought was a near-impossible task. "If you can find another one that cheap, I'll do it."

Within days, Jim found Sugar, the last dog of a litter whose mates had all sold for \$1,250. Since Jim had fulfilled his end, Jerry agreed to consider meeting nine-month-old Sugar. "The owners had kept her apart so that she



LEFT Sugar scans for teal near Kinder. RIGHT Jim prepares to bag his first woodcock of the day's hunt. FACING PAGE Jim and his father, James Marcantel, plan their quail-hunting route in Kisatchie.

would bond with whoever bought her," Jerry says, smiling as Sugar brushes past. Unlike Hank, she takes brief breaks for rubs. "And did we bond. It happened at first sight. I bought her as a Christmas present to myself."

Sugar leaps onto the road, weaving past Hank. The two dogs work with intensity and purpose, seeming to sense the coming storm, seeming to know that this hunt will be cut short, and they don't want to be the ones who disappoint.

"These dogs," Jerry says, "they're the main story."

A month earlier, on a quail hunt with Jim and James in the Vernon Unit of Kisatchie National Forest, Ronald Stine expressed a similar sentiment. "Sometimes I don't even fire my gun," said Ronald, Jim's former teammate at McNeese and one of the Marcantels' regular hunting partners. "I just like to watch the dog work."

Jim nodded. "He's the main guy." Just then, Hank leapt, changing direction in mid-air.

"That's the Hank special," Ronald said. "He does these 180s."

"He must sleep for days afterward," I said. "Oh, he's definitely a house dog when he's not working," Jim said. "He gets hair all over the couch."

You can now attach a GPS to a dog's collar to record its movements, but other than that electronic collar, Jim keeps his gear minimal. On that hunt in Kisatchie, he walked seven miles. With all of his zigzagging, Hank must have run something close to a marathon. As we watched him work, Ronald told a story about a recent quail hunt in Kansas. Spent by the end of the day, he fell into bed only to find that Hank — knocked out, legs hanging limp over the edge — had already claimed it.

Since there was no sign of quail that day in Kisatchie, stories about past hunts filled the air. Some seemed apocryphal, but that might be because Ronald is a deadpan storyteller. Early on his first upland hunting trip with Jim, Ronald stepped aside to relieve himself. At the sound of his zipper, a covey of quail took flight. He had already joked, during that first hunt, that ducks were too easy, and now this. Such luck didn't continue. Since then,



LEFT Jerry speaks of bird dogs as “the main story” in upland hunting. He bought Sugar as a Christmas present to himself. **FACING PAGE** Jim ends a successful woodcock hunt.

upland hunting has met the challenge he and Jim originally sought.

By that point on our hunt in Kisatchie, Hank had been working solo for three hours, relentless in his search for quail. James, Jim, and Ronald trailed behind, listening to the silent forest as they wound past trees downed during Hurricane Laura, which struck 18 months before. Jim had proof of a different soundscape. He opened a video on his phone and raised the volume to let me hear what he and Hank had experienced a few weeks earlier on a preseason reconnaissance trip. Cacophonous birdsong of northern bobwhite quail — more brigade than covey — filled the air.

While the LDWF estimates that “approximately 800 quail hunters harvest approximately 2,500 wild quail each year in Louisiana” during the annual Nov.19 to Feb. 28 season, hunters have begun to notice a decline in quail populations. There are many theories for this. The LDWF states, “This population decline is primarily due to habitat degradation from past farming and intensive pine management.” James suggests that pesticides such as ant poison, which make quail eggs brittle, are also to blame. He mentions Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” (1962), merely utters the author’s name and title, but it’s enough to conjure the landmark book that urges us to face the environmental effects of indiscriminate pesticide use. Another theory for the decline in numbers: As Louisiana farms grow larger, quail habitat decreases.

The declining numbers were apparent in Kisatchie. Hours passed while Hank worked but found no quail. The elusive quarry causes the hunters to fall back into storytelling mode.

“We found a needle in a haystack right off the bat,” Jim said, remembering their first upland hunt, three years before. Five minutes into the woods, before the sound of Ronald’s zipper, they stumbled on a healthy covey of quail.

“What is this?” Ronald asked, a question as much about the quantity of birds as it had been about the few upland hunters he knew, as in “Why isn’t everybody doing this?” In their next several hunts, however, they didn’t see a single quail. “This is nothing short of suffering,” Ronald said. “But duck hunting is too easy.” He let a moment pass. “I’m going to step aside to relieve myself,” he said. “Y’all wait for the birds.” Then he paused again before turning to walk away. “You’re welcome.”

A month later in Allen Parish, Hank and Sugar continue their relentless pursuit of woodcock. The song from their collars quickens. Within seconds, Jim and Jerry stand 10 feet behind Sugar. “Hey!” Jim calls, to which James, once again at a safe distance, follows suit.

The bird flushes. Jim and Jerry aim and fire. It’s a kill, but they go back and forth about who earned it. Each compliments the other on the good shot until Jerry eventually bags the bird. Soon, Jim finds James and offers a different compliment. “Your fish was very good last night,” he says.

James had hosted a jam session for a friend who attends Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans. Jim’s mother’s 90-year-old uncle played fiddle with Jim on guitar, while James fried bass. It lasted until nearly 11 p.m., and neither father nor son can believe that they woke up in time for the hunt.

“You haven’t shot yet,” Jim says.

“No,” says James.

“What are you waiting on?”

“Birds.”

He may have one last chance before the storm, now that Sugar has gone birdy. With one paw, she points at a woodcock, her tail wagging like a poked spring door stopper. This, Jerry says, is called flagging. “It’s not unknown,” he says, “but you prefer the tail

not to move at all. It’s more about style than hunting. It doesn’t affect the birds.” He says it with affection. Jerry and James each fire once, but this time, the woodcock eludes them.

For several minutes without success, they track it through the forest. Then Jim stops and rests his shotgun against a pine. “I’m going to take this extra layer off,” he says. Before the final syllable is out, a woodcock flushes.

“That’s where I thought it was,” James says. “Oh, that’s where you thought it was?” Jim says.

The front, predicted to come through two hours ago, has yet to arrive, but the wind holds steady. Through intermittent drizzle, the Marcantels in their orange vests and hats press deeper into the darkening forest. By now, Hank and Sugar’s collars blend with the sounds of these woods. Then a new one arises.

“Whispering pines,” Jim sings. “Whispering pines.”

James then repeats the line, softer, slower than his son.

“I remember you had those Johnny Horton records,” Jim says, to which James nods. “Each of his songs is a history lesson — ‘Sink the Bismarck,’ ‘The Battle of New Orleans.’” Then Jim resumes his song — “Whispering pines, whispering pines” — and for a moment, while Hank and Sugar lead the Marcantels onward, a new harmony arises. ■

